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## WILD RICE

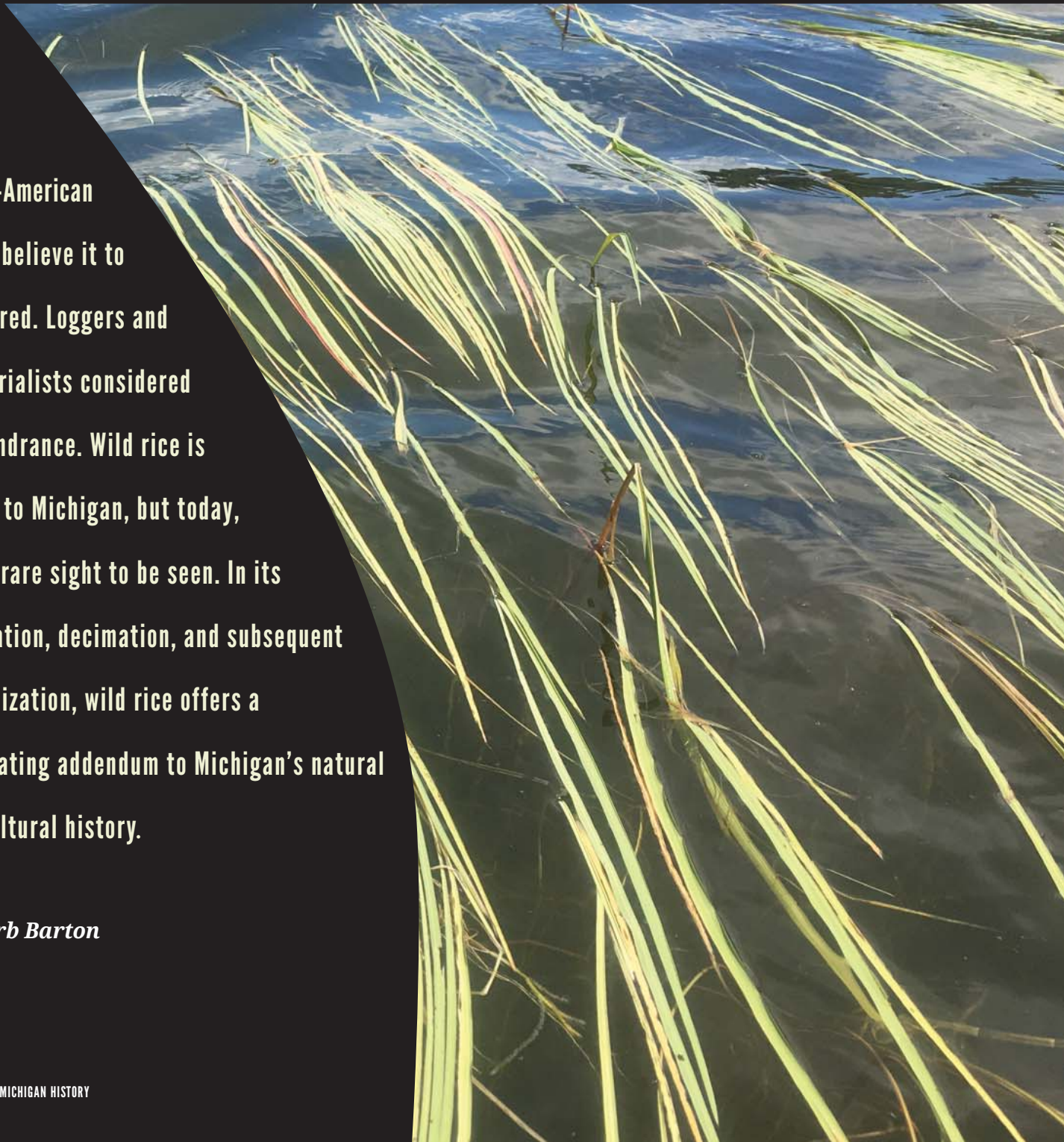
A Return to the Past

# WILD RICE

## *A Return to the Past*

Native-American tribes believe it to be sacred. Loggers and industrialists considered it a hindrance. Wild rice is native to Michigan, but today, it is a rare sight to be seen. In its cultivation, decimation, and subsequent revitalization, wild rice offers a fascinating addendum to Michigan's natural and cultural history.

