

# Damn You, Dam: The Menominee Nation and the Lake Sturgeon



Taelynn O'Kimosh, Three Affiliated Arikara  
Haskell Indian Nations University



## Introduction

The Menominee Nation is well known for its vast forest, logging, wild rice, and other natural resources. One natural resource commonly neglected are lake sturgeon, *Acipenser Fulvescens*, that populate the Wolf River in Spring (see figure 1). The five clans were created at the mouth of the Menominee River, and their first task was fishing, and after the first catch of sturgeon the five clans gave a ceremonial offering and had a feast. The ceremony included giving tobacco in the Spring when the sturgeon would migrate up rivers where the Menominee villages were located, continuing until 1892.

**Knowing this, how does Lake Sturgeon population effect the Menominee Nation ceremonies since the development of the Shawano Dam in 1843?**



Figure 1. Lake Sturgeon (*Acipenser Fulvescens*)

## Background

- Limited amount of access to Lake Sturgeon and the management of the fluctuating population of Lake Sturgeon has been detrimental to Menominee cultural ceremonies.
  - In one creation story, Bear and Eagle stood on the banks of the river, they saw a sturgeon, which was adopted by the Bear as younger brother and servant who were keepers of the Wild Rice and tribal historian.
- This change in location of sturgeon spawning grounds and migration routes resulted in Menominee tribal members moving to a more accessible site to continue practicing the sturgeon ceremony.
  - Nama'o Maec Micehswan Kewaehmakat Piataeh (Sturgeon big feast they're coming home)
- The method of harvest was with spears. The Menominee relied upon the sturgeon that supplemented their diet along with other fish, wild game, wild rice and maple sugar and was also used for medicinal purposes.
- Lake sturgeon is a threatened species that has been classified as rare by the committee on a Rae and Endangered Wildlife Species, Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife

