

“Bad River,” premiering in Madison this month, tells “a story of defiance”

A new documentary about a Native American group’s fight to remove an oil pipeline — and protect Lake Superior from contamination — is showing March 15-20.

M Jess Miller | Mar 13, 2024



Image courtesy 50 Eggs Films

When award-winning filmmaker (and former Olympic rower) Mary Mazzio set out to make a documentary about the Lake Superior Ojibwe tribe known as the Bad River Band, she “originally thought the story would focus on the David and Goliath battle that the Band was waging to protect Lake Superior from an oil pipeline rupture.”

What she got was something much bigger.

“The elders in the community wanted to tell a different story,” she says. The result is “Bad River” — which Mazzio wrote, produced and directed — which premieres in select locations around the country this month including New York, Los Angeles and, on March 15, at the **AMC Theatres** in Fitchburg.

The Bad River Band is a federally recognized tribe of Ojibwe people. For centuries before the arrival of Europeans, they occupied land throughout northern Wisconsin. An 1854 treaty officially established their reservation on the shores of Lake Superior. But like so many Native Americans across the country, the story of their relationship with the government and their American neighbors is rife with oppression, harassment and genocide.

“Bad River” sheds a light on this harrowing but vital history. Mazzio interviewed over 50 members of the Bad River Band for the documentary, making the film, in her words, “a historic retrospective”; a testament that the tribe members’ “parents, grandparents, great grandparents and ancestors fought the good fight for the land and culture.”

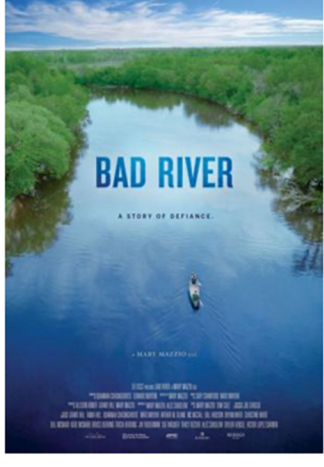


Image courtesy 50 Eggs Films

“It’s a powerful chronicle of some of the saddest chapters in American history,” says author and environmentalist **Bill McKibben**. “And oh what beautiful country is at stake!”

Much of “Bad River” centers around the Band’s fight against the Line 5 oil pipeline, which Canadian company Enbridge constructed in 1953. Currently the pipeline is in a state of disrepair and threatening to contaminate Lake Superior, America’s largest freshwater source. Over the last several years, Bad River Band members have been fighting to have the pipeline removed.

“This story is about a small group of people who are fighting to protect one of the world’s most precious resources,” says Mazzio.

Mazzio is no stranger to underdog stories. Her other documentaries include 2020’s “**A Most Beautiful Thing**” about the first African American rowing team in the country, and “**Underwater Dreams**”, released in 2014, about the children of undocumented Mexican immigrants who learn to build an underwater robot out of parts from Home Depot.

When it came time to select locations for the film’s premiere, Madison was included along with places like New York and L.A. because of the city’s status as “a minor character” in the film, according to Mazzio.

“Many Bad River members actually live in Madison,” she says. And some scenes from the film take place in the city, like the Band’s **performance of a smudge ceremony**, a sacred purification ritual, in a federal courtroom where a judge hears their case against the Enbridge pipeline.

Mazzio says the documentary will be available to stream “in the not-too-distant future.” If you want to be one of the first to see “Bad River”, tickets are on sale now on **AMC’s website** with multiple showtimes March 15-20. 50% of all ticket profits will be donated to the Bad River Band.

Jess Miller is an editorial intern at Madison Magazine.



Jess Miller
Editorial Intern



★ Follow Jess Miller