Protecting the Harvest

A study of present-day Minnesota state-permitted wild rice harvesters

Minnesota (Ojibwe) or Poté (Dakota) (wild rice, Zizania palustris) holds great cultural, ecological, and economic importance. It is Minnesota’s state grain and to the Ojibwe Tribes across the Great Lakes it is a sacred food, medicine, and gift from the Creator. Despite its importance, the species’ range has declined dramatically because of climate change, competing vegetation, changes in land use, water levels, and water quality. Indigenous people have been harvesting Minnesota in this area for millennia. Hand-harvesting and rice-water has also become an important tradition to non-tribal members in the state, who are required to purchase a state permit. However, state-permitted harvesting by non-tribal members has declined dramatically since the 1960s. In 2018, the University of Minnesota partnered with several tribes across present-day Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan to design a survey of Minnesota state-permitted harvesters in order to better understand their values, beliefs, and behaviors associated with wild rice harvesting, processing, and protection. Surveys were mailed to 1,339 state permit holders; 672 people responded for a 53% response rate. Insights gained will inform future Minnesota stewardship.

Profile of survey respondents

- The average 2018 harvester was 55 years old, had riced for 14 years, and harvested 139 lbs (unprocessed) in 2018. A majority (93%) of respondents identified as White.
- In total, respondents harvested more than 83,000 lbs of wild rice (unprocessed) in 2018. They rated the 2018 crop as poor in amount and fair in quality.

What do state-permitted harvesters do with their wild rice?

- 56% sell/plan to sell
- 24% share with others
- 8% use
- 7% give away or share with others
- 6% sell/tell someone
- 2% prefer not to respond

What do harvesters value and believe about wild rice?

- 98% agree it is a healthy food source
- 99% agree it tastes good
- 94% agree that eating wild rice that they have harvested is special to them
- 89% agree that being able to harvest wild rice means a lot to them
- 94% agree it is important to a healthy ecosystem
- 80% agree that wild rice and wild rice waters need better protection
- 76% support expanding wild rice restoration programs (e.g., reseeding, managing water levels)
- 80% support increasing monitoring of wild rice plants and waters
- 76% support expanding education and outreach programs to raise awareness about the ecological, nutritional, and cultural values of wild rice
- 75% support coordinating wild rice habitat conservation efforts between tribal, state, and local entities
- 75% support enforcing water quality regulations to protect wild rice
- 74% support expanding public and private partnerships to protect wild rice
- 73% support conducting more research on wild rice

Which management strategies do state-permitted harvesters support?

- 87% support enforcing water quality regulations to protect wild rice
- 85% support expanding wild rice restoration programs (e.g., reseeding, managing water levels)
- 80% support increasing monitoring of wild rice plants and waters
- 80% support expanding education and outreach programs to raise awareness about the ecological, nutritional, and cultural values of wild rice

Mixed survey respondents, UMN student; Vicky Chapman (Ojibwe), UMN; Corinna Glatz (Ojibwe), Leech Lake Tribal College student; David LeBlanc (Mandan-Hidatsa), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Dave Magnuson (Dakota), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Dave Mathieson (Dakota), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Delbert John (Ojibwe), Northern Michigan University; Diana Peterson (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Donna Rabeau (Dakota), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Edmund Smee (Ojibwe), Essentia Health; Emily Green (Ojibwe), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Emily Mayer (Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe), Harvard University student; Eric Chapman (Ojibwe), Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe; Erik Klopitis, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Evan Sheets (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Hana Hsu (Ojibwe), University of Minnesota; Hana Vrigakis (Ojibwe), University of Minnesota; Hans Skjersvold (Dakota), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Heidi Chartrand (Ojibwe), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Jeff O’Hara (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Jessica Gray (Ojibwe), University of Minnesota; John Birdsall (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Josephine Boatwright (Ahnaa’ki), University of Minnesota; Joshua Clarke (Dakota), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Kate Miller (Ojibwe), University of Minnesota; Kate O’Hara (Dakota), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Kevin Gustave (Ojibwe), University of Minnesota; Kristy Altman (Dakota), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Laci Miller (Dakota), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Lisa Littke (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Laura Hauk (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Linda O’Hara (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Marlen Herron (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Michelle Pfeiffer (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Michelle Swenson (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Michelle Williams (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Michelle Fink (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Nicholas Hahn (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Nicholas Verdi (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Nadia Zingel (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Nancy Rice (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Patrick Littlechild (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Rachel Ahmann (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Rachel Kettles (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Ryan DeJong (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Sam Zingel (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Sarah O’Hara (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Scott Tidwell (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Susan Dorsey (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Tanya Kettles (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Tim Krause (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Tyler Zingel (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Wanda Charland (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Yvonne Miranda (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Zachary Olson (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Zane Nettleton (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Zachary Spence (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Zhang (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Zora Kettles (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; Zhanna Kettles (Ojibwe), Minnesota State University Moorhead; "Wild rice, because of its nutritional value and important component of the natural order of things, is probably one of the most important plants to all Mississipicans. From human consumption to the waterfowl and shorebirds that eat the kernels to the variety of insects, which feed red-winged blackbirds and others, it needs all the protection and research that we can afford, because once it’s gone, it’s hard to replace." --survey respondent

"Minnesota wild rice, harvested and processed right, is the best tasting form of rice in the world. It must be protected!" --survey respondent

*This survey questionnaire or any data analyzed or reported as part of the survey project do not constitute a claim or use of any Tribal, State, or Federal wild rice water rights. The wild rice waters identified in this survey effort do not constitute a wild rice waters determination list and shall not be used as such in any Tribal, State, or Federal legal proceedings.