

VOICES FROM THE FIELD:

CHASING THE WILD RICE HARVEST: CHALLENGES IN REACHING A DISPERSED, SEASONAL COMMUNITY

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What defines a community? In many cases, location and proximity identifies individuals as part of a particular community, such as “High Ridge” or “East Shore”. Other communities come together because of a shared interest or passion. Hidden within the forests of northern Minnesota and Wisconsin every fall just such a community comes together to endure sweat, sun and spiders for the privilege of gathering a wild, natural, water born grain: wild rice.



harvesting relationship still today, and are joined by an average of 2,000 state licensed harvesters throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Research conducted on wild rice up to this point has focused primarily on communities of place, and all of those had a focus on Ojibwe harvesters and harvesting practices, usually in association with a traditional rice lake.

Considering that less than 10% of the lakes known to have wild rice occur within tribal reservation borders, I was interested in a more regional perspective of wild rice harvest and management, one that incorporated voices from both traditional Ojibwe and non-tribal harvesters, yet were connected to a particular lake and a particular management regime (state, tribal or treaty-ceded).

An avid canoe traveler, I had on one or two occasions shared the slow moving waters of the Turtle River in northern Minnesota with members of this community, the wild rice harvesters. All I knew about wild rice was that it was good to eat, and that the rice harvested from the lakes and rivers was considered ‘different’ from the wild rice cultivated in paddies across north central Minnesota and California. Returning to school in 2003, wild rice and its harvest and management would become the focus of my doctoral research.

Background

Wild rice, a native annual grass which grows on the scattered lakes and rivers of the northern forested regions of Wisconsin and Minnesota has a long history of use by Native Americans and is often associated with the Ojibwe of the Upper Great Lakes Region, a nation which considers wild rice part of their identity as a people. Spread out over more than 125,000 square miles, wild rice and the Ojibwe people continue their

Identifying members of the wild rice harvesting community, across cultures, requires meeting harvesters where they congregate - on the lakes. There are no formal meetings or gatherings of wild rice harvesters save for the annual wild rice meeting held by the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC), a treaty authorized entity that works to protect the treaty rights, including wild rice gathering, of the eleven Ojibwe tribes it represents. This annual meeting is attended primarily by a small number of Wisconsin resource staff and a handful of tribal representatives. Outreach to the wild rice community for this study would have to include visits to the lakes during ricing season to establish contacts with rice harvesters. Through GLIFWC and state and tribal contacts,

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six lakes were selected for this study and the chase to gather wild rice harvesters began.

Management of this natural resource falls under the work of wildlife biologists, primarily because of its role in providing food for migrating ducks. Within the wild rice growing region these biologists serve tribal, state or treaty authorized entities. Working in northern Wisconsin for example, I depend heavily on contacts made through Peter David, biologist for GLIFWC. In addition, tribes with ricing lakes within their reservation borders have local jurisdiction and state natural resource agencies cover the remaining non-tribal lakes. Across the rice growing region there is a mosaic of regulations, from setting opening dates of harvest, to license fees and harvest times, all determined by the management entity with jurisdiction for a particular local.

*Challenges of the chase:
temporal and spatial*

In wild rice harvesting timing is everything. When the seed heads ripen, which they do over a period of several days, the rice falls easily from the stalk with just a brush of a smooth, cedar ricing stick. Gathered in canoes, using push poles or paddles to move through the rice beds, wild rice can be harvested from the same lake multiple times over a one or two week period. Exactly when this period occurs however, is a factor of sunshine and warm temperatures, varying with the location and year. Additionally, wind can quickly dislodge ripe seeds, sending them to the lake bottom for next year's crop. Those who harvest wild rice understand this and check weather patterns, visit the rice and talk to other harvesters in their area in order to judge the best time for gathering.

More critical to me than the maps I depended on for traveling across 500 miles of roads to visit my lakes were the lists of contact names and phone numbers constantly at my side. These individuals were my local knowledge sources, harvesters themselves or natural resource managers involved in setting opening harvest dates, part of the mosaic of regulations across the rice growing region. Ideally it was supposed to work like

this: I would contact a source, they would assure me the rice was at least five days away from being ready to harvest and they would then contact me again in four days to let me know I could expect harvesters on the lake tomorrow. I would then hop in my car, drive the 20 or 200 miles to the lake for an early morning arrival and be welcomed by the site of harvesters with canoes driving up behind me to set out on a day of wild rice gathering.

Thankfully, sometimes it DID work out that way.

Other times it went more like this: I would contact a source and be assured that the rice was a solid week away from being ready for harvest, but when it was, my source informed me, he would call. Four days later I would be passing by said lake and decide to make a quick check, only to find that the lake had opened the day before. Thirty minutes later, while looking for a place to spend the night so I could return to the lake the following morning, I would receive a call from my source, expressing regret that he had forgotten to call until this very moment, but that the lake was ready. Humor helped.

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The temporal aspects of this study are challenging enough, but spreading it out over more than 125,000 square miles adds to the complexity. Since the lakes themselves weren't considerate enough to ripen in a north to south or even west to east pattern, my travel routes took on the look of a scribbled pretzel. The constants were the set of study lakes and visits early in the season when ricers were not there. These visits allowed me time to become familiar with boat landings (where the boats would put in, usually marked on maps, but not always) and area resources (gas stations and food stops). This helped immensely once the harvest season began in earnest, for I would need to be at the landings before anyone else in order to greet ricers prior to going out on the water. Luckily, harvesting hours are regulated and none of the lakes open before 9 a.m. In fact, I would have to say I'm partial to Wisconsin lakes, as they don't open until 10 a.m., allowing for a little more daylight drive time.

The downside to a regional view

So much of participatory research is about building relationships and building trust. When this research began forming I was excited about the prospects of meeting harvesters from across the region. Would those harvesting rice in the remote lakes of northeast Wisconsin share similarities with those harvesting just two hours from a large metropolis? It was important for me to gather in as many diverse voices as possible. The decision has been the right one, even with the loss of building a deeper relationship with the harvesting community, a loss I am not quite ready to accept.

There have been bright spots. Although my interaction with harvesters at the landings has been limited, it has also been very positive. Even in the hustle and bustle of preparing for a day on the rice beds, harvesters were amenable to answering questions and often eager to hear more about the study or offer their own opinions and thoughts on the issues of wild rice harvest. Participation rates at the landings were nearly 100% and when asked about their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview, 50-90% agreed to be contacted. Several times I was told “I’m glad someone is finally looking at this.”

Looking ahead, opportunities for harvesters to continue building a network of communication are moving forward. With the support of the Community Forestry Research Fellowship, harvester discussion groups are being scheduled for early 2007. These small group meetings will offer an opportunity to hear findings from this research and provide input and direction to a future coordinated effort at bringing together a voice for natural wild rice. Throughout this study, the interest and support of the natural resource personnel and the commitment of wild rice harvesters from across the region have clearly moved us forward towards this goal.