*By Barb Barton*



If you have traveled along beautiful US-2 in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, you likely have seen wooden signs propped up in front of gas stations and gift shops advertising wild rice. The signs appear hand-painted, with imperfect black lettering set against a white or red background. The homemade look of the signs might lead you to believe that the rice is locally harvested. Chances are, however, that it is actually a domesticated variety grown in a California or Minnesota rice paddy and costs around \$9.95 for three pounds.

Authentic, hand-harvested wild rice grows in lakes and rivers across Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Canada. It has not been altered through selective breeding, nor has it been sprayed with any chemicals. Due to the high amount of labor involved in its harvesting and processing, it costs around \$12 to \$15 a pound. If you are lucky, you may find a bag labeled "hand-harvested" or "tribally harvested" at one of the shops in the Upper Peninsula. That label, along with a higher price tag and the diversity of color and size of the grains, will tell you that you are about to enjoy some truly "wild" rice.

So why is it that we don't have more Michigan wild rice for sale? The answer lies, of course, in history.

## A LIFE CYCLE OF GROWTH

Wild rice is an annual aquatic grass that grows in the shallow waters of lakes, bayous, rivers, and coastal marshes. The seeds are safely tucked under the sediment during the winter months and begin to sprout in the springtime when the ice melts and the water warms. The plants first enter what

is known as the "floating leaf" stage, when their long green leaves float on the surface of the water.

The rice typically takes on its emergent form in June, growing up out of the water to a height of 3 to 5 feet for lake rice (*Zizania palustris*) and up to 13 feet for the elegant, state-threatened river rice (*Zizania aquatica*). Its flowers appear in July and the seeds form in August, maturing toward the end of the month. Each seed has a tail, called an awn, which serves as a rudder and spins the seed as it quickly descends to the bottom of the sediment, embedding itself like a corkscrew into the ground.

Wild rice faces many challenges throughout its life cycle. During the floating leaf stage, wild rice plants are extremely vulnerable to changes in water levels because the roots have not yet developed well enough to firmly anchor the plants. Wave action can easily uproot and kill them.

When the rice begins to grow into its emergent form, it becomes a favorite food for ducks, geese, swans, and deer. Red-winged blackbirds, grackles, waterfowl, and shorebirds enjoy the rich food sources and protection offered by the tall grass, and muskrats gather the plants as building material for their houses.

## THE ANISHINAABEK MIGRATION

The Anishinaabek's connection to wild rice in Michigan began long ago, when ancestors of the Anishinaabek—Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi—lived along the northeastern Atlantic coast. According to traditional stories, the tribes' spiritual leaders were visited in dreams by several prophets who warned of what was to come and encouraged the Anishinaabek to leave



Previous page: Wild rice during its "floating leaf" stage. (Photo courtesy of Peter David, Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission.) Above: Daniel Green, Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, holds a wild rice seed at rice camp 2009. (All photos courtesy of the author, unless otherwise noted.) Below: A wild rice bed at Tawas Lake.





their homes or be destroyed. The people were instructed to follow the megis shell westward to the place “where food grows on the water.” That food was wild rice, known as “Manoomin” in Anishinaabemowin, the language of the Anishinaabek.

The Anishinaabek’s migration began at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River and ended 900 years later on Madeline Island, which is located in the western end of Lake Superior. Wild rice was found along the migration route and, according to the teachings, is what brought the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi to the land now called Michigan.

When the Anishinaabek first arrived in Michigan, they discovered vast beds of wild rice on the western shore of Lake Erie, all the way up along the Detroit River, and in Lake St. Clair. Thousands of acres also grew along the shoreline of Saginaw Bay and in the great marshes of the Saginaw River.

Wild rice was known to have completely covered sections of rivers and their tributaries, making travel difficult. Though the largest beds were found on the Great Lakes coastlines, many stands of wild rice occurred inland, too, along the edges of rivers and streams and in shallow lakes in both of Michigan’s peninsulas.

Today, wild rice remains sacred in Anishinaabek culture. It is honored as a gift from the Creator who rescued the tribe from danger centuries ago. Wild rice is considered a “Spirit Food” and is present at feasts and ceremonies. It is also a “Medicine Food” that plays an important role in helping keep the body healthy. As it has

been for generations, wild rice is an integral part of Native-American daily diet and life.

