

# Woven Ecology: Wabanaki Basketry as Environmental Knowledge and Cultural Resilience

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**ABSTRACT:** The Wabanaki, a Native American confederation of five principal Eastern Algonquian nations, are famous for their basketry, which is inseparable from the ecological and cultural systems that sustain it. Black ash, birch bark, and sweetgrass are not only basketry materials, but are considered to be relatives, harvested through generational ecological practices of reciprocity and respect. However, colonial disruption, assimilation policies, and salvage anthropology have transformed their baskets into “artifacts,” separated from their contexts of use and meaning. The contemporary tradition of Wabanaki basketry reveals that cultural and ecological survival are mutually dependent. However, today, climate change and other threats like the emerald ash borer imperil the very trees and other plant species used in basketry. In this paper, I examine Wabanaki basketry as a reflection of ecological memory, assess its transformation from precolonial eras to the present, and analyze the challenges contemporary basketmakers face in continuing the tradition. Through observing museum collections, interviews with basketmakers, and previous research in Indigenous studies and environmental history, I argue that Wabanaki basketry offers crucial insights into ecocultural sustainability and challenges the separation of art and ecology reflected in Western institutions.

**KEYWORDS:** Wabanaki Basketry and Ecology, Earth Science, Environmental Science, Indigenous Ecological Knowledge, Black Ash Sustainability.

## ■ Introduction

In the wetlands of northern New England, black ash (*Fraxinus nigra*) grows in floodplains, its trunks yielding splints for weaving baskets. A fragrance that signals summer harvest is released as sweetgrass spreads across bogs and estuaries. Birch bark, a waterproof and resilient material, peels in seasonal layers.<sup>1</sup> Yet, to the Wabanaki Confederacy (comprising the Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqey (Maliseet), Passamaquoddy, Abenaki, and Penobscot peoples), these materials are not simply resources; they are living beings and relatives whose splits, leaves, and bark, respectively, are woven into baskets that serve as tools and cultural records.<sup>2</sup> Each basket derived from these species carries ecological knowledge across generations: information about when to harvest bark, how to tend sweetgrass, and why healthy groves of ash need to be left standing. For the Wabanaki and other indigenous species, basketry is not only an art but a memory, binding a culture to environmental stewardship over generations through cycles of use and renewal.<sup>1</sup>

Wabanaki basketry serves as an ecological memory system. Unlike written, static archives of the Western academic world, basketry survives through repetition.<sup>1</sup> Each season demands new crafting under constantly changing conditions, with careful attention to lands, waters, and seasonal weather. As basketmaker Eric Bacon explains, weaving is “working next to your ancestors,” a reminder that every splint of ash, every strand of sweetgrass, every piece of birchbark, holds history and survival within it. Thus, a basket is far more than an object; it is a living record of ecological relationships, human skills, and adaptation.

Colonial contact dramatically changed these relationships between the Wabanaki peoples and their basketry, trans-

forming baskets from living tools and valued containers into decontextualized artifacts.

Driven by a belief that Native cultures were vanishing, anthropologists attempted to “salvage” the baskets, removing them from their natural roles and placing them instead on display shelves and in museum storage.<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as Samuel Redman and Carolyn Dean have critiqued this process, explaining how it devalued Indigenous knowledge and environmental relationships and imposed Western categories, such as “art” and “artifact.”<sup>4</sup> More recently, thinkers like Indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer have confirmed Indigenous practices as models of ecological reciprocity, emphasizing that sustainability arises not from a lack of interaction, but from responsible harvest and use. Her account of sweetgrass tending, where the plants flourished with careful picking, highlights the principle that reciprocity can strengthen ecological vitality.<sup>5</sup> The resilience of Wabanaki basketry today demonstrates how cultural and ecological survival are mutually sustaining. Contemporary basketmakers like Eric Bacon and Victoria Neptune are confronting new threats, such as the emerald ash borer, an invasive beetle destroying black ash, while also navigating the challenges of preserving and promoting their culture.<sup>6</sup> Their work, alongside the advocacy of the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, stresses that “to save the art, you must save the tree.” This principle condenses an urgent truth: baskets cannot exist without the ecological systems that sustain them and the cultural practices of care and reciprocity.<sup>7</sup> This paper asks how Wabanaki basketry functions as a system of ecological knowledge transmission, and how colonial and contemporary pressures have reshaped, but not erased, this relationship and process. By examining Wabanaki basketry across time, from

