Indigenous Forestry in the Americas:
Comparative Environmental Histories in Bolivia and Wisconsin

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Abstract

For many indigenous communities forests have powerful cultural, historical, and economic meanings. In this dissertation I explore the meanings of forest management for two indigenous communities. I address three fundamental questions:  How do indigenous communities understand their relationship with forests and forest management?  Why have they engaged in forest management? How does history shape definitions and practices of sustainability? To answer these questions I use combine historical and qualitative research methods using a case study approach.

The first case study centers on the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin. I discuss the composition of the Menominee forest in the mid-1800s and argue that differing perceptions of the forest had profound effects on forest management. I discuss the 1890 and 1908 laws that limited harvesting on the Menominee reservation. These laws were the first to set harvest limits in the United States. I also use oral history interviews to understand Menominee perceptions of forest management, sustainability, and the legacy of Menominee forest management. I show how tribal members have used forest management to further Menominee goals, cultural values, and community well-being. Finally, I explore multiple tribal perspectives on forest management in relation to ecological changes.

The second case study centers on forestry in Bolivia. I explore the cultural, historical, and environmental influences that affect forest management and perceptions of sustainability among lowland communities. I explore how lowland indigenous people expressed their demands for territory through a 1990 protest march and outline the Bolivian government’s subsequent decision to enact multiple laws including the 1996 Forestry Law. I then use community documents and oral history interviews with Guarayos people to explore their perspectives of
sustainability, forest management, and the 1996 Forestry Law. I show that Guarayos people view community forest management as a tool to control their territory and provide community benefits.

Despite different histories, cultures, ecosystems, and values, there are several similarities between Menominee and Guarayos perceptions of forest management. Both the communities have used active forest management—harvesting trees for timber—to foster territorial control; strengthen community well-being; protect the forest; and bolster cultural connections between past, present, and future generations.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract............................................................................................................................................ i

Acknowledgements………………………………………………………………………………………… iii

Table of Contents........................................................................................................................ viii

Chapter 1: Introduction and Methods ............................................................................................. 1

Chapter 2: Menominee Forests and Environmental History before 1890 ................................. 20

Chapter 3: Forest Management History on the Menominee Reservation: The 1890 Forestry Act to the 1973 Menominee Restoration Act ................................................................. 60

Chapter 4: Menominee Oral History: Using Historical Perspectives to Inform Contemporary Sustainable Forest Management ................................................................. 94


Chapter 6: Community Forestry as a Method of Territorial Control in Guarayos, Bolivia .... 167

Chapter 7: Conclusion......................................................................................................................... 204

References Cited........................................................................................................................................ 219

Appendices........................................................................................................................................ 234