Leech Lake Ojibwe: Meet the People

Narrator: The Leech Lake Band is part of the Ojibwe tribe, one of the largest American Indian tribes in the United States. Spread across five U.S. states and three Canadian provinces, the Ojibwe people are also known as the Anishinaabe, meaning the Original People. They are sometimes called Chippewa, but Ojibwe is the favored term among the Leech Lake Band. Traditional Ojibwe culture, values, and beliefs are closely tied to the land on which they live.

Leslie Harper, Director, Niigaane Ojibwe Language Immersion Program: There are connections we have to the fish. There are connections we have to the birds and the trees and the rocks and the animals. Our job here as humans, we’re gifted with so much from everyone around us, from the trees, and from the rocks, from the water, from everyone around us. We don’t just take and take and take. We have a responsibility to take care of those gifts, because we do have an ability as human beings, we have an ability to think and see ahead and make choices in our lives.

Narrator: For the Ojibwe, one of the most important foods is wild rice, or manoomin. Manoomin is a centerpiece of nutrition and a gift to the Ojibwe from the Creator. Wild rice plays an important role in Ojibwe teachings.

Elaine Fleming, Ojibwe Culture and History Instructor, Leech Lake Tribal College: They say that long ago, that our people, we lived out on the East Coast. One of the prophecies that was given to us was that we would be leaving that place, and we would be journeying west until we came to a place where food grew on the water. And that is that manoomin.

Narrator: For centuries, the Leech Lake people and other Ojibwe have harvested the wild rice that grew abundantly in the shallow lakes of the region.

Steve Smith, Biology and Chemistry Instructor, Leech Lake Tribal College: Historically, the Ojibwe people relied on the wild rice. The wild rice is used as part of ceremonies and other traditional activity. It’s a very important part of Ojibwe culture.

Colleen Wells, Archeologist and Field Director, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Heritage Sites Program: The word “manoomin” almost has the sense of a life- force. It has been so entwined in the culture that it obviously can’t be seen as simply a food resource.
Jeff Harper, Water Quality Specialist, Leech Lake Division of Resources Management: When a child is born, when somebody dies, when we have birthday parties, everything we do at the beginning of the season, whether it’s First Rice or First Berries or First Fish—we always have a feast. And we’re told that we always got to have rice there. If nothing else, we got to have rice. So we always do, and we’re fortunate to have a lot of wild rice here.

Narrator: But according to scientists, half the wild rice in the Great Lakes region has disappeared over the past century. Their findings confirm what many Ojibwe elders have noticed: pollution, invasive species, and development are threatening the rice crop.

Steve Smith: The range of wild rice and the amount of wild rice and the amount of lakes that are holding wild rice is decreasing.

Elaine Fleming: They say that whatever happens to your food will happen to the people.

Narrator: True to their teachings about caring for the environment, the Leech Lake people are taking steps to preserve, restore, and manage the wild rice beds of the Leech Lake reservation.

Leslie Harper: So our responsibility is also to help them keep this place livable and viable for the future. Yeah, that’s one of our basic, basic teachings. One of the first—very first—important things we learn as Anishinaabe people.