Ho-Chunk are rightful heirs to Badger plant land

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Plant on the prairie in 1942, the land was made to support the production of gunpowder and rocket propellant. The effigy burial mounds of the First Peoples were replaced with regularly spaced ammunition storage bunkers. A large portion of the Seik prairie became a production facility for violence and destruction.

Decommissioning of the Badger plant offered an opportunity for just redistribution and an ecological healing of the land. In 1968, the federal General Services Administration was given responsibility for the disposition of the 7,300-acre site. The Ho-Chunk asked that some 1,500 acres be returned to them for prairie restoration and tribal economic development.

After five years of negotiations, a 1,000-acre tract was set aside for the Ho-Chunks. In 1973, the tribe accepted the 2,000-acre tract to expand its Dairy Forage Research Center. Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources will get 4,700 acres to establish a Saginaw Prairie Recreation Center located to Devil's Lake State Park. The Ho-Chunk will get 2,500 acres. Although there are parcels with sacred effigy mounds that were bulldozed in the 1940s, it is less than a third of what the tribe had requested. Over the past 30 years, the Ho-Chunk have worked to preserve and restore what has been almost completely lost. To allocate any fraction of the Seik prairie to the USDA, an agency that has been a major force behind the replacement of prairie with rows of corn and alfalfa, seems unconscionable. Moreover, it is unnecessary. Although we plowing of fields and roads has left us too short of prairie plants and grassland birds, we are hardly short of milk. The DNR would use its parcel for conservation purposes. But sustainability requires more than a commitment to ecological health. It also requires a commitment to social justice.

The disproportionate small allocation to the Ho-Chunk is apparently the result of DNR's insistence on obtaining particular tracts of the site that are also of particular interest to the Badger. Once again, the legitimate interests of native people are being subordinated to the priorities of the government and the society that originally dispossessed them. Today, the Ho-Chunk has no reservation land in Wisconsin. The 2,000 acres they now hold in state that they have re-acquired through purchase. Allocation of Badger plant land to the Ho-Chunk would facilitate conservation as well as redressing injustice. Anyone who has passed through the thriving cities of the Muscogee reservation has seen eloquent evidence of the commitment of Wisconsin's First Peoples to the sustainable development of their land. The recent acquisition of the Crow Agency by the Flathead Indian Tribe and the Mako Lake Chipewa in order to safeguard the headwaters of the Wolf River benefit all Wisconsin citizens who want their children to inherit a legacy of healthy and intact ecosystems.

The Ho-Chunk are rightful heirs to Badger plant land, but they were kept out of the way, they pleased to take our land, and they took it.