

Ancestors, Archaeology and the Anishinabek: Bridging the Past into the Future Manoomin (Wild Rice)

The Food that Grows on Water

The Anishinabek tell how they traveled long, long ago to Michigan. They were told by the Creator that they would “find the food that grows on water.” This “food that grows on water” is wild rice, one of the most important foods to the Anishinabek. When they reached Michigan, they found wild rice in hundreds of lakes, rivers and streams. To the right is an ancient rock painting of the Wild Rice Spirit that was found on Painted Rock Island in Canada, just north of Minnesota. The name of the Wild Rice Spirit is Manoominikeshii.



Image from “Indian Rock Paintings of the Great Lakes” by S. Dewdney and K.E. Kidd, University of Toronto Press, 1962

Wild Rice and Archaeology

Archaeologists found evidence of wild rice at two of the sites they dug in Ottawa County, Michigan. The Anishinabek who lived at the sites harvested and cleaned the wild rice, then stored it in underground cache pits. In the winter and spring, they could go to the cache pit and open it up when they needed fresh wild rice.



Photo courtesy of Barb Barton

Wild Rice Harvesting

In late summer, the Anishinabek camped along the lakes and rivers where wild rice grew. While they waited for it to ripen, they prayed to Manoominikeshii and prepared a feast. When the wild rice was ready to be harvested, they traveled by canoe (jiimaan) to the areas where the wild rice grew. They gently pulled the tops of the rice plants over the jiimaan and knocked the grains with wooden sticks into the bottom of the jiimaan, as shown in the picture to the right.



Image courtesy of the Newberry Library

Wild Rice Today



Photo courtesy of Barb Barton

The Anishinabek word manoomin means “good berry.” wild rice is the seed of a grass that grows in shallow, calm water. In the past, dams, logging, and pollution killed many beds of wild rice beds in Michigan. Today, with healthier lakes and rivers, the Anishinabek are planting wild rice so they can continue to harvest it like their grandparents and ancestors did.