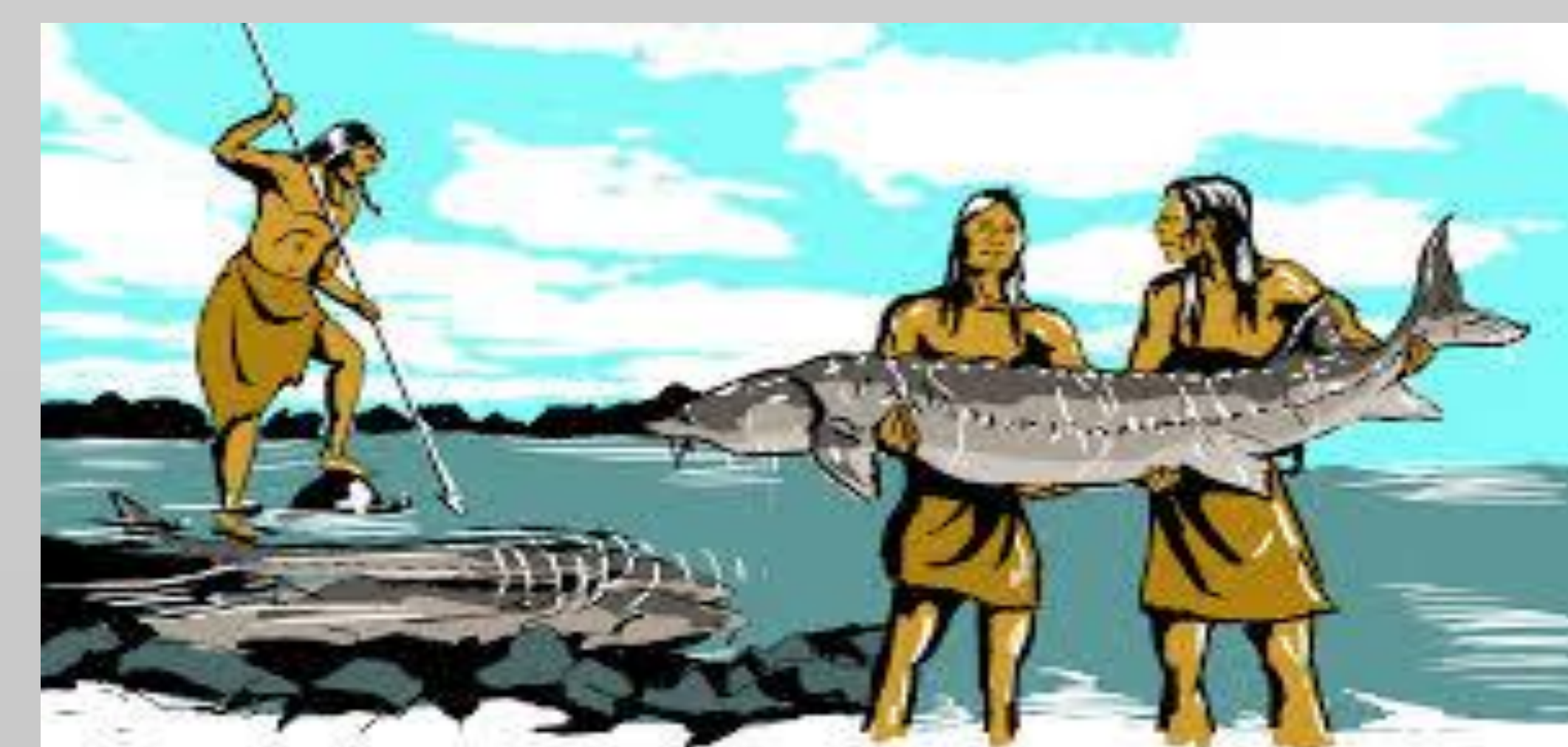


Figure 2. Traditional sturgeon spear fishing

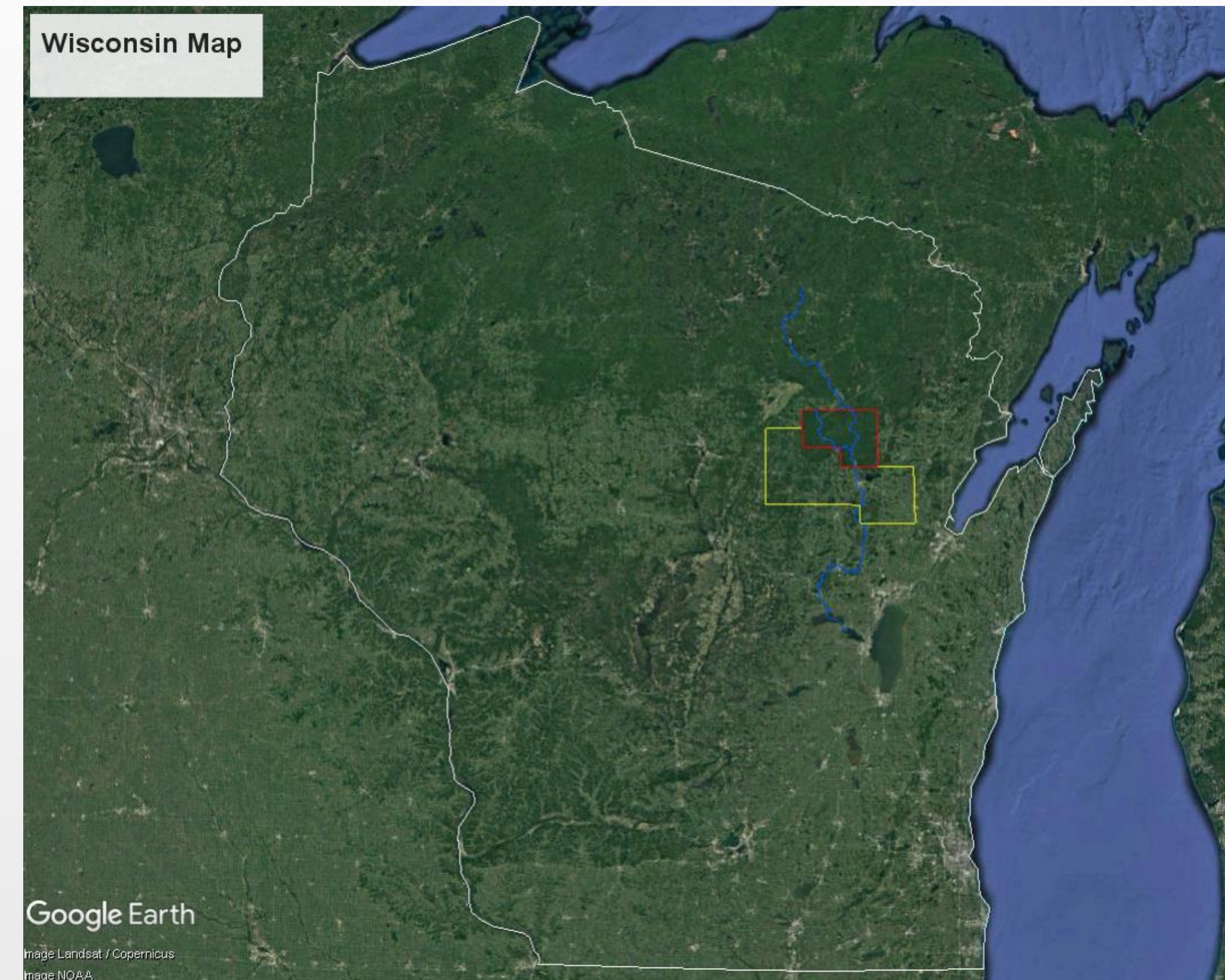


Figure 3. Wisconsin Map (white); Menominee Reservation (red); Shawano County (yellow); and Wolf River (blue)

