

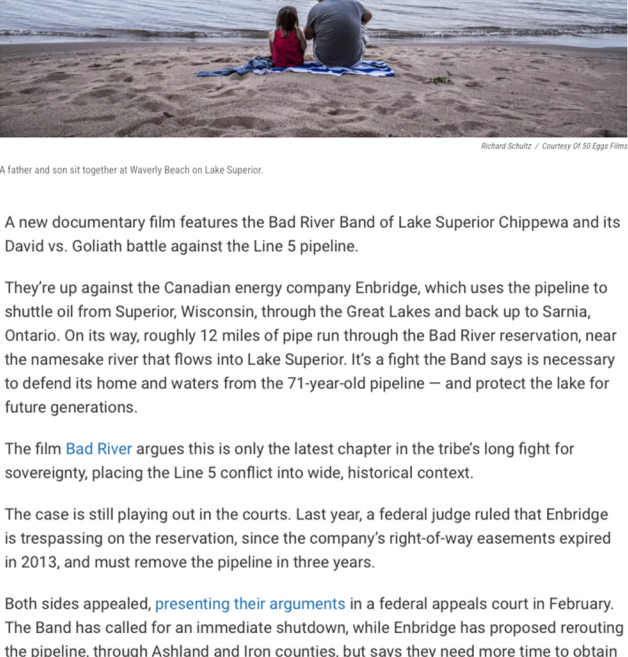
Environment

A new film spotlights Bad River Band's fight against Line 5 pipeline

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Richard Schultz / Courtesy Of 50 Eggs Films

A father and son sit together at Waverly Beach on Lake Superior.

A new documentary film features the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and its David vs. Goliath battle against the Line 5 pipeline.

They're up against the Canadian energy company Enbridge, which uses the pipeline to shuttle oil from Superior, Wisconsin, through the Great Lakes and back up to Sarnia, Ontario. On its way, roughly 12 miles of pipe run through the Bad River reservation, near the namesake river that flows into Lake Superior. It's a fight the Band says is necessary to defend its home and waters from the 71-year-old pipeline — and protect the lake for future generations.

The film [Bad River](#) argues this is only the latest chapter in the tribe's long fight for sovereignty, placing the Line 5 conflict into wide, historical context.

The case is still playing out in the courts. Last year, a federal judge ruled that Enbridge is trespassing on the reservation, since the company's right-of-way easements expired in 2013, and must remove the pipeline in three years.

Both sides appealed, [presenting their arguments](#) in a federal appeals court in February. The Band has called for an immediate shutdown, while Enbridge has proposed rerouting the pipeline, through Ashland and Iron counties, but says they need more time to obtain the necessary permits. The court is waiting for the federal government to weigh in.

In the meantime, Mary Mazzio, who produced, wrote and directed the film, says Line 5 is "a very, very precarious situation happening in real time." Erosion near the banks of the Bad River has stoked the Band's concerns that the exposed pipeline could rupture. Extreme rainfall and flooding in recent years, increasingly likely due to climate change, adds to their sense of urgency.

Mazzio noted that Enbridge participated in the film, providing interviews with their chief communications officer.

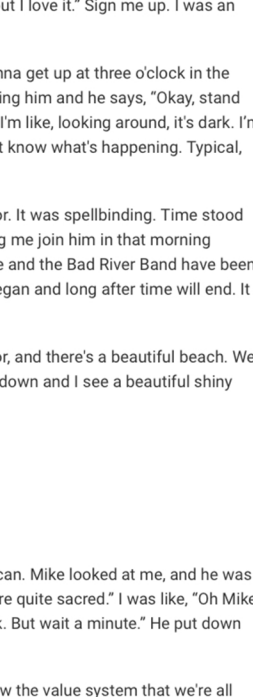
Before the film premiered, I spoke with Mazzio, previously an Olympic rower and attorney-turned-filmmaker, and RunningHorse Livingston, a Bad River member featured in the documentary. *Bad River* starts screening March 15 in Milwaukee, Ashland and Madison. Tickets are available [online](#).

