

Midterm Report

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Sustaining a ricing culture: a landscape approach to understanding harvest and management of wild rice across state, tribal and treaty ceded lands in Minnesota and Wisconsin

Summary: Since receiving CFR funding in July all interviews with wild rice harvesters have been transcribed (38) and additional interviews are lined up. The goal of this project was 60 interviews, 10 from each lake. Lake visits took place in August and September, reaching 101 harvesters over a period of 2 weeks and a distance of 1500 miles. During this time I was also able to meet with the wild rice committee from Leech Lake and participate in the rice inspection with two band members prior to the season opening. Working towards the harvester input meetings, set for January and February 2007, meetings were also held with harvesters from Leech Lake and managers from the 1854 Authority and GLIFWC. In August I was invited to present my research at a conference on wild rice entitled “Manoomin Niikanisaag” or Wildrice Collaboration (Brotherhood), held at Lac Vieux Desert in Michigan’s UP. People were interested in information on those who harvest rice, as many of the participants were Ojibwe who had not grown up harvesting. The comments were very encouraging.

Preliminary Findings:

Data seems to be flying all over the place right now as I move into this last phase. It is becoming clear that wild rice growth, although not considered ‘declining’ by most ricers, is being pushed into a narrower range through development impacts. Although I thought this would be a common theme with harvesters, few mention it during the interviews. The most commonly heard concern is the lack of new harvesters coming into the activity, whether harvesters are tribal or not.

Another issue harvesters mentioned during initial meetings (prior to lake visits and interviews) was the concern of people coming in from “outside” to harvest, and not being familiar with techniques or judging when rice is “ripe”. In visiting lakes and gathering zipcode data from ricers, I’m finding that in most situations (5 out of 6 lakes) harvesters live relatively close to the lakes they harvest, typically within an hours drive or less. There are exceptions, lakes that are accessible to all and known for their abundance of rice attract harvesters from more than 100 miles distant.

Regarding people harvesting with little knowledge, preliminary results show that overall tribal harvesters began ricing at a younger age (13 years vs. 30) than non-tribal harvesters and that experience levels across culture also showed a difference. Tribal members had an average of 40 years experience harvesting to 18 years experience for non-tribal. These numbers are preliminary and expected to change somewhat as more data points are added.

Field experiences:

My original goals

were to describe the current state of wild rice harvest across Minnesota and Wisconsin and I expected to find harvesters concerned with issues pertaining to loss of habitat or restricted access to rice. Although the access issue came out somewhat, and is still being assessed in regards to where new seedings occur, very few harvesters mention access as an issue. Again, all agree across the board that there just aren’t that many harvesters out there and few seem concerned about the question of whether or not wild rice is declining.

Initially with my research I was told by other harvesters that I wouldn’t have much luck talking to people at the landings. I have not found this to be true. Although there is always a few who decline, over 50% of the ricers I approached agreed to an interview at a later date. The surprises were those harvesters who declined, and then talked my ear off for the next 30 minutes about all aspects of ricing! Suspicion of my research intent

did crop up with both tribal and non-tribal members on occasion, but that was usually laid to rest once I talked about my work and the reason for it. In fact, during interviews has been the time when I have had primarily tribal band members say that they are glad someone is doing this research and they hope that their contribution is helpful.

An eye opener for me on this research has been the role that I seem to have played for rice harvesters and managers. Traveling from lake to lake, across state boundaries, reservation boundaries and treaty ceded boundaries, and visiting with harvesters from many areas, I'm often asked about what is taking place in other locations. There appears to be an assumption that harvesters are pretty homogenous, usually most like the person I'm talking to. For example, I met with a harvester just yesterday who said "You'll find that most people who harvest wild rice also trap." Interesting, but not something I've found to be true (although I have not directly asked people). There always seems to be a bit of surprise when I share my experiences from other locations with them.

Through the interviews I have found that people harvest wild rice for a variety of reasons, including for food, income generation, tradition and just 'getting away'. How often and how hard they harvest also varies with some people attached to one lake, and they only go on years when the rice is 'good'. Others harvest 10-14 days, often bringing in several thousand pounds of rice and either selling it green or having it processed and selling it finished to friends, families or as a business.

There seems to be a lot of information, undocumented of course, contained within the memories of those who have harvested rice for 40 years or more. This knowledge and experience often leads to questions or assumptions that scientifically we haven't studied or examined in regards to wild rice. As I move into the next phase of this fellowship I am excited to hear the feedback from harvesters as we invite them together for the first time to discuss harvesting wild rice today. I expect one of the challenges will be getting people to attend, but I feel that in traveling to these lakes, meeting them at the landings, I have already gained that small bit of connection that a face to face brings. A few have expressed interest only in their local lakes and situations, but just as many have expressed concern about the regional landscape of wild rice and the question of its future. Those are the people I hope attend.

Lessons learned:

- Emails can be ignored and phone numbers are often disconnected...
- Subaru wagons don't have that high of clearance on forest roads
- One or two visits a year to a community doesn't build a lot of support, 3 to 4 builds more
- Reaching wide means not going so deep (less rapport, more doors)
- Ricers love to talk about ricing (and often like to share rice)
- Pictures in an interview can open people's mouths
- Gas costs more in Wisconsin than it does in Minnesota
- Just when you think you've heard them all....