Until the nineteenth century, the Menominee Nation occupied nearly half of what is now Wisconsin and northern Michigan. A woodland people, the Menominee hunted, fished, and gathered wild rice. Their name for themselves, "Mano'min ini'niwuk," means wild rice people. In 1854, besieged by smallpox, alcohol, and pressure from land-hungry European settlers, the tribe was forced onto a reservation representing less than 3 percent of their ancestral lands. Although the reservation, which lies along the Wolf River about 50 miles northwest of Green Bay, WI—is in the poorest county of the state, it represents a unique treasure. The forests covering 98 percent of the land make up the densest, most diverse woodlands in the Great Lakes region and the longest-running operation for sustained-yield forestry in the country.

Timber harvesting started in 1854, when 20 million board feet were cut for lumber, planks, firewood, and fence rails. Greedy lumber barons tried to gain control of valuable white pine holdings but the tribe resisted. While the rest of the state was clear-cut, burned over, and turned into farmland, the Menominee insisted on careful, selective cutting of individual trees. By 1890, the tribe had built its own sawmill and carried out the first sustainable harvest management plan in the country. When first inventoried in 1890, the 89,000 ha (234,000 acres) reservation contained 1.3 billion board feet of lumber. Today, after 107 years in which a total of 2.25 billion board feet were harvested, the forest stock has increased to 1.7 billion board feet.

Ironically, the successful forestry operations almost brought about an end to the tribe. By 1959, the Menominee had accumulated a $10 million surplus. The Bureau of Indian affairs declared them too wealthy for continued protected status. Congress officially terminated the tribe in 1960, distributing trust funds and land allotments to individual tribal members. Forestry and mill operations were turned over to a private corporation, which immediately began liquidating reserves and racking up debts. Tribal leaders fought termination and successfully restored reservation status in 1973. Although the forest remains largely undivided, tribal enterprises still are plagued by debts incurred under privatization.

Wise elders set up a simple forest management plan when they began operations a century ago. Rather than manage for short-term yields, as is the case for lands around them, the tribe aims for maximum quantity and quality of native species. They say, "instead of cutting the best, we cut the worst first. We're managing our resources to last forever." They have one of the few lumber operations in the country that preserves old-growth characteristics.

The forest is northern hardwood type with a mixture of sugar maple, beech, hemlock, basswood, yellow birch, white pine, jack pine, and aspen. The heart of the management plan is a continuous forest inventory to determine optimum growth, species balance, ecological health, and cutting cycles. Land is divided into 109 compartments based on 11 species combinations, topography, stand history, and management goals. Two-thirds of the forest is managed for mixed species and ages, with selective cutting on a fifteen-year cycle. About 20 percent is devoted to aspen and jack pine in even-age (clear-cut) stands of no more than 12 ha (30 acres) each. Nearly 400 ha (1000 acres) of white pine utilize a two-step shelterwood program that mimics the natural fire-succession sequence by artificially manipulating the balance of sunlight, competition, and soil disturbance. Judicial use of herbicides, prescribed burns, selective cutting, and rock raking maintain optimum growth and regeneration of this valuable species, which has largely disappeared elsewhere in the Great Lakes forest.

Some 300 people are now employed in the tribal forestry and sawmill operations. Logging is carried out by both Indian and non-Indian private contractors. Current harvest levels are about 30 million board feet per year. Lumber from the tribal mill is certified by the Green Cross organization as "good wood" harvested in a socially and environmentally responsible manner.

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Environmental Case Study
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As Aldo Leopold said in Sand County Almanac, the best definition of conservation "is written not with a pen, but with an axe. It is a matter of what a man thinks about while chopping, or while deciding what to chop." He was describing the kind of stewardship practiced on the Menominee reservation. In addition to welcome economic returns, the sustainable harvesting has brought them an aesthetically pleasing forest, spiritual rejuvenation, clean water, and a sense of pride in being Menominee.