



Kingston Plains

How Improper Management Can Have Lasting Effects

UGA5254037

Photo Courtesy of Joseph OBrien, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org

Kingston Plains - Before the 1800s, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (UP) was fairly pristine, the only footprints of use were from Native Americans. Though a few Europeans had made their way to the peninsula – Etienne Brule around 1622 and Father Marquette in 1668 were the earliest – most showed up between 1830 and 1840 when the milling and logging industries began to boom. By the 1870s, timbering was a major industry in the UP that lasted until about 1920, 10 years after the rest of Michigan’s timber had been harvested.

One important area for the industry was the Kingston Plains and the forests that grew there, although it’s now sometimes referred to as a “stump prairie.” The timber industry left Kingston Plains 115 years ago with a field of old tree stumps. Despite that length of time, however, it’s almost as barren as it was the day the last logger left. The area, west of Grand Marais and south of Grand Sable Dunes, was a vast forest of old growth white pine, surprisingly sturdy despite the sandy ground from which the trees grew.

“With proper conservation practices, forests can regrow once the area’s trees have been harvested. But that didn’t happen in the Kingston Plains.”

Trees, unlike many resources that the Upper Peninsula has used to support industry, are renewable. With proper conservation practices, forests can regrow once the area’s trees have been harvested. But that didn’t happen in the Kingston Plains.

When Europeans began venturing into the wilderness of the UP, the area was lush and full of growth. Before the 1820s, they had mainly stuck to the shore. When they realized the potential of the forest and that there was so much of it, they may have thought the trees would be inexhaustible, that regardless of how much they harvested, there would always be more beyond. Maybe they thought that by the time they were through, new growth would have started on the other side.

We can never truly know their intentions and history tends to be unforgiving. What we do know is that they laid the forest to waste. Thomas G. Sullivan, an owner of the logging companies harvesting in the UP, discovered the old growth in the Kingston Plains. His crews cut down 50 million feet of white pine. Winter was no barrier to their work. The heavy logs were sledged to the bottom of dunes along Lake Superior, waiting for a spring pickup. At night, workers sprayed water across the snow to create ice roads that would make transport easier.

When Lake Superior froze, the men hauled logs up the backdune of the Grand Sable Dunes, dropping them one by one onto a wooden log slide that dropped 500 feet to the water. From there, barges hauled the wood to mills in Grand Marais and Munising. When the logs went down too fast, they would catch fire. In the worst cases, the logs would skip the surface of the water – as much as 200 feet – crushing the men working to retrieve them.

Sullivan was one of many. Soon, there were no trees left on the plain, as it had been logged over, time after time. The area was abandoned in 1909 with nothing left but slash – branches and scraps full of resin with no market value. When the loggers left, the plains acted like tinder and caught fire many times. Sometimes lightning ignited the fires and sometimes they were man-made. After a huge fire in the 1930s, the land has been barren – no trees, just decaying stumps.

Geographer Linda Barrett suggests the reason there has been no revegetation is that the vastness of the white pine areas, coupled with the slash that made the fire burn extremely hot, left few trees to produce new seedlings. The soil was dry and sandy to begin with, so those extreme temperatures literally cooked the land. In the last few decades, however, some trees have been replanted.



Sharp-tailed grouse. Photo Courtesy of David Charles

Now a large preserve, the Kingston Plains have no old-growth trees, but efforts by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to overcome the environmental damage have met with some success and some new tree growth is now there. The DNR manages the area to protect species that like open plains such as the sharp-tailed grouse. They also conduct controlled fires to maintain the open habitat.

The scars of environmental damage have helped the sharp-tailed grouse, who need grass-shrub habitats for nesting and breeding. Though the loss of the white pine and other old growth is devastating, nature found a way to encourage the habitat of the sharp-tailed grouse in such a barren landscape. But that's not all they need – it's crucial for their breeding habitats to be protected from human intrusion.

According to Dr. Alec Lindsey, “the lack of human disturbance on the Kingston Plains is what makes it such an important place for maintaining a healthy sharp-tailed grouse population.”

You can visit this area by hiking along the Fox River Pathway beginning at the trailhead on the Adams Trail, just east of H-58.

More Information

<http://frankjhutton.blogspot.com/2012/05/kingston-plains.html>

<http://geo.msu.edu/extra/geogmich/kingstonplains.html>

<https://michigansharptails.wordpress.com/>

<http://geo.msu.edu/extra/geogmich/loggingbackgrd.html>