Western Abenaki People—the First Vermonters

The first Vermonters arrived here about 11,000 years ago, when Bitawbagok—"the between lake," now known as Lake Champlain—was still the Champlain Sea. These first people were nomadic, hunting the big game animals with whom they shared the early spruce-fir forests. As the climate warmed over thousands of years, these Vermonters farmed corn, beans, and squash on lands they cleared along the banks of lowland rivers, and met together in settlements near the mouths of the major rivers like the Missisquoi and Winooski. In winter, they migrated upslope into the pine forests to hunt game (see map on reverse side, which focuses on Vermont’s Center-West Ecoregion).

Their way of life continued through their first contact with Europeans in the 1600s, but like many native peoples, the Abenaki population plummeted from introduced diseases. During 1800s and early 1900s, the Abenaki people who remained were forced to hide their identity to avoid being targeted by eugenics and sterilization programs in Vermont that sought to prevent “undesirable” people from reproducing. Abenaki culture began to re-emerge in the 1980s as it became less dangerous to self-identify as native. The Nulhegan and Elnu Abenaki tribes received official state recognition in 2011, followed by the Abenaki Nation at Missisquoi and the Koasek Band of the Koas Abenaki Nation in 2012. The process of rebuilding community and reviving Abenaki customs and traditions is underway.

Abenaki Relationship with Land

“Our connection to this land cannot be described in any language.”

Western Abenaki oral traditions and stories celebrate the importance of caring for the land. A central theme is the view of the Abenaki people belonging to the land, engaged in reciprocal relationships with other species. In the Abenaki view, our actions should be weighed with the wellbeing of seven generations in mind—from great grandparents to great grandchildren.

Today, Vermont’s Abenaki community continues to deeply value relationship with land. Tribal membership, cultural awareness, and participation in cultural practices continue to expand. In 2012, the Nulhegan Band of the Abenaki acquired 68 acres of land in Barton, Vermont—the first Abenaki tribal land ownership since they lost access to their lands more than 200 years ago. Tribal members use this land for cultural celebrations, gatherings, workshops, medicine foraging, and community gardens, where the practice of planting the three sister crops of corn, beans, and squash has been rekindled. But the Barton land is inaccessibly far for many Abenaki citizens.

Cultivating Abenaki Land Access

In recent years, the Abenaki people have worked with the state, federal, and corporate land managers to negotiate permissions to gather edible and medicinal plants. Nearly 80% of Vermont’s forests are privately owned, and about 80% of those privately owned forests—about 2.9 million acres—are non-industrial family forests. So Vermont’s family forest owners hold tremendous opportunity for cultivating mutually beneficial relationship with the Abenaki people.

This brochure is drawn from the work of Middlebury College students Will Greene, Holto Huntington, and George Valentine, 2019.
Vermont has been home to the Western Abenaki for thousands of years, and still is. This map shows historic Abenaki summer and winter lands, as well as place names, within Vermont’s Center-West Ecoregion. Vermont Family Forests works with many private forestland owners in this region, indicated with yellow shading.