seasonal reliance on the baskets and basketry materials, to market commodification of baskets, to their repositioning as museum collections, and through the perspectives of contemporary makers, I show how baskets embody the philosophy of reciprocity that offers solutions to sustainability today.<sup>3,5</sup> This study contributes to two conversations: first, the critique of “salvage anthropology,” underscoring the limits of Western art-historical categories; and second, the recognition of Indigenous Peoples’ ecological knowledge and wisdom as central to contemporary debates about the environmental crisis.<sup>4</sup> To view a Wabanaki basket closely is not only to see a craft, but to encounter a woven record of human-environment relationships and survival. I focus on basketry specifically because it sits at the intersection of ecology and daily survival rather than just a role of ceremonial display. Methodologically, this paper combines close observation of museum basketry collections with oral history interviews conducted with contemporary Wabanaki basketmakers. This approach highlights the distortions and shortcomings of institutional archives as compared with the knowledge preserved within Native communities themselves. Where museums often strip baskets of their ecological specificity, labeling them without identifying materials (in this case, ash, birch, or sweetgrass) from which they were made, the basketmakers themselves restore that context.<sup>8</sup> Together, these sources create a study that reestablishes Indigenous voices and knowledge while exploring how outsiders have attempted to frame the baskets as curios.

### ***Background & Cultural Context:***

Members of the Wabanaki Confederacy—Mi’kmaq, Wolastoqey (Maliseet), Passamaquoddy, Abenaki, and Penobscot tribes—inhabit a landscape of rivers, lakes, bogs, estuaries, and coastal forests stretching across what is now northern New England and Canadian Maritimes. This entire area is referred to as an ecotone: a meeting ground of habitat and species biodiversity, with “edge effects” fostering heterogeneity. Ecotones, as environmental historians have argued, are places where “communities come together in a complex configuration,” producing concentrated interactions among species and people. This “people of the ecotone” frame clarifies why Wabanaki technologies and arts—especially black ash basketry and birch bark work—are so deeply related to people’s water routes, wetlands, and seasonal movements.<sup>1</sup>

The Wabanaki Confederacy is not only a cultural group, but a political entity.<sup>2</sup> Historically, the Confederacy functioned as both an alliance and a council system, allowing the member nations to coordinate diplomacy and resource management across Dawnland (the land of the Wabanaki people). In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Confederacy played a crucial role in negotiating with French and English colonial powers. Although the original Confederacy was dismantled by colonial settlement, its memory is still preserved today in oral traditions.<sup>1</sup>

In the late 20th century, that memory was revived. About thirty years ago, Wabanaki leaders and elders began hosting meetings of tribal representatives, redefining the Confederacy as a body for promoting intertribal collaboration. These

gatherings emphasized cultural renewal, especially regarding language, stories, environmental knowledge, and art forms such as basketry. Today, the Confederacy serves as a living political and cultural entity whose alliances are significant in struggles for ecological justice.<sup>1,2</sup>

### ***Seasons, mobility, and technologies:***

Wabanaki life historically followed seasonal patterns that synchronized everyday life with ecological rhythms—summer berry picking, fall hunting, winter camps, spring fish runs, ice thawing, and freezing. Having access to river corridors and sustaining coastal communities binds communities together while developing and maintaining ecological relationships with the land. Winter, typically referred to as the season of hardship, was a season managed by the Wabanaki with technologies (notably the use of canoes and snowshoes), turning frozen rivers and difficult terrains into prime hunting grounds. Historical Wabanaki figures, such as Madockawando (Penobscot, c. 1630–1698), embodied this knowledge of the land from ancient times. His diplomacy with the English and French powers relied on his significant expertise in river systems and winter travel routes that gave the newcomers strategic mobility.<sup>9</sup>

With the seasonal mindset, nature guides the lives of the Wabanaki. Black ash (*Fraxinus nigra*) thrives in saturated soils of river floodplains and swales; its growth rings, when pounded, separate into splints. The outer bark of Birch (*Betula papyrifera*) is durable and waterproof, gathered in sheets with care in late spring and early summer. Seasonal harvesting protocols (selecting only healthy trees and only taking what is necessary from sweetgrass fields) express the Wabanaki ethics of restraint and reciprocity.<sup>7</sup> These principles align with the broader Indigenous understanding that nature and all its species are relatives, not just resources—an ethic shown in the artistic choices that reference these seasonal cycles and ecological patterns.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Contact, colonization, and ecological shifts:***