## MICHIGAN’S LOGGING ERA BEGINS

The industrial logging period of the late nineteenth century brought the first major negative impacts to Michigan’s wild rice beds. The Saginaw River saw many early lumbering operations since its watershed had some of the best timber in the state and an abundance of tributaries to move the logs. Trees were cut in the winter and stored on river banks until spring, when they could be pushed into the water and floated downstream to the booming mills at the mouths of the Tittabawasee, Shiawassee, and Cass Rivers.

During logging operations, lumber nearly covered the entire surface of the water, and mill debris blanketed the sediment, which all but obliterated the river’s shoreline vegetation. Waterways were dredged and deepened to accommodate log-carrying boats. With the advancement of technology, railroads and plank roads were installed to run through the marshes so that timber could be harvested farther away from the rivers. As the industry expanded, more

Left: Megis shells, such as these pictured, led the Anishinaabek to Michigan. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia/Sodabottle.) Below: Two ricers work to parch their harvest, circa 1940. (Photo courtesy of the Michigan Education Association.) Next page, top: Roger LaBine, traditional ricer, winnows rice at the 2009 Lac Vieux Desert wild rice camp. Next page, right: A ricer “dances” wild rice in a wooden bucket, circa 1940. (Photo courtesy of the Michigan Education Association.)





lumber mills were built on the shorelines, more towns began to spring up, and more wetlands were drained for development and agriculture.

Loggers also frequently dammed rivers, which allowed the transport of logs on waterways that would have otherwise been too shallow. Because wild rice requires shallow water to grow, it was not long before it began disappearing in deepened rivers.

Such was the case at Lac Vieux Desert in the Western Upper Peninsula. In addition to being the headwaters of the Wisconsin River, the lake was also home to the Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, who had been harvesting rice from the lake's five large wild rice beds for hundreds of years. Sometime around 1870, a logging dam was constructed on the Wisconsin River. As the water levels rose, the rice beds began to shrink. The dam was rebuilt several times until 1937, when a final concrete structure was installed. After years of rising water levels, wild rice disappeared entirely from the lake.

Fortunately, recent efforts by the Lac Vieux Desert Tribe and various government agencies to restore wild rice to Lac Vieux Desert have been successful, and nearly 100 acres have been returned to the lake. Wild rice remains so important that Rice Bay was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in December 2015 under "National Register Criterion A" for its traditional cultural significance. The designation was the first of its kind in the United States to recognize wild rice for its impact on tribal culture and history.

### **MORE THREATS TO WILD RICE**

In addition to logging operations and the damming of rivers, there existed a number of other factors that threatened Michigan's wild rice beds. During the late nineteenth century, many marshes in the state were drained to prevent the spread of malaria, rivers were deepened to improve shipping, and water quality sharply declined due to an increase



in industrial pollution. By the mid-1900s, nearly all the large wild rice beds that were in Michigan when the Anishinaabek first arrived had disappeared.

Today, the 4,000-acre Monroe Marsh, once full of wild rice and believed by many to be one of the nation's leading hunting destinations, is gone. Thousands of acres of beautiful wild rice beds in Saginaw Bay and along the Saginaw River watershed have also vanished. Wild rice in the coastal marshes of western Lake Erie, too, has disappeared. As a result of those ecological changes, only one large wild rice bed remains in all of Michigan—located at Iosco County's Tawas Lake.

Considered large even by Wisconsin and Minnesota standards, the rice bed at Tawas Lake contains 700 acres of the state-threatened wild rice species *Zizania aquatica*. It was mentioned in an 1874 article in the *Transactions of the American Medical Association* by Dr. James Reeves, where he described Tawas Lake and the surrounding lands as they related to the threat of malaria:

*“Our villages are between two bodies of water – to the east, Tawas Bay and Lake Huron; to the south, Saginaw Bay; westward, for seven miles, a succession of marshes, swamps, and wet lands, with the large bodies of water, Tawas Lake and River. The*

*wet lands amount to thousands of acres, and they are covered with a growth of vegetation not exceeding in luxuriance by the most extravagant growth of the tropics. Tawas Lake produces an annual growth of ‘wild rice,’ so abundant that it bids fair to convert it into a great marsh in course of time. With all the apparent sources of malaria around us, we are, however, quite free from malarial diseases.”*

Even today, wild rice remains misunderstood by most in the non-tribal world and often faces the same attitudes of early colonizers—that it is a weed and a hindrance to boating activities. While dredging, draining, and damming rivers were the preferred methods used to remove wild rice in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, today the rice is cleared by machines and chemicals.

