



WISCONSIN CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Wild Rice: Gift of Our Creator

by Kathy Bartilson for the Creation Care Committee

Seated in a canoe, all I can see is vivid sunshine and blue sky above, tall green rice stalks on my right and left, and my ricing partner poling us along. I use my ricing sticks to guide a handful of stalks over the canoe and give the top of the plants a tap. A burst of rice kernels shower into the canoe and into the river. It's wild ricing season in northern Wisconsin, and the harvest has been spectacular at our favorite spot.



A few years ago I recall hearing the Parable of the Sower told again during our church service. I've always considered this such a marvelous and simple object lesson. But when I heard it this time, my mind went from the familiar scenes of the seed falling on the path, on the rocks, among the thorns, and in the good soil, to the question "What about the seed that falls on water?"

Wild rice grows in many lakes and rivers in Wisconsin. It's a very special and essential plant in our aquatic environment, growing back each season, not from past roots, but from the seed that falls on water.

History

This story would be best heard from a Native American storyteller. Here is my understanding of the historical significance of wild rice in our region. The Lake Superior Ojibwa or Anishanabe people came to the Midwest from Maine and New Brunswick on the "eve" of the Age of Exploration, around 1500. Their oral history recounts a prophecy where they were told to move inland by the Manitou, the Great Spirit, to preserve their way of life. They were to travel until the cowrie shell no longer appeared in their dreams (essentially, until this familiar image was no longer present in their minds). When the cowrie shell disappeared, they would be at their new home—where food grows on the water. And as the Great Spirit directed, they came to what is now the Lake Superior region, where they found wild rice: the food growing on the water.

And they call this food “manoomin,” which to me sounds coincidentally like “manna.” A good crop of wild rice meant survival through the winter for them, being one of few carbohydrates available to these woodland hunter-gatherer people. In their words, manoomin is a “spirit food,” nourishing not only the body, but also nurturing the spirit.

The French fur traders later called wild rice “folle avoine” literally meaning “crazy oats.” Historically, wild rice has been a trade item, treasured plant and food source to the non-tribal explorers and settlers, right up to modern times. Many people today still gather rice in the fall for winter food stocks, income, and recreation.

Importance as an integral part of creation

Wild rice still thrives in the key waterways of the north. Scientifically, *Zizania palustris* is an annual grass, dependent on a good seed crop each year for success in upcoming years. Wild rice serves many ecosystem roles, and is an excellent example of how gifts of creation have intrinsic value way above and beyond their utility to humans. The rice plants hold river bed material in place and use nutrients from the water to help sustain water quality. Rice beds help protect shorelines from erosion by tempering the effect of waves from boats. They also provide food and shelter to many animal species, as nursery areas and cover for fish, amphibians and reptiles; as house building material for muskrats; and food and habitat for fur bearers, songbirds, mammals, and waterfowl. Sora rails hop from stalk to stalk across the duckweed in the fall, eating insects that also find a home in this vegetation.

Protecting wild rice and its habitat

Many historic rice beds have been lost. It is impossible to determine exactly how many acres of rice have disappeared, but it is believed that the loss has been substantial. There are many threats to rice from shoreland development, habitat loss, dredging, sedimentation, weather extremes, water level changes, and even genetic alteration. Rice can be hurt by pollution, watercraft traffic through the beds, boat wakes, invasive species, and direct or incidental mechanical or hand removal.

In June, the early stage of growth is a thin, long leaf floating on the water surface. At this stage (before the strong stalk or “tiller” grows) wild rice is very vulnerable to uprooting from boat wakes and rapid water level changes. If you know the location of wild rice beds on a lake where you recreate, stay well back from the bed, and travel past at slow, no-wake speed (especially during the floating leaf stage).



Wild rice is so important to the Ojibwa people, that in the 1980s, original treaties from the 1800s were re-affirmed in federal court, ensuring the Ojibwa right to gather rice from waters in their original lands (called the ceded territory). To protect rice, many tribal, state, and federal resource managers work together to set the season and harvest times for rice on several prime northern Wisconsin rice waters.

Wild rice can be harvested in late summer by Wisconsin residents under a permit from the Department of Natural Resources. For our family, it has become one of the highlights of the summer. There is an excellent video on how to harvest wild rice on the DNR website at this link: <https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/outdoorrecreation/activities/rice.html>.

Luke 8:15 tells us: “And as for that [seed that falls] in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience.”

To me, faith and inspiration in the eternal and sacred is deeply reinforced by time spent in nature. When sitting in the front of my canoe harvesting wild rice, my spirit is fed. Watching white-tailed deer stand in the river shallows in the spring twilight, eating vivid green shoots from sprouting rice, makes me believe manoomin is a unifying spirit food for all creatures who are sheltered or nourished by its stems and grains. I believe the Great Spirit still gives us rice, as a call to work together for not only a good harvest, but for a greater understanding and respect of each other's cultures, traditions and rights, as well as our shared life with all creatures of land and water. Perhaps in this North American setting of the parable, the seed that falls on the water is the word that feeds the spirit, reawakening us to the sustaining gifts of God.

Need a recipe?

Wild rice gathered from lakes and streams usually has a delicious nutty flavor and a softer texture than cultivated “wild” rice. I like to simmer it slowly in a camping kettle on the woodstove. Here's a basic way to cook the rice gently for a side dish or to add to a salad, soup, or casserole. It's great to mix with bread cubes and seasonings for stuffing.

- 1 cup wild rice
- 3 cups water (or vegetable or chicken broth for more flavor)
- 1 tsp. salt
- ½ cup each of finely chopped onion, celery, and carrots (optional)

First, rinse the rice several times in cool water to remove any chaff. Simmer covered until rice is tender and has absorbed the water or broth. Add more liquid if needed during keeping to prevent the rice from scorching.

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