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

How did work on this film begin? What was it about the story that grabbed you?

Mary Mazzio: I had been called many years ago, after my very first film, by a Native American coach from Tuba City, Arizona. He said, "I can't get any of my young Native athletes to be recruited. I think a project would go a long way to dispelling stereotypical assumptions." I was a young filmmaker, couldn't immediately find funding for it. And then, coming off of [my last project](#), I said, you know, "I think it's time. I would love to find an extraordinary Native story, [so] that we could amplify voices from that community."

Long story short, I had a chance encounter with former chairman of the Bad River Band, Mike Wiggins. He explained what was happening with the Band in terms of its current challenges over Line 5. But he also began to explain the profound connectivity that he had — and that the Band has — to the ecosystem, to the water, to the waterways, to the pristine aquifers. He said, "So do you want to come out for some canoe diplomacy?"



Courtesy Of 50 Eggs Films

Bad River starts screening March 15 in Chicago, Ashland and Madison.

I was like, "I don't know what canoe diplomacy is, but I love it." Sign me up. I was an Olympic rower back in the day.

When I came out to meet Mike, he said, "You're gonna get up at three o'clock in the morning." He took me to Waverly Beach. I'm following him and he says, "Okay, stand here." He proceeds to go halfway down the beach. I'm like, looking around, it's dark. I'm like, am I supposed to be feeling something? I don't know what's happening. Typical, typical, non-Native, right?

The sun begins to rise and break over Lake Superior. It was spellbinding. Time stood still. I now understand what he was doing by having me join him in that morning exercise, which was to experience what it is that he and the Bad River Band have been fighting to protect. Not just now, but before time began and long after time will end. It was a moment of magnitude for me.

We got into a fishing boat. We go into Lake Superior, and there's a beautiful beach. We pull off and step out on the sand. Of course, I look down and I see a beautiful shiny rock. What do I do? Do I leave it?

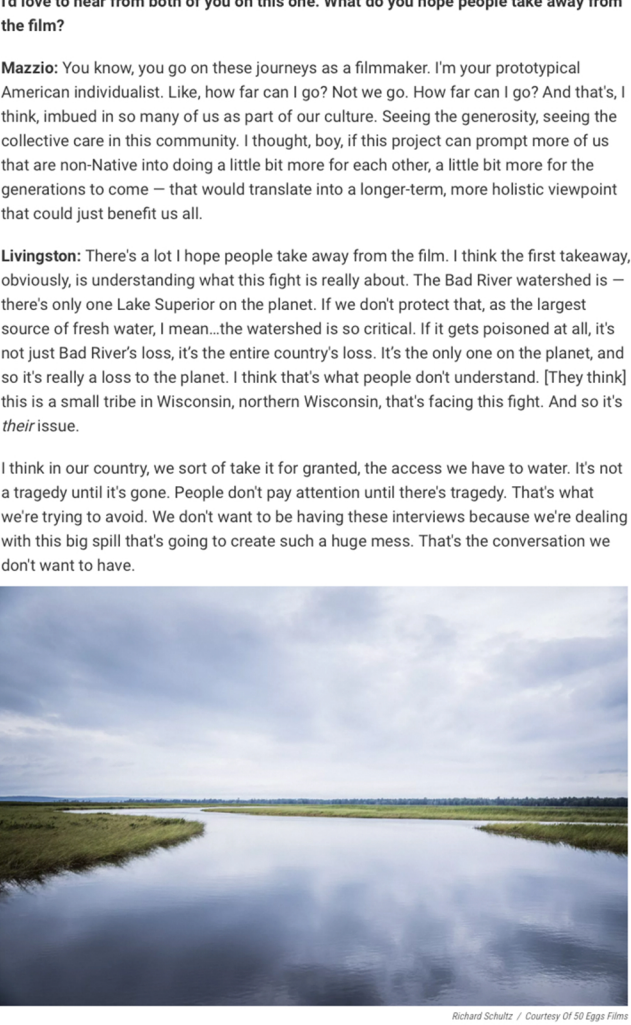
You pick it up, of course.

