

TEXT BY KEVIN ABOUREZK | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENN ACKERMAN + TIM GRUBER

WILD Harvest

In northern Minnesota, the Ojibwe people are keeping a vital tradition alive even in the face of growing challenges.



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TEN-YEAR-OLD WESLEY NEELAND LEANED HARD ON A cedar pole, pushing his father's canoe through the shallow lake's recently ripened stands of rice. His dad sat below him, using a pair of wooden sticks to gently guide the rice stalks into the canoe and knock the grains off. As the rice fell into the aluminum boat, it sounded like sleet on a tin roof.

Then, in a moment of inattention, Wesley looked up to the sky and subsequently lost his balance, rocking the canoe wildly. In an instant the canoe began to tip and roll. To save their precious load of rice, Wesley and his dad, Jared, instinctively jumped out of the canoe and into the lake to keep the boat from capsizing.

Drenched but having kept their precious cargo intact, "we laughed about it," Jared said recently, "and we kept ricing."

That was 12 years ago. Every year since, the father-and-son team, members of the White Earth Band of the Ojibwe people, have carried on the ricing tradition passed down to them by their families and ancestors.

The yearly harvest is not only a source of sustenance—it also strengthens community bonds for tribal members. In addition, wild rice provides important habitat for waterfowl, fish and many other wildlife species. But wild rice habitat has declined by roughly a third over the past century, and the plant is increasingly vulnerable to stressors such as water pollution and fluctuating water levels—as well as warming temperatures and other effects of climate change.

Since members of the Ojibwe first arrived in the 1600s in what is now Minnesota, pursuing a vision that drove

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HARVESTING TRADITION: Jared Neeland harvests rice by knocking the grains into his canoe with two wooden sticks, while his son, Wesley, propels the boat forward with a pole across Upper Rice Lake in Minnesota.







Clean Water, Wild Rice

The Nature Conservancy is helping to provide clean water that is critical to the future of wild rice by working to protect and restore the most important parts of the 13-million-acre Mississippi River headwaters area in Minnesota.

"A lot of people's perception of what the Mississippi River is—that big wide working river with lots of locks and dams—is what they see farther down, in St. Louis ... or New Orleans. Up here in Minnesota, it's a very different river," says Doug Shaw, the assistant director for TNC's Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota chapter. "It is the most intact part of the Mississippi: It's this big, wet, largely forested mosaic of small towns, people and wildlife."

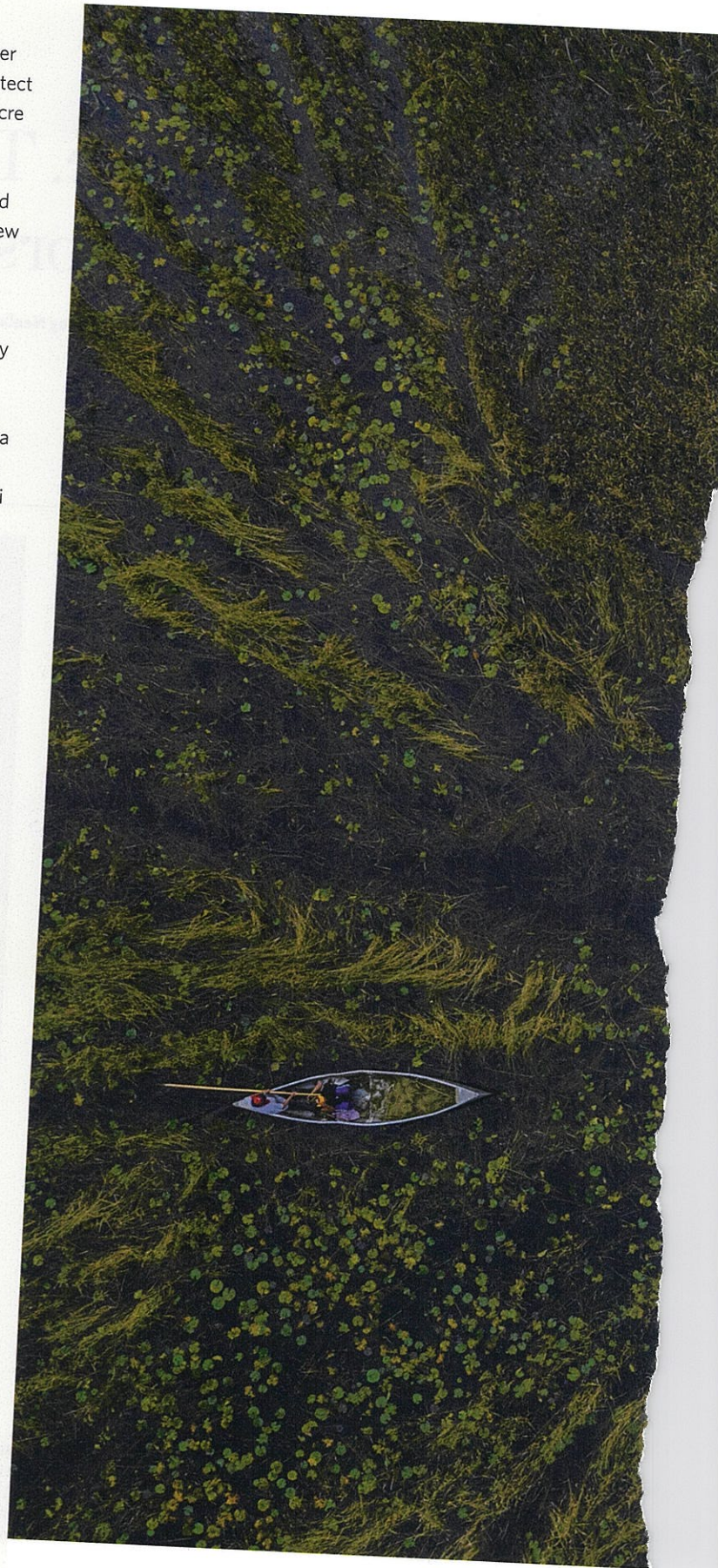
Minnesota has the largest remaining natural stands of wild rice in the country, and the Mississippi headwaters area encompasses a major portion of those rice beds. That habitat is important for migrating waterfowl, and the Mississippi River flyway is a vital migration corridor for nearly half of North America's bird species and about 40% of its ducks and other waterfowl. In total, the headwaters support more than 350 species of mammals, birds and other wildlife. The headwaters also provide drinking water for some 2.5 million Minnesotans—more than 44% of the state's residents.

But in the past 13 years, nearly 600,000 acres of land in the Mississippi headwaters have been converted to agriculture and urban development. In response, TNC identified 200,000 acres of the most critical land in the headwaters and is now working with partners to protect and restore it. The Conservancy will soon begin restoring native wild rice habitat on the Sauk River, and it's a partner in two broad-based initiatives: one to monitor wild rice abundance throughout the state, and the other to better understand the ecological and social relationships associated with wild rice to enhance its resilience in the face of climate change.

In addition, TNC is partnering with the Leech Lake Band of the Ojibwe in the management of the band's traditional lands. Much of that work is focused on restoring native pine ecosystems, which provide culturally important resources like wild blueberries for Ojibwe people. And because the pine forest is a fire-dependent ecosystem, TNC is working with the Leech Lake Band to bring more fire back to the land with prescribed burns and training exchanges.

