American Indian Responses to Environmental Challenges

Leech Lake Ojibwe: Our Future

**Narrator:** Because of the work the Leech Lake Band of the Ojibwe is doing today, wild rice will probably be around for generations to come. Their knowledge and traditions about wild rice are passed on through formal education and through the tribe’s cultural traditions.

**Steve Smith, Biology and Chemistry Instructor, Leech Lake Tribal College:** Leech Lake Tribal College is a two-year school. We have a new AS degree, associate of science degree, in natural science. And we see that degree as being able to prepare students for work in natural-resource protection fields. In all our courses, we try to incorporate the local culture, the Anishinaabe culture. And we try to give students an understanding of how we can look at local issues and local environmental concerns and problems using both Western science and a Native traditional ecological knowledge perspective. So we hope that through this course, we give students a pretty full understanding of wild rice, and not only the scientific angle, but the cultural and historical angle, and talk about threats also, and what the future is for wild rice.

**Levi Brown, Environmental Director, Leech Lake Division of Resources Management:** Right now, we have a “Take A Kid Ricing Day,” which is one day. Right now we have 70 kids signed up and about roughly 34 guides, which we want a guide in each boat, somebody who is an experienced ricer in each boat, to show the kids how to put out their tobacco, how to respect the rice. And when you go into the rice beds you shouldn’t have any bad feelings. You should only have nothing but good feelings, and we want these young people to learn that, so they can pass it on to the next generation. And we’ll always have a good rice crop, if we have, you know, positive ricers who are out there for the right reasons.

**Gilbert Moss, Culture Teacher, Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig School:** I got a grandson that’s five years old. And I made him a small knockers like in your hand there and small pole and made him a little fake canoe out of birch bark. And he stands in there and wiggles back and forth like that. He’s learning, you know. He said, “Grandpa, I want to start ricing this year.” He’s only five years old. So I’m going to take him out on the lake in shallow water, and he’s going to pole his own self around, and he’s going to sit down and knock also and stuff like that. That’ll be something to see.

**Narrator:** For the Ojibwe people, wild rice is as spiritually significant today as it was in the past.
Colleen Wells, Archeologist and Field Director, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Heritage Sites Program: A people’s heritage is their past, and to be able to demonstrate that what’s essential to their culture today was also essential to their culture nearly 4,000 years ago just gives people a really deep sense of their culture and their heritage.

Elaine Fleming, Ojibwe Culture and History Instructor, Leech Lake Tribal College: We have to understand values and we have to respect all things, that I am no greater than that tree, I am no greater than a stone. We have to understand that relationship.

Gilbert Moss: So there’s a lot yet to learn and teach the children. This here is a never-ending thing, you know, teaching our children. When we do this here, we put tobacco out in a lake before we start harvesting rice. The tobacco is for the Great Spirit to watch over us, to watch over the ricing, so there will be plentiful rice afterwards. And then when you gather rice and we come back to shore with our canoe filled up, we take a handful and put the rice back, and honor the Great Spirit.

Leslie Harper, Director, Niigaane Ojibwe Language Immersion Program: Why do we make rice every year? And why is it important to Ojibwe people? We understand we got this amazing, incredible gift of wild rice. And we have a responsibility to, you know, make sure that it’s here for the future, for our relatives that are going to come along after us. And there’s something just amazing and incredible and touching, you know, right in here, when you get those teachings, and when we understand that. It’s that connection, it’s that spiritual connection. It’s those teachings that we’re given so our kids are able to explore that and understand that as well, and so they’ll carry it on also.