When English and French settlements intensified in the region in the 17th century, colonial property regimes, pasture animals, and town-centered agriculture re-ordered New England ecologies and Indigenous Peoples’ lifeways. William Cronon’s *Changes in the Land* synthesized how a shift “from Indian to European dominion” altered forests, wildlife, and soils through fencing, livestock browsing, timber extraction, and market hunting. What had been a mosaic of species and habitats managed by seasonal burning, rotation, and mobile settlement became a landscape disciplined by private property and continuous exploitation.<sup>10</sup> For Wabanaki communities, these changes altered daily life drastically. There were widespread encroachments on hunting grounds, introductions of invasive species, disruptions to wetland hydrology, and new diseases, accentuated by periods of war and trade alliances. Colonial winters were particularly revelatory for New England settlers’ vulnerability to the climate.<sup>9</sup> Historians of early New England winters stress that Indigenous winter expertise exceeded colonial capacities, and therefore winter, at that

point, was a period of Wabanaki advantage; colonists struggled with exposure, food scarcity, and transport until they received guidance from the original peoples, and adopted Native technologies, including snowshoes.<sup>11</sup> Over time, colonists adopted several Native American practices, reflecting a pattern of selective adoption of Indigenous culture and knowledge, masked by broader dispossession.

### *Assimilation, disruption, and continuities:*

U.S. assimilation policies—most notoriously the Indian boarding school system imposed by the newcomers—sought to separate the Native children from their languages, families, and land-based practices. The Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, the first Indian boarding school, exemplified the motto, “Kill the Indian, and save the man,” combining military discipline with manual labor. Hair cutting, uniform use, punishment for speaking the Indigenous language, and family separation were all utilized as oppressive systems. The methods initiated by this school served as a model for the dozens that followed, and also led to the attempted elimination of Indigenous craftsmanship and relationships with the land.<sup>12</sup>

Assimilation did not end with boarding schools. In Maine, removal of Wabanaki children from their families continued into the late 20th century through other channels. The Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare TRC found that in the 1970s, Indigenous children were placed in foster care at rates 20 to 60 times higher than non-Indigenous peers. In 1972, in Aroostook County,<sup>13</sup> their removal was over 62 times more likely. These removals, often justified by biased state officials’ perceptions characterizing Wabanaki families as “needy” or inferior, reflected ongoing structural efforts to disrupt cultural autonomy.

In its 2015 final report, the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded that this systematic separation of Wabanaki children amounted to cultural genocide, matching the United Nations definition by “forcibly transferring children” and causing “serious mental harm.”<sup>12</sup> Despite the passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978, designed to protect Indigenous families, state compliance was inconsistent. Reviews found that up to half of Indigenous children entering the system between 2006 and 2009 had their heritage unverified, meaning that they were denied ICWA protections and at greater risk of placement in non-Indigenous homes.<sup>13</sup>

These modern removals were facilitated by cultural ignorance on the part of non-Indigenous officials and the devaluation of Indigenous child-rearing philosophies, which emphasize extended kinship and communal care rather than nuclear-family norms. The TRC’s findings underscore how assimilation persisted through sanctioned systems beyond the boarding schools. The Commission’s work recommends improved cultural awareness training for welfare agents, respect for tribal sovereignty, and the creation of more Indigenous foster homes to help mend the broken intergenerational trend.<sup>14</sup> In relation to this focus on basketry and biocultural relationships, by placing children outside their cultural worlds, the

system attempted, once again, to sever children’s ties to Indigenous art and environmental knowledge.

### *Market entanglements, salvage anthropology, and collections:*

By the 19th and 20th centuries, Wabanaki makers were selling their baskets and cultural artifacts to tourists and Arts-and-Crafts markets in Maine and beyond the Northeast. This produced both new opportunities and new pressures: demand for “fancy baskets,” seasonal vending, and the need to navigate outsider tastes, while maintaining the cultural meaning of their work.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, salvage anthropology and museum collecting—often under federal auspices or with federal support—transformed Native material culture into “specimens.” The Smithsonian Institution’s finding aids, for example, documented that large Wabanaki holdings increased during this period. These collections reflect an outsider’s perspective on Indigenous cultures and the idea that Indigenous cultures were disappearing and that they wanted to preserve them, not save them. The resulting collections were often uncategorized and provided little insight into the culture because they lacked cultural context.<sup>3</sup>

## ■ Literature Review

Recent research on Wabanaki basketry is centered around three key debates: the colonial reframing of Indigenous products and materials through salvage anthropology, the epistemological limits of applying Western art historical categories to Indigenous works, and the role of sustaining Indigenous ecological knowledge and relationships in reference to the materials and traditions of basket making.

