

LOCAL

Land seizures, 'unethical' research: University of Minnesota confronts troubled history with tribal nations

Indigenous nations want reparations, understanding over land seizure with U

By Ryan Faircloth (<https://www.startribune.com/ryan-faircloth/6370411/>) Star Tribune |

APRIL 3, 2021 — 5:25PM

Every time Kevin DuPuis steps foot in the rugged red pine forest just west of Cloquet, Minn., he's reminded of the painful truth that this slice of land within the borders of the Fond du Lac Reservation does not belong to his tribe.

For more than a century, the 3,400-acre stretch has been home to the University of Minnesota Cloquet Forestry Center, a research outpost on land the federal government deeded to the university without the tribe's consent. Members of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa have long taken issue with the U's presence there, demanding transparency about its research and defying a hunting ban around the forestry center. To this day, the tribe is fighting to reclaim the land.

"We want to be able to use the land how we feel that we should be able to use the land," said DuPuis, Fond du Lac's chairman. "It's rightfully ours."

Fond du Lac isn't the only band that has a dispute to settle with Minnesota's land-grant university. Tribal leaders statewide have called on the U to own up to actions "rooted in institutional racism." Members of the Red Lake Nation are seeking answers about research conducted on children decades ago, and the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council has criticized the U for not returning sacred objects it once displayed at its Weisman Art Museum to their rightful tribes.

The tension between the U and tribal nations can be traced to the very creation of the land-grant university system. The flagship Twin Cities campus was built on Dakota land ceded in treaties of 1837 and 1851. The Duluth campus is on land that was once home to Ojibwe people and other Native groups. And the Morris campus occupies land where an American Indian boarding school used to "assimilate" children once stood.

Though their histories are deeply intertwined, the university and tribal nations had not come together to discuss their troubled past until recently. After the death of George Floyd, the Indian Affairs Council renewed demands for the U to acknowledge and atone for past injustices.

For the first time in a long time, tribal leaders are optimistic the university is listening. U President Joan Gabel has met with leaders of the 11 tribal nations in Minnesota. She has made improving those relationships a top priority, and she is mulling remedies ranging from public apologies to reparations.

"We're in a moment right now where it feels as if we have a really positive outlook on how we can move forward," Gabel said.

'It will always be our land'

Hiking through woods and wetlands surrounding the forestry center, DuPuis pointed to where he hunts and traps animals such as foxes, bobcats, beavers and mink.

"My uncles would always tell me ... 'It will always be our land. You can trap it,'" he said.

DuPuis and tribal members want the land to be used for natural reasons, not for research that they feel the U has never fully explained.



ALEX KORMANN, STAR TRIBUNE

Kevin DuPuis, chairman of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, said the Cloquet Forestry Center land is "rightfully

Cloquet researchers conduct long-term studies meant to improve forest and wildlife management and examine the impact of climate change. The forestry center doubles as an educational hub for some undergraduates, natural resource managers and area youth.

The band worries the U's research might negatively affect native plants and species. Fond du Lac and other bands have similarly clashed with the university over its genetic research on wild rice, which they view as sacred.

"Our perspective on the natural world is that everything is perfect. ... Leave things alone," said Thomas Howes, Fond du Lac's natural resources program manager.

DuPuis has made clear to Gabel that Fond du Lac wants the land back. However, he said the band would also consider co-managing the territory.

Gabel said she looks forward to "advancing those conversations."

In northwest Minnesota, Red Lake Nation is trying to piece together information about university research conducted on tribal children in the 1960s.

While tales of the research were told by some elders, the tribe did not have a detailed account of what happened until 2018, when former Indian Health Service research director William Freeman brought records to the tribe's attention.

Freeman said he was appalled to learn of the "unethical" research. U researchers were studying Red Lake children who had contracted a kidney disease during an epidemic a decade before a new outbreak occurred, according to Freeman's report.

The researchers knew a shot of long-acting penicillin helped stop the first epidemic, yet they refrained from immediately telling local doctors, and more children fell ill. They took young children off the reservation for kidney biopsies, Freeman said. Researchers did a second biopsy on roughly a dozen children and performed the procedure on some kids who showed no symptoms of the disease.

"Doing that kind of research on kids ... would be problematic," Freeman said, noting kidney biopsies were more painful then than they are today.

Red Lake Tribal Secretary Sam Strong said he and other tribal members feel the U treated their people as "guinea pigs."

"They basically chose to let our kids suffer for science," Strong said.

Red Lake's council has called for the university to make amends, and Strong met with the U's Medical School dean to discuss a path forward.

Among many requests, Red Lake leaders asked the U to make its physicians available to treat tribal members and to help their tribal college develop a nursing program. Most of all, the tribe wants the university to publicly acknowledge the research was "inhumane and unethical."

Tadd Johnson, the U's senior director of tribal nations relations, said he believes such apologies are in order. But the U first wants to thoroughly understand what happened. The university will soon begin working with tribal nations on [a historical report](https://www.startribune.com/university-of-minnesota-initiative-to-examine-school-s-history-with-tribes-teach-residents-about-rac/600010235/?refresh=true) (<https://www.startribune.com/university-of-minnesota-initiative-to-examine-school-s-history-with-tribes-teach-residents-about-rac/600010235/?refresh=true>) of their relationship.

"We want all the facts — no matter how bad, how ugly, how awful they are — to come out," said Johnson, who is a member of the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa.

More work to be done

Rebecca Crooks-Stratton, secretary and treasurer of the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community, praised the U for confronting its past and noted it has already made some positive steps forward, such as creating a tribal administration and governance degree program at the Duluth campus.

But there's still much to be done, said Shannon Geshick, the Indian Affairs Council's executive director. First, she said the university needs to comply with a 1990 federal law and return sacred objects to their rightful tribes.

The university's Weisman Art Museum houses more than 2,000 objects including stone tools, painted bowls and arrowheads that students and researchers excavated from New Mexico between 1928 and 1931. Gabel has ordered staff to inventory the objects and expedite their return to Pueblo tribes.

Additionally, Geshick said the U should waive tuition for American Indian students at all of its campuses. Currently, only students at the Morris campus can enroll for free.

Dannah Nephew, a senior at the Duluth campus and a descendant of the White Earth Nation, said the university can do more to support Indigenous students by increasing financial aid and creating campus spaces for them to pray and smudge.

Johnson is optimistic the university and bands will collaborate on many important issues going forward.

"To me, it's a new day at the University of Minnesota," he said. "These issues were lying dormant for a number of years. Suddenly, there's this awakening."

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Correction: Previous versions of this article misstated Dannah Nephew's affiliation with the White Earth Nation. She is a descendant.

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