I'm still mortified by that instinct.

The instinct to take something for yourself?

It is mine! I will conquer! It's part of being an American. Mike looked at me, and he was so kind. He said, "We have grandfather rocks that are quite sacred." I was like, "Oh Mike, I'm so sorry." He said, "That's not a grandfather rock. But wait a minute." He put down some tobacco and said, "Now you can take it."

It struck me for the second time in one morning, how the value system that we're all inculcated with, is so single-mindedly about ourselves. I still have that rock and I treasure it. To remind myself what more can I do for community? What more can I do where it's not all about me, me, me?



Richard Schultz / Courtesy Of 50 Eggs Films

Mary Mazzio and Joe Grasso, director of photography, on location at the Bad River reservation.

He's showing you the waters that are so important to their tribe, that are at risk from this pipeline that you mentioned. For people who are new to the story, can you give a brief account of how we got here?

In the late 1940s, there was all kinds of exploration happening in Canada. They happened upon a huge vein of oil in Leduc, Canada. Thus began how do we move oil from western Canada to eastern Canada?

What ended up happening was a pipeline was constructed from the western side of Canada. It came down through the Great Lakes, and then back to Sarnia, in Canada. The reason the pipeline did not go from western Canada to eastern Canada was it was cheaper to go through the United States. The permitting was easier and faster.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs, the BIA, at that time in the 50s. You had relocation underway. You also had termination, where tribal communities and tribal status [were] actually being terminated. So there was this massive push to push Native peoples off their land. It meant that the land all of a sudden was available for all kinds of commercial extraction. For pennies on the dollar, often free, often completely subsidized and rubber-stamped by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In 1953, the line had already come down under the Great Lakes and then it was going to go back up. And it was constructed along 12 miles of the Bad River reservation. There is no evidence that the band ever consented, and the amount paid for 20 years was less than \$3,800. This is just what was happening, not just here, but everywhere you had Native land in the 50s, right? Pipelines, mines, dams, all throughout Indian country.

You know, I think some people maybe will come to this film being like, "I am here for the story about the pipeline and the fight that's happening today." But the film, in fact, spends a lot of time documenting all of that history of displacement, of U.S.-tribal relations. Why was it important to you to frame the story here as bigger in scope?

Honestly, I came to this thinking what an epic David and Goliath story. But what happened is that we began interviews with tribal elders. And they started talking about not only this current chapter. They wanted to talk about how they themselves, or their parents, stood up to the mining. They wanted to talk about treaty rights, boarding schools. When elders started speaking with such a sense of pride about this amazing genetic trait of fighting, of refusing to back down — this film meandered.

So I was like, you know what, that's the story. The chairman said one interesting thing to me in his interview. He said, "You know, Mary, we do not define ourselves through an Enbridge lens." Really, this challenge with Line 5 is only a chapter of the many, many stories that Bad River members shared. And long after this challenge, there will be another one, because that's just the history of who we are as a country.

A perfect case in point — RunningHorse. All of a sudden, he starts talking about "my Uncle Clyde." I'm thinking, is this Clyde Bellecourt? Who founded the American Indian Movement? Like what?

Richard Schultz / Courtesy Of 50 Eggs Films

Sonny Smart, a Bad River member featured in the film, on the shores of the band's namesake river.

Going from there, RunningHorse, your family history comes up in the film. You share that you heard stories [of activism] from him, your aunt, grandmother, mother growing up. How did hearing those stories influence you?

RunningHorse Livingston: I feel like family really forms who you are from the inside out. The memories that I had back then from Minneapolis, as a child, you know, it was attending marches, attending rallies and protests. I understood that we were fighting for something that was valuable. But I didn't realize how valuable that was until I was a bit older. Now, I appreciate the fact that my family was as involved as we were.