### *Salvage Anthropology and the “Museumification” of Basketry:*

Samuel J. Redman’s *The Federal Government and Salvage Anthropology* critiques the late 19th- and early 20th-century collecting practices that transformed Indigenous works into “specimens,” detached from their cultural heritage. Salvage anthropology operated under what the Bureau of American Ethnology, led by John Wesley Powell, called an “imperative... to record all possible data... so that accurate knowledge of this interesting and vanishing race may be available for future generations.”<sup>3</sup> For Wabanaki basketry, this meant large-scale acquisitions—often without consent—that removed baskets from their seasonal and functional cultural contexts. Ethnographers such as Frank Hamilton Cushing, Alice Cunningham Fletcher, and James Mooney embodied this impulse, gathering objects under the assumption that Native culture was disappearing. As Redman notes, “thousands if not millions of objects were gradually removed from their original contexts and communities to be put on display and cataloged into museum collections.”<sup>3</sup>

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) maintains an extensive digital database showcasing many such objects, Wabanaki baskets included. Browsing the Collections Search (which houses over 800,000 items) reveals pieces like an “Abenaki plaited woodsplint bas-

ket" (catalog number 10/7398), donated in 1921, and a dyed black ash basket with cover dating to circa 1910 (catalog number 22/1345). Both baskets, removed from their original contexts and now existing in institutional captivity, are symbolic of how salvage anthropologists reshaped cultural heritage into museum objects.<sup>8</sup>

The scope of this collection of baskets and other cultural objects was enormous. Between 1879 and 1916 alone, the Bureau of American Ethnology amassed "nearly 35,000 objects from tribes across the American Southwest."<sup>3</sup> Though not a collection relating to the Wabanaki, these numbers demonstrate the federal government's obsession with quantity over quality. The result was a storage crisis: "objects that were routinely pulled for study were placed in easy-to-access display cases or in nearby storage rooms, [but] many more objects were stored away deep in museum vaults, rarely to be considered again in careful academic study or popular museum exhibition."<sup>3</sup> Thus, baskets once connected to seasonal harvesting and ecocultural knowledge were transformed into "artifacts" with little connection to the communities who made them.

#### ***Reframing Indigenous Material Culture: Carolyn Dean:***

Carolyn Dean's *The Trouble with (the Term) Art* questions the categories through which Indigenous cultural objects are interpreted. She distinguishes between "art by intention... made to be art in their own cultural context" and "art by appropriation... made for other purposes but redefined as art by outsiders."<sup>16</sup> Wabanaki basketry in museum collections often falls into the appropriation category. Dean warns that such reframing can impose Western evaluative frames that distort original meanings. As she states, "calling something art reveals nothing inherent in the object to which the term is applied; rather, it reveals how much the viewer values it." Similarly, she warns that "'art by appropriation'... invites judgment according to Western aesthetic standards by which they can only, invariably, fail to measure up, since they were not made with such standards in mind."<sup>4</sup> In the context of Wabanaki basketry, this means a birchbark container or a black ash basket, originally tied to seasonal harvests, transport, and storage, becomes a static visual object evaluated on formal, Western-valued qualities like symmetry and surface patterning, rather than on the ecological knowledge referenced in and associated with its making.

#### ***Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Sustainable Harvest:***

Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* provides a contrasting perspective, one focused both on science and reciprocal ethics.<sup>5</sup> Kimmerer's account of Indigenous ethics emphasizes careful selection, respectful harvesting, reciprocity, and the responsibility to ensure conservation: "Never take the first, never take the last. Take only what you need. Take only that which is given. Never take more than half. Leave some for others." Importantly, in *Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass*, Kimmerer recounts a student research project where one of her students demonstrated that sweetgrass actually grew better when it was tended and harvested, compared to sweetgrass in plots that were left completely alone.<sup>5</sup> This finding challenges

Western conservation models that correlate human use with depletion, instead showing that reciprocal relationships of care and gathering, working with natural regenerative processes, can enhance ecological vitality. While Kimmerer's main focus is on the sweetgrass example, the principles she presents are equally applicable to Wabanaki black ash basketry. Black ash basketry harvesting requires assessing the tree, partial harvesting, timing the harvest with seasonal water patterns, and preserving healthy groves of the trees.<sup>7</sup> This perspective redefines basketry not only as a form of artistic production but as reflecting ecological relationships, which are being threatened by invasive species like the emerald ash borer, and thus intrinsically connected to environmental activism and knowledge.

