

Ho-Chunk are rightful heirs to Badger plant land

I read with great disappointment your paper's account of the how the Badger Army Ammunition Plant is going to be divided among various claimants ("Ho-Chunk to get less Badger land," Oct. 25). If it were my decision, the entire property would be returned to the Ho-Chunk Nation.

When Jean Nicolet landed near Green Bay at Red Banks in 1634, it was the Ho-Chunk who welcomed him to tribal lands that stretched from the Door peninsula to the Rock River. In 1825 a treaty recognized Ho-Chunk sovereignty, which later made it possible for their lands to be formally and "legitimately" expropriated.

In subsequent treaties, the Ho-Chunk gave up their title to all 10 million acres of their Wisconsin lands and were forcibly removed to a series of reservations in Minnesota, South Dakota and Nebraska. Periodically, the U.S. Army would round up Ho-Chunk who had fled the reservations to return to their ancestral homes in Wisconsin, and ship them back into exile.

By 1848, the year Wisconsin became a state, the Sauk prairie was lined with fences. Settlers' plow blades have since made the earth produce corn and Holsteins rather than compass plants and bison. The marvelous biodiversity of the aboriginal prairie has been supplanted by the narrow monocultures characteristic of industrialized, chemical-intensive dairy farming.

With the establishment of the Badger Army Ammunition

Once again, the legitimate interests of native peoples are being subordinated to the priorities of the government and the society that originally disenfranchised them.

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

Decommissioning of the Badger plant offered an opportunity for a just redistribution and an ecological healing of the land. In 1998, the federal General Services Administration was given responsibility for deciding 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 the GSA has made its allocations. The U.S. Department of Agriculture will get about 2,000 acres to expand its Dairy Forage Research Center. Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources will get 4,700 acres

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FILE PHOTO

The federal government last week announced the new land ownership split for the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant south of Baraboo. The Ho-Chunk will receive 420 acres, less than a third of what the tribe had sought.

to establish a Sauk Prairie Recreation Center linked to Devils Lake State Park. The Ho-Chunk will get 420 acres. Although that parcel contains remnants of sacred effigy mounds that were bulldozed in the 1940s, it is less than a third of what the tribe had requested.

Over 99 percent of the original prairie that once graced the Wisconsin landscape is gone. The Badger plant site represents a unique opportunity to

restore what has been almost completely lost. To allocate any fraction of the Sauk prairie to the USDA, an agency that has been a major force behind the replacement of prairies with seas of corn and alfalfa, seems unconscionable. Moreover, it is unnecessary. Although the plowing of fields and hedgerows has left us short of prairie plants and grassland birds, we are hardly short of milk.

The DNR would use its par-

cel for conservation purposes, true. But sustainability requires more than a commitment to ecological health. It also requires a commitment to social justice.

The disproportionately small allocation to the Ho-Chunk is apparently the result of DNR insistence on obtaining particular tracts of the site that are also of particular interest to the Ho-Chunk. Once again, the le-

gitimate interests of native peoples are being subordinated to the priorities of the government and the society that originally disenfranchised them. Today, the Ho-Chunk still have no reservation land in Wisconsin. The 2,000 acres they now hold in this state 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 forests of the Menominee 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 Crandon mine site by the Forest County Potawatomi and the Mole Lake Chippewa in order to safeguard the headwaters of the Wolf River benefits all Wisconsin citizens who want their children to inherit a legacy of healthy and intact ecosystems.

"They made us many promises," the Sioux leader Red Cloud said, "but they never kept but one; they promised to take our land, and they took it."

Would it not be both socially and ecologically responsible to make partial amends for the violence done to both the Ho-Chunk and the landscape by returning to the Ho-Chunk this piece of what was, and should once again become, their land?

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