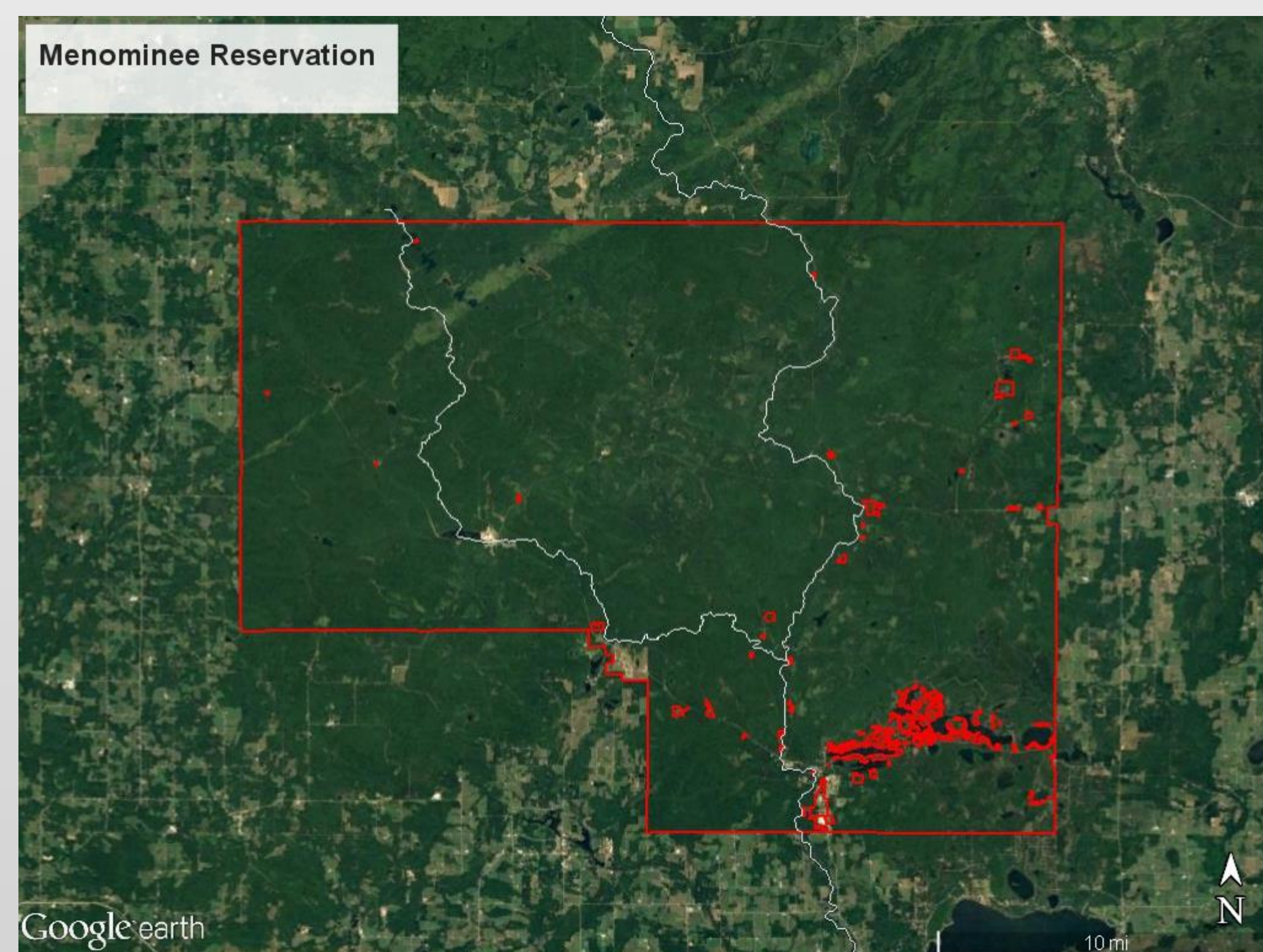


Figure 4. Menominee Reservation; Wolf River

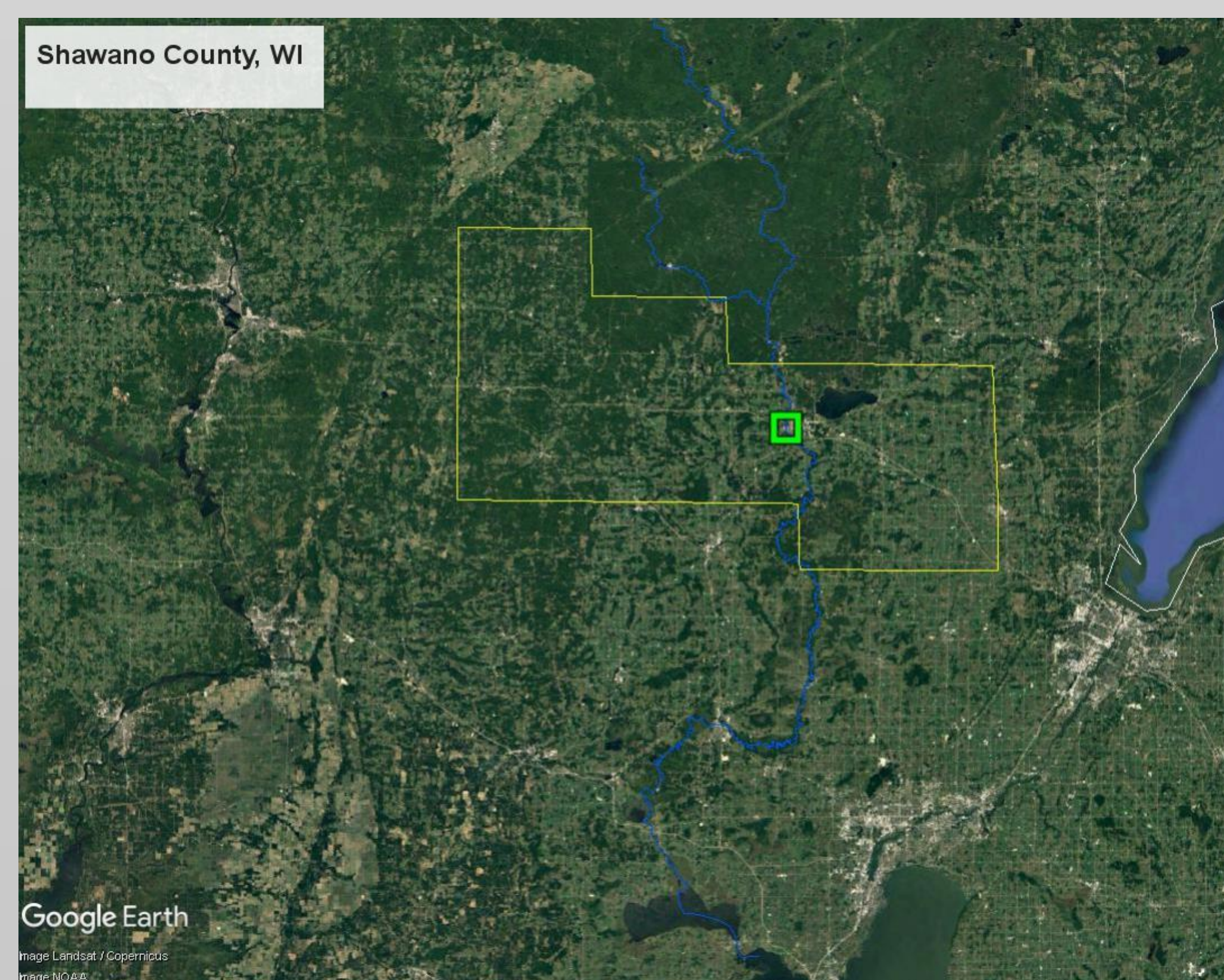


Figure 5. Shawano County; Papermill Dam (green); Wolf River

## Methodology

The emerging field of Indigenous Environmental Studies and Sciences (IESS) is distinctive, investigation social resilience to environmental change through the research lens of how moral relationships are organized in societies (Whyte 2018). Utilizing IESS I will conduct interviews, use oral history, and traditions for my research to capture a holistic perspective, while including sturgeon management, dam turbine statistics, and Wolf River sedimentation data.