#### ***Contemporary Revitalization and Environmental Activism:***

*Wild Maine*, "...a community education program for the residents and visitors of Maine," helps to bring a voice to the past and to educate people about the land they live on. The *Wild Maine* article, "Beneath the Ash and Cedar: The Resilient Art of Maine's Wabanaki Basketmakers," documents how Wabanaki basketmakers who live in that area connect tradition with ecological crises today. The Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance (MIIBA), founded in the 1990s, works to preserve Indigenous culture and to serve in conservation efforts. The article highlights how contemporary basketmakers are acting as advocates for black ash trees and assisting with pest management and habitat protection. As one basketmaker notes, "Ash is not just material. It's an ancestor"—a statement that encapsulates the inseparability of environmental and cultural knowledge and survival.<sup>7</sup>

#### ***Scholarly and Practical Intersections:***

These sources model the academic trajectory from colonial viewpoints that decontextualize Indigenous works, towards interpretive viewpoints that restore cultural heritage. Redman's historical critique and Dean's theoretical intervention reveal the issues of outsider categorization, while Kimmerer's lived ecological perspective and the *Wild Maine* case study demonstrate how Wabanaki basketry resists these issues by continuing to thrive in communities.

### **■ Methods**

This paper draws on two different research methods: observation through a museum visit and qualitative interviews with contemporary Wabanaki basket makers. These approaches provided both material context and living perspectives, and they revealed different strengths and limitations.

The first method involved a visit to a museum collection in New York City at the National Museum of the American Indian. The visit was limited as the exhibits were small with little curatorial information. I was unable to determine whether black ash baskets were included because the basket materials were not identified in the interpretive text.

The second and more central method consisted of interviews with practicing Wabanaki basket makers. I conducted an in-depth interview with Eric Otter Bacon (Passamaquoddy), whose baskets I also documented through photographs

to serve as visual sources. In the interview, Bacon detailed his techniques for harvesting and preparing traditional basketry materials and discussed adaptations in response to ecological pressures, such as experimenting with alternative fibers. He also described how his practice incorporates both traditional and contemporary approaches, providing insight into technical processes as well as the intergenerational transmission of knowledge within basket-making.

In addition to Bacon, I also interviewed Victoria Neptune (Passamaquoddy). In her interview, Neptune discussed sustainable harvesting practices, attentiveness to ecological balance, and ways that basketry knowledge is passed to younger generations, providing insight into the practical and community aspects of Wabanaki basketry.

As a non-Wabanaki researcher, I approached these interviews with an emphasis on listening and verification rather than interpretation. By combining museum observation with oral history interviews and material documentation, this methodology prioritizes Indigenous voices and lived experience. While the museum visit revealed institutional collecting practices, the interviews restored voice and context to the tradition.

## ■ Results and Discussion

### *Basketry as Ecological Memory:*

Basketry in Wabanaki communities functions not only as an artistic practice, but also as an ecological sustainability memory system (a way of sharing environmental knowledge across generations). Eric Bacon's testimony demonstrates how materials and seasonal rhythms embody the memory of both ancestors and ecosystems. He frames basketry as not a static craft, but as a living archive that contains the soul and passion of the ancestors.

In our conversation, Bacon emphasized the adaptability of basket makers to ecological crises: with black ash threatened by the emerald ash borer, some makers are experimenting with willow, cedar bark, or commercially produced reed. For him, however, the traditional materials remain irreplaceable, because, as he described, basketry reflects "an intimate relationship with these materials" that cannot be replicated through substitutes.

Bacon first highlights his learning through his family and community, presenting his craft as a lineage of ecological memory. He recalls how, as a child, "it was really common when I was a kid for, you know, a lot of the elder basket makers, to kinda congregate at one of the other basket makers' houses. And they would all sit together and work... I used to always go and hang out there, you know, pick up scraps off the ground, you know, just ask questions and always get fed sweets." This childhood scene portrays ecological memory as connected through both material fragments—scraps of ash and bark that carried knowledge of processing and weaving—and the social environment of storytelling and generosity. The practice of sitting together, weaving while sharing food and oral tradition, made environmental knowledge a part of everyday life.

Beyond technical challenges, Bacon also reflected on the cultural and personal aspects of basketry. His work serves as a lineage of perseverance, stating, "I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing if people before me didn't keep it alive. I come from

generations of basket makers." He spoke of basketry as both economic survival and spiritual resilience, recalling that for his family, baskets once meant food security, while for him, they became a source of healing during times of loss and struggle. Bacon also connected basketry to contemporary art movements, describing how his generation shifted toward more experimental forms while retaining previous techniques, thereby sustaining tradition while engaging modern audiences.

