

DE, 1634-1836

THE LAND OF LA BAYE:
THE ECOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE GREEN BAY FUR TRADE, 1634-1836

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is certain. (John Lawe to Robert Stuart, 1834)

During the 1820s and 30s, the Indians of the Green Bay and Lake Michigan coasts spent much time fishing. This emphasis on fishing is reminiscent of seventeenth century Great Lakes subsistence patterns, although the fishing seasons of the two centuries differ. In the seventeenth century, the Menominee, Chippewa, and Ottawa relied heavily on the spring and fall runs of spawning fish, although they did fish at almost any season of the year. The eighteenth century picture is obscure, but Green Bay villagers apparently missed the fall fish runs by leaving their settlements in September and October to hunt. By 1820 and probably much earlier, the Menominee of Green Bay both hunted and fished during the autumn whitefish runs, but they returned to their villages on about January first, when the ice had built up from the shore onto the Bay. They would spend the remainder of the winter spear- ing sturgeon through the ice. Andrew J. Vieau, a second generation Milwaukee trader, noted that the Indians of Kewaunee and Door Counties seldom hunted, but relied on fishing for their livelihood.²¹¹ The Menominee River and Peshtigo River residents reportedly fished for most of their subsistence.²¹² The Chippewa of the south shore of Lake Superior also derived most of their food from fishing.²¹³ These fishing Indians sent sturgeon, whitefish and maple sugar to their traders instead of furs.

The winter has been so open and mild this year that the Lake has not yet taken to this day so that there has not been a single speared sturgeon has been brought to the Bay this year. The Indians is all a-starving & it is quite a famine for them. (John Lawe to Jacques Porlier, 1824)

It is estimated that 4000 souls are subsisted every winter, within 30 miles of this place [Green Bay] on sturgeon &

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trout alone, taken from under the ice. From 600 to 800 barrels of whitefish are caught every fall at Menominee River. (Albert G. Ellis, 1830)

...as for Bay des Nuck there is no appearance whatever as the Lake broke in March and they nearly all starved to death. (Stanislaus Chappue to John Lawe, 1831)

At first glance, these reports of Indian famine and of dependence both on traders for provisions and on the fisheries would seem to contradict the reports of a sporadically successful fur trade, and of abundance of certain species. Some traders specifically noted an abundance of fine furbearers which coincided with inadequate provisions and Indian starvation.²¹⁷ The resolution of this apparent contradiction probably lies in the reduction of big game populations and in the inadequacy of a diet based largely on small furbearers.

Fish was a perfectly adequate winter dietary staple for the seventeenth century Great Lakes Indians who took only short hunting trips into the interior. However, the fur trade demand for fall deer skins and the Indians' early fall abandonment of village fishing sites probably lead to an increased reliance on dried meat and grain for overwinter subsistence. The meat of bison, elk, and white-tailed deer was easily preserved and portable when dried, and would on the average provide hunters with one hundred or more pounds of usable meat per animal.²¹⁸ The meat of the black bear, another large game animal, was less often dried, but the bear's great size and abundant fat also made it a desirable species. Even beaver is edible, and averages 38.5 pounds of usable meat per adult animal. However, these same species apparently declined in numbers in the Green Bay region by 1820.

The smaller animals such as muskrat were perfectly edible protein