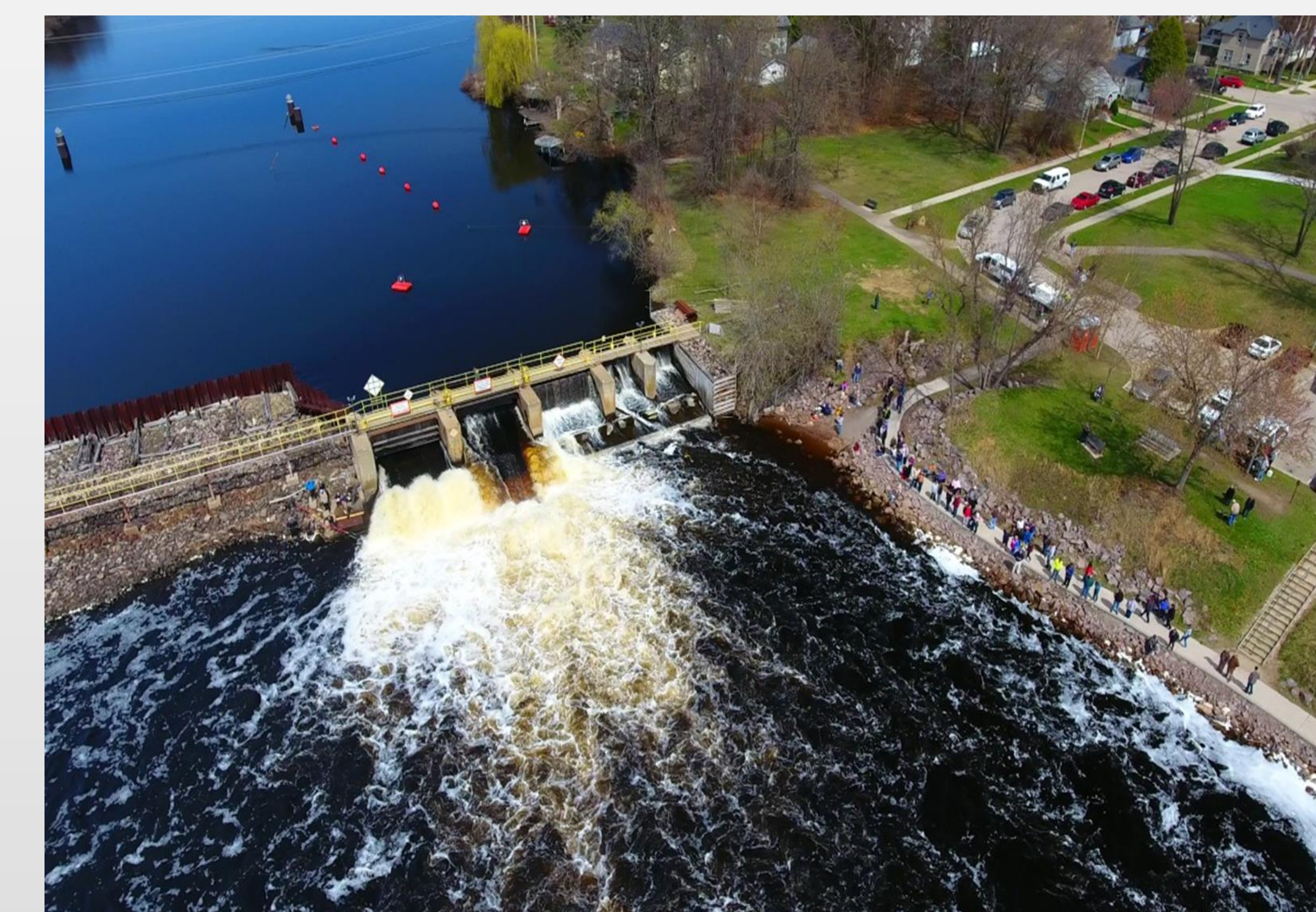


Figure 6. Shawano Papermill Dam; located on the Wolf River

## Results

**Lake sturgeon are being threatened by dam development, negatively impacting natural spawning ground and migration routes.**

- Shawano Papermill Dam (see figure 6).
- River sedimentation is likely affected by a combination of historical human disturbance related to logging and log drivers and downstream source.
- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) reported growth of lake sturgeon in the Menominee River was considerably slower and weighted less than that in Lake Winnebago.

### Traditional Ceremony Tools

- Dam disruption of spear fishing practices
- Use of fencing and nets (no spear fishing or natural location) see figure 2 and 8.

### Relocation of Sturgeon Feast

- Original spawning ground were located by the Keshena Falls, is now held at the Menominee high school (figure 7).
- The Menominee had always hunted fished, and gathered in this area, which is a part of Menominee aboriginal territory.



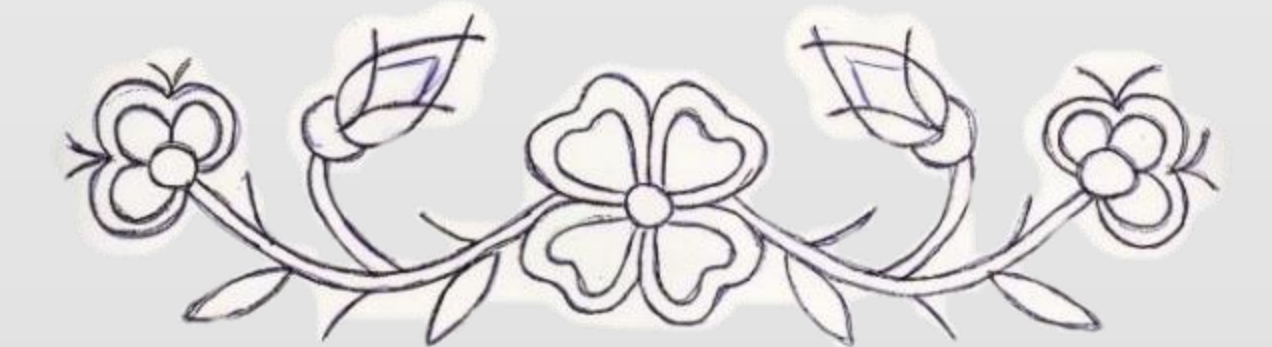
Figure 7. Menominee Feast Dance



Figure 8. Net catching for Sturgeon Feast

## Conclusion

Menominee tribal members have fought to practice the sturgeon feast ceremony every Spring ( see figure 7). The tribe has a ten-year Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the State of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to bring 100 sturgeon per year. The sturgeon are put in at Chickenay Creek just below Keshena Falls and the objective is to start producing or productive population of them on the reservation above the dams. Menominee Nation is in the seventh year of the MOA and after the first year that were seen spawning at Keshena Falls, and every year since have been spawning at the falls every spring. Some go back through the dams, but some stay on the reservation. (Grignon). This current method of sturgeon and dam management has disrupted tribal Menominee practices of sturgeon fishing using spears. Showing respect to tribal members and elders who are willing to share stories of lake sturgeon, having been connected to Menominee families for generations, is of top priority. An additional threat to sturgeon preservation is the outside involvement from over fishing, tourism, and government agencies.



## References

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## Contact Information

Taelynn O'Kimosh  
Haskell Indian Nations University  
Email: okimosht@gmail.com  
Phone: (715)851-0099  
Website: [www.linkedin.com/in/taelynn-o-kimosht-3b80b8189](http://www.linkedin.com/in/taelynn-o-kimosht-3b80b8189)