As Bacon went deeper into his practice, he came to articulate basketry as a worldview that requires attunement to ecosystems. He explains: "Kinda working with the materials, you have to really kinda look at things from a different perspective. You have to look at things in more of, I guess, like, a holistic way... you're kinda working next to your ancestors when you're doing this work." Here, ecological memory is not only generational but also spiritual. Working with ash, sweetgrass, or birch bark becomes a direct connection with the past. The techniques are inherited, but so is a way of seeing the world that emphasizes sustainability and learning from the land. The act of weaving thus becomes a form of remembering with the hands, a way to understand how all of these materials come together to create a continuation of ancestral presence.

This memory is also seasonal, as cycles of gathering carry precise ecological knowledge. Bacon details how sweetgrass harvesting requires attention to timing: "Sweetgrass is definitely seasonal... people do start picking in July, but typically the grass is shorter. And, you know, it's kinda nice having nice long strands of grass, so you try to push it off as long as possible. But then you push it off too long, and it starts dying off. It turns brown." His words highlight how memory resides in knowing when to harvest for optimal strength and color, balancing copiousness with sustainability. Likewise, birch bark holds seasonal distinctions that shape practice: "Birch bark, for instance, we have two different kinds of bark that we work with. We have one that we call summer bark, which is basically a smooth bark... and then it transitions into winter bark... and that's the layer that you can actually etch off and reveal the lighter layer underneath." Here, the knowledge of when bark "pops" off trees or when it can be etched properly is not recorded in written calendars but remembered through embodied seasonal cycles.

In Bacon's words, working with these materials requires "being open while you're doing the work... You start absorbing what was already there before you." Each cut of ash, each strand of sweetgrass, each sheet of birch bark becomes a point of contact with ancestral practices. What emerges is then an account of ecological relationships through time. Seasonal harvests, ancestral presence, and material selection converge in the act of making. Basketry carries this memory because it is cyclical: it must be done again, with each season, under changing conditions. As Bacon's reflections suggest, the basket is both a vessel and a record: a container of use, but also a trace of the land and the people who shaped it.

### *Basketry Across Time: From Market to Museum:*

Tracing Wabanaki basketry across time illustrates how basketry has changed depending on the context it has been in.

In pre-contact contexts, baskets were inseparable from survival and seasonal life. This connection between basketry and survival is reinforced in the testimony of Victoria Neptune (Passamaquoddy), who emphasized ecological sustainability and the future of basketry.

When asked what she hoped the next generation would carry forward, Neptune emphasized resilience and utility: “Our ancestors made baskets to help with everyday tasks (laundry, picking vegetables, packing baskets, even a bassinet for the baby) that later turned into financial stability by making sturdy functional working (bushel) baskets for the local fish weir and sawmill factories. My father always told me, and I’ve heard others say this saying from his generation, ‘You will never go hungry if you know how to make baskets.’ To this day, this still holds. We must keep our culture and skills to pass along to the next generations to come, and they can have their ancestors backing them up always.”

As Victoria Neptune explained, baskets were not luxuries but essential tools: they were used for everyday tasks as well as being sold to fisheries and sawmill factories. Function, material, and survival were bound together: a berry basket held blueberries in summer, a pack basket carried fish or firewood, and the durability of the ash and birch made them incredibly sought after. Basketry in this early period was not supplemental to life; it was a guarantee of life itself.

Neptune also spoke to basketry’s personal and communal meanings: “Basketry to me is part of my culture and family traditions. My father learned from watching his parents make baskets and actually started making them at the age of 8. I myself watched him make baskets and started at the age of 9. It’s just something that I hold dear to me because not everyone was making baskets anymore... My oldest daughter was taught and often goes with me to help teach basketry to other native groups that have reached out to me for a class. Currently, I incorporate basketry into my work to have a strong presence of cultural practices in our community. I run a Tribal Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Advocacy Center... and part of the outreach work I can hold culturally specific events/activities (basketry, beading, sewing regalia) to keep these skills alive with natives.” Neptune’s experiences reflect how basketry balances personal, familial, and community values with broader historical pressures.

By the nineteenth century, baskets fell into the rise of economic markets. The increased coastal and inland tourism in Maine, along with the Arts-and-Crafts movement, created a demand for what collectors called “fancy baskets.” These were often miniature, brightly dyed, and ornamented forms designed for sale to non-Native buyers.<sup>7</sup> As Neptune observed, this represented a turning point: “I’ve watched the decline of basketry due to manmade items that kind of changed the views of basketry to an art that collectors go for. My father has stayed strong on producing the heavy-duty functional baskets while my four aunts... started doing fancy baskets, and my cousins continue with their legacy.” The market encouraged new aesthetics and new audiences, but also new meaning. Baskets became commodities, and Wabanaki makers were forced to

navigate between maintaining cultural integrity and adapting to external tastes.