## COLLECTING THE HARVEST

Though it is the last of Michigan's large wild rice beds, the wild rice at Tawas Lake nevertheless remains under threat of removal today. In addition to regulation, one very important way to help protect wild rice is to educate others of its significance so that it can be recognized as a valued part of Michigan's cultural history and ecological landscape.

This page: Traditional rickers Charlie and Terry Fox harvesting in Rice Bay on Lac Vieux Desert in 2014. (Photo courtesy of Charles Rassmussen, Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission.) Next page: A view of wild rice harvested inside a canoe.



Many Michigan tribes are working hard to restore wild rice to lakes and rivers on or near their tribal lands. They are also bringing back traditional harvesting and processing techniques practiced long ago by their ancestors. Roger LaBine, traditional ricer and member of the Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, has been facilitating wild rice camps around Michigan since 2008. The traditional gatherings occur in the fall when the wild rice is ready for “picking.” The methods used today are relatively unchanged, though large-scale sellers employ machines for processing rather than doing so by hand.

Right about the time the colors of Michigan trees turn from emerald green to brilliant hues of gold and red, wild rice grains begin to ripen. Ricers pack up their canoes and make the annual trek to their favorite beds. At Lac Vieux Desert, Rice Bay is the destination for the best picking. After being loaded with a pair of cedar ricing sticks and a slender push pole, each canoe is paddled out to the rice bed by two ricers, gently guided by the calls of sora rail birds. As the canoe approaches the rice bed, the paddles are replaced by the push pole. One of the ricers uses the push pole to guide the canoe into the tall grass, while the other spins around in his or her seat to face the center of the canoe—a tricky maneuver that can result in a spill if not properly executed!

Once in position, the canoe moves slowly through the rice bed, where the seated ricer begins “picking” or “knocking” the rice. With a ricing stick in each hand, the ricer reaches back and carefully pulls the rice plant over the canoe, while the other hand uses the second ricing stick to stroke or gently “knock” the seed head. That action causes the grains to fall into the bottom of the boat. As the canoe moves forward, guided by the push pole ricer, a rhythm develops as the two ricers gather the rice with every push of the pole.



## DRYING, DANCING, AND WINNOWING

Upon returning to camp, the freshly harvested wild rice is placed on tarps to dry in the sunshine for a few days, during which it is stirred and turned periodically to make sure no moisture remains. The rice is then “parched” so that the grains can be released from their hulls and will be dry enough for storage. A small fire is built and a pre-seasoned washtub is placed over the flame. Several handfuls of the sun-dried rice are tossed into the tub and stirred in a circular motion with a hand-carved cedar paddle until all the rice is properly parched.

The next step is to remove the hulls, which is traditionally done by “dancing” or “jigging” the rice. First, a small bowl-shaped depression is carved out of the earth and covered by a tarp. That depression is filled with parched rice. Two posts are lashed to a horizontal pole and placed in front of the depression, creating a railing for a “dancer” to use for support. The dancer, wearing clean moccasins, steps

into the depression and begins moving his or her feet in a twisting motion, back and forth, until the rice hulls have completely separated from the grain.

The pile of “fluff” is then placed into a birch-bark tray called a winnowing basket, where the chafe is separated from the rice by repeatedly dropping the basket out from under the rice. The draft created by that motion blows the loose hulls out of the basket. By the end, all that is left is clean wild rice.

The final step to preparing wild rice is one last cleaning, where many elders and children sit at tables to remove the last bits of chafe from the rice, all while telling stories and sharing teachings.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Many people still do not know that wild rice grows in Michigan, nor that it has endured so many threats to its existence. However, there is hope that through education and restoration, the role of wild rice and the traditions of the Anishinaabek can be preserved as a part of Michigan’s collective history for generations to come.

*Barb Barton is a wildlife biologist and singer/songwriter who loves all things Michigan. She was taught the traditions of wild rice by Roger LaBine of the Lac Vieux Desert of Lake Superior Chippewa. Barb is writing a book on the story of wild rice in Michigan anticipated to be published in 2017.*



Children are encouraged to participate in various ricing activities while at rice camp.