I remember taking my own children to a rally. It was for the mascot issue. We went to the Minnesota Vikings — so you know, of course, we all go for Minneapolis. We're playing the Washington...football team. We marched down University Avenue in Minneapolis, which is one of the main streets in Minneapolis. It was crazy to see that many people.

I remember my kids having the same look I did when I was a kid. You know, the big eyes and something big. And that it's important, because you see people getting up to speak and you hear the crowd roar, and you hear all the people that are excited to be there. I think it was maybe within a few years that they finally decided to change the name with a bit of pressure from corporate America.

The thing about generational trauma, which a lot of indigenous people have, is that there's a flip side to that. So like generational experiences and traits, I think are also transferred. I really wanted my children to experience that side of humanity, that it's always good to stand up for what you believe in and always stand up for what's fair. I think that's really important.

I'd love to hear from both of you on this one. What do you hope people take away from the film?

Mazzio: You know, you go on these journeys as a filmmaker. I'm your prototypical American individualist. Like, how far can I go? Not we go. How far can I go? And that's, I think, imbued in so many of us as part of our culture. Seeing the generosity, seeing the collective care in this community. I thought, boy, if this project can prompt more of us that are non-Native into doing a little bit more for each other, a little bit more for the generations to come — that would translate into a longer-term, more holistic viewpoint that could just benefit us all.

Livingston: There's a lot I hope people take away from the film. I think the first takeaway, obviously, is understanding what this fight is really about. The Bad River watershed is — there's only one Lake Superior on the planet. If we don't protect that, as the largest source of fresh water, I mean...the watershed is so critical. If it gets poisoned at all, it's not just Bad River's loss, it's the entire country's loss. It's the only one on the planet, and so it's really a loss to the planet. I think that's what people don't understand. [They think] this is a small tribe in Wisconsin, northern Wisconsin, that's facing this fight. And so it's *their* issue.

I think in our country, we sort of take it for granted, the access we have to water. It's not a tragedy until it's gone. People don't pay attention until there's tragedy. That's what we're trying to avoid. We don't want to be having these interviews because we're dealing with this big spill that's going to create such a huge mess. That's the conversation we don't want to have.

Richard Schultz / Courtesy Of 50 Eggs Films

The Kakogan River flows through the Bad River reservation on its way to Lake Superior.

I think the second takeaway is who we are as a people. I think for Indigenous people all over the world, we're stewards of the Earth. That part of our culture gets sort of lost on people who don't understand or have that connection. When people ask me, "Well, how can people be tied to the land? That just seems kind of a romantic thing to say about Indigenous people."

But when you compare it to, for example, the home you grew up in as a child. Every person remembers everything about their childhood home. They remember all the rooms and all the little nooks and crannies and all the little pieces of wood on the stairs or where they got a sliver one time. They have these memories that are tied to this space.

That's what Indigenous people's connection to the land is. It's like that home that they grew up in. But it's been for way longer — I mean, millennia. And it's a wider space. But we know all of the nooks and crannies, we know all of the ins and outs of the land. And so it is our home. So you know, I think understanding that about Bad River people: That we are tied to the land and it is our home. We're fighting this battle for water, but it's really a battle for our home and keeping it safe and keeping it beautiful, the way that it has been for forever.

Mazzio: It does bear repeating that where the Meander, the Bad River, is carving a new course for herself, she's headed right for the pipeline. Judge William Conley found that there could be a rupture with the next big flood. This is a very, very precarious situation happening in real time. And I love, RunningHorse, that you said, we don't want to have this conversation post-rupture.

I think the Band is really fighting. It's fighting for its life. It's also fighting for our collective lives, in terms of that water resource [on] this brink of what could be really catastrophic. And the fortitude and strength of this small group of people, really waging this fight single-handedly, is extraordinary.

This piece was updated with screen-times and a clarification on the Enbridge interview requests.

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Lina Tran
Lina is a WUWM news reporter.
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