Eric Bacon’s reflections reinforce the continuity of tradition amid these changes, emphasizing that ancestry sustains the practice even as external pressures reshape aesthetics. He stressed that his own practice is sustained by ancestral persistence: “I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing if people before me didn’t keep it alive. I come from generations of basket makers.” That lineage reminds us that baskets did not simply “evolve” into tourist art but persisted across the changing times. For Bacon, this ancestry carries responsibility. The basket embodies survival strategies and cultural memory. Its continuity defies the notion that Native traditions were vanishing and therefore needed to be “saved” through salvage anthropology.

That ideology of salvage shaped the next major transformation: the museum. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, federal agencies and curators removed baskets from Wabanaki communities, accessioning them as “specimens” into national collections.<sup>3</sup> In my own visit to the National Museum of the American Indian in New York City, I encountered how these objects are currently framed: little detail and no identification of the materials used. Without acknowledgment of ash, birch, or sweetgrass, the works were stripped of the ecological relationships that define their making. This suggested that the institution valued the basket as an abstract “artifact” but not as a material expression of land-based knowledge. As Carolyn Dean has argued, “calling something art reveals nothing inherent in the object to which the term is applied; rather, it reveals how much the viewer values it.” Within the museum, baskets became what Dean terms “art by appropriation.”<sup>4</sup>

This contrast of basketry over time demonstrates how colonial economies and institutions reframed Indigenous work. Yet both Bacon and Neptune resist those framings. Neptune insists on basketry as survival knowledge: harvesting, weaving, and teaching are continuations of everyday practices that bind families and communities together. Bacon, too, insists on its living continuity: basketry is not heritage frozen in glass but an active practice, a “relationship with these materials” renewed in every cut, split, and weave. Their voices remind us that the journey of a basket is not simply a story of appropriation. Instead, it reveals the ability of the Wabanaki people to adapt to the challenges they faced. A basket may pass from berry patch to tourist shop to museum shelf, but in each context it carries its cultural memory. These pieces are each living embodiments of reciprocity with land and ancestors.

### ***Contemporary Basket Makers and Resilience:***

Contemporary Wabanaki basket makers confront a dual challenge: ecological threats to traditional plant materials and habitats, and the pressures of cultural continuity in a changing world. Yet their responses demonstrate the continued resilience and creativity that their ancestors strived for.

The greatest ecological threat to black ash today is the emerald ash borer, an invasive insect that devastates this tree at the heart of basket making. As Victoria Neptune explained, “The emerald ash borer is the biggest threat to the ash logs... they burrow in and eat a lot of the outer layers under the bark,

leaving the ash damaged and not being able to be used for basketry.” She pointed to efforts by New England universities and environmental agencies to study and counter the insect. The Massachusetts Bureau of Forest Fire Control and Forestry and the Department of Conservation and Recreation state, “The forest health program is working in partnership with the USDA-AHPIS and Forest Service to establish biocontrol species to help minimize the impact of the emerald ash borer and to protect our valuable ash trees.”<sup>6</sup> The goal of the biocontrol release would be to populate host-specific parasitic wasps from the emerald ash borer’s native range. These wasps will help limit the borer’s growth. However, Neptune’s emphasis was on cultural responsibility in harvesting: “With our cultural beliefs and practices for sustainability, those who harvest the ash and birch bark [know] these are living beings... thinking of how many are in the area... how tall they are... and promoting seeding for new logs/trees to grow.” In this aspect, materials are not simply raw resources but cherished relatives whose well-being requires reciprocity.

Eric Bacon voiced a similar ethic of resilience, though from the perspective of adaptation. As noted previously, with ash under threat, some makers have turned to willow, cedar bark, or even commercial reed. Bacon acknowledged these experiments but insisted that traditional materials remain irreplaceable: basketry is “an intimate relationship with these materials” that cannot be fully substituted. For him, making baskets is also about adapting to ecological and cultural threats.

This ethic resonates with Robin Wall Kimmerer’s teaching, noted previously, “never take the first, never take the last... leave some for others.”<sup>5</sup> Kimmerer emphasizes that harvesting is itself a form of caretaking, not depletion but renewal. In her account, when sweetgrass was carefully picked, it actually flourished more, whereas patches left untouched eventually withered. The principle, respectful use fosters abundance, parallels Neptune’s claim that ash and birch are “living beings” whose well-being depends on thoughtful harvesting, and Bacon’s recognition that substitutes cannot replicate the connection of traditional materials.

The Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance (MIBA) exemplifies how makers collectively turn resilience into organized activism. Since its founding in the 1990s, MIBA has worked not only to revitalize Wabanaki basketry as an art form but also to protect ash trees through conservation projects and partnerships with scientists. Their motto, “to save the art, you must save the tree,” captures the connection between cultural and ecological survival. By combining generational teaching with advocacy for habitat protection, basket makers ensure that the practice remains in both community life and environmental stewardship.<sup>7</sup> Basketmakers like Neptune and Bacon carry forward ancestral knowledge while responding to ecological change. Their work, read alongside Kimmerer’s ecological framework, reveals why Indigenous art cannot be understood apart from land, water, and living materials.

### ***Contemporary Relevance:***

Wabanaki basketry extends far beyond the survival of a single cultural practice. At a moment when climate change,

deforestation, biodiversity loss, and invasive species are reshaping ecosystems worldwide, Wabanaki knowledge demonstrates that sustainability is relational. Basketry offers a vision of how cultural continuity and ecological resilience are mutually dependent. The protection of black ash habitats is not only an environmental concern but also a cultural necessity.

This perspective questions dominant approaches to environmentalism that often separate resource management from cultural survival. Policies that measure forests only in terms of board feet, carbon credits, or recreational value miss the deeper ecological relationships sustained and reflected by practices like basketry. Wabanaki traditions remind us that trees are not inert “resources” but rather our kin, beings with whom humans have reciprocal obligations. Robin Wall Kimmerer emphasizes that careful harvest can foster abundance. Sustainability emerges not from limiting use, but from respectful use that promotes regeneration.<sup>5</sup> In this way, creating a basket is participation in an ecological cycle.

Wabanaki basketry provides a counter to the idea that Indigenous knowledge is a relic of the past. In contrast, it models futures in which ecological adaptation and cultural renewal are connected. The emerald ash borer poses a major threat to ash groves in the Northeast, but the Wabanaki response has been not only ecological (collaborating with universities, experimenting with pest management) but cultural: revitalizing basketry traditions and expanding public awareness.<sup>6</sup>

For contemporary environmentalism, these lessons matter deeply. They remind us that conservation cannot be reduced to science and regulation alone, but must also engage cultural practice and generational teaching— not just dependent on scientific facts, but also on value and relationships. Basketry refuses false divisions between art and ecology and between human survival and environmental flourishing. To see Wabanaki basketry as simply a “craft” or creation of an “artifact” is to miss its ecological insight: that human creativity can sustain, rather than deplete, the living world. In this sense, basketry is not only cultural heritage but also environmental philosophy in action, offering models urgently needed as societies confront climate disruption and ecological loss today.

## **■ Conclusion**

This paper has shown that Wabanaki basketry is more than an artistic tradition: it is a vessel of ecological memory and a practice of resilience in the face of contemporary threats. Interviews with Eric Bacon and Victoria Neptune reveal how basketry combines ancestral knowledge and ecological ethics, while research from Redman, Dean, and Kimmerer shows how institutions have both obscured and recovered these meanings. Together, these perspectives represent how basketry represents the inseparability of cultural and ecological survival.

Basketry teaches us that sustainability does not come from absence, but from relationships. As Kimmerer reminds us, careful harvesting fosters abundance: sweetgrass flourishes when it is tended, just as black ash groves thrive when cared for by those who depend on them. This ethic challenges modern conservation models that treat humans as external to ecosystems.

tems. Instead, Wabanaki practice asserts that humans are active players within ecosystems, and that reciprocity and renewal are the foundations of the future.

The stakes of this paper extend far beyond the Wabanaki Confederacy and indigenous culture. In an era of climate disruption and deforestation, Wabanaki basketry offers a model of sustainability rooted in lived practice. Its principles of taking only what is needed, giving back to promote regeneration, and carrying knowledge forward for future generations provide urgently needed frameworks for redesigning how societies approach environmental crises. Although this paper hasn't focused on this, the ways in which this knowledge is conveyed—through “learning by doing,” and through language and storytelling are also critically important and effective in keeping the cultural contexts of basketmaking alive.

The responsibility to confront these issues and design unique solutions is with scholars, institutions, and citizens alike. Museums must present Indigenous works not as static artifacts but as living ecological archives. Policymakers and conservationists must recognize that cultural knowledge is essential to achieving environmental stewardship. And all of us can learn from the ethic at the heart of Wabanaki basketry: to save the art, we must save the tree and its habitat. In its weaving of memory, land, and creativity, basketry offers a guide for how to live responsibly in a changing world.

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