Leech Lake Ojibwe

About Our Homeland

**Narrator:** The Leech Lake Indian reservation is located in north-central Minnesota. The land is a mix of coniferous and deciduous forest and includes more than 200 miles of rivers and streams and well over 200 lakes. About 150,000 acres of wetlands provide an abundance of fish, game, trees, and plants. The reservation also has more wild rice beds than any other place in the United States.

**Susan Kedzie, Invasive Species Program Coordinator, Leech Lake Division of Resources Management:** So, the Leech Lake reservation sits on top of what I would consider the true headwaters of the Mississippi River. So we have a lot of water here and a lot of potential habitat for wild rice.

**Narrator:** Long before the arrival of Europeans, the Ojibwe acquired vast knowledge about the environment. They knew where to hunt and fish. They knew which plants were safe to eat and which could be used for medicines. They developed ingenious ways to create shelter, canoes, containers, clothing, and tools from natural resources.

They also became wild rice experts. They understood rice’s place in the local ecosystem. They learned how and when to gather it so that it would grow back the next year. They developed ways to process the rice so that it could be eaten and stored. This knowledge has been passed on for generations.

**Jeff Harper, Water Quality Specialist, Leech Lake Division of Resources Management:** So when I’m looking at the water, I’m taking in the history of what my parents and my grandparents told me and people in the community. And, I’m trying to think ahead to what my children and my grandchildren will see when they come out here to partake of the water, the wild rice.
Steve Smith, Biology and Chemistry Instructor, Leech Lake Tribal College: This rice is unique to each area, and an experienced wild-rice harvester could identify where a particular rice had come from—where it had been harvested from—by looking at it by the color, the size.

Narrator: Today, a committee of elders continues to practice that knowledge.

Jeff Harper: We have a natural resource advisory committee and they’re elders from the Leech Lake area here. What they’ll do is they’ll come out every few days and verify how far along the rice is, and then they’ll say, “Next week we’re going to open this bed for harvesting.”

Narrator: Today, rice harvesting is done the same way it was long ago, with harvesters working from canoes. Motorized boats are not allowed. This method is both efficient and sustainable.

Jeff Harper: So they work together as a team. Neither one’s responsibility is more important than the other’s. The poler, it’s his responsibility to make sure they stay in good thick rice and that they’re going in the right direction so the rice doesn’t get broken as they pass through.

The guy in back has a push pole. It’s 16 feet long or so, and it’s got a little fork on the end that opens up and sits on top of the mud so that he can push the canoe around.

Narrator: This type of pole helps navigate the canoe while limiting damage to the roots of the plants. Two carved cedar sticks are then used to “knock” the rice.

Jeff Harper: So the guy that’s knocking the rice, he’s bringing in the rice with one stick, and he hits it twice over the heads, kind of a little bit of a sweeping motion, and takes the ripe rice off from there.

Narrator: This harvesting method doesn’t break the stalks of the rice plant, and the canoe leaves only a small trail of bent plants in its wake. After a day or so, the rice stands straight and tall again. Because harvesting by hand removes only about 15% of the crop, there is plenty of rice left to feed wildlife and to reseed the rice bed for the next year.
Wild rice cannot be eaten right off the stalk. The Ojibwe people have developed a complex method of processing it, so that it can be eaten. First the rice is laid out to dry.

**Gilbert Moss, Culture Teacher, Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig School:** This is how we parch the rice. And we get it golden brown, light to golden brown, and that’s when it’s done.

And then over here, this is where we put that rice from the kettle to here, and this is what the jigger does—he smashes the rice, takes the hulls off the rice. Sometimes we do it all day, you know, depending on how much rice we have. Sometimes we have a little singing here, a little powwow music, so he’ll dance a little better.

This is called winnowing, and we take—we brush all the hulls off this here. And all that’s left will be just the rice.

**Narrator:** Some Ojibwe people still finish their rice in the traditional way, but many take it to modern rice-processing facilities.

Most people keep some rice for themselves, then sell or give away the rest. The Leech Lake tribal government also prepares wild rice for resale or to give away.

**Bruce Johnson, Director, Leech Lake Division of Resources Management:** In the economics standpoint, ricing is some extra money. It helps.

We also buy it green, get it finished, and store it here, and pass it out to band members. We donate 20,000 pounds of finished rice a year.

**Jeff Harper:** It’s a big part of our culture to share with people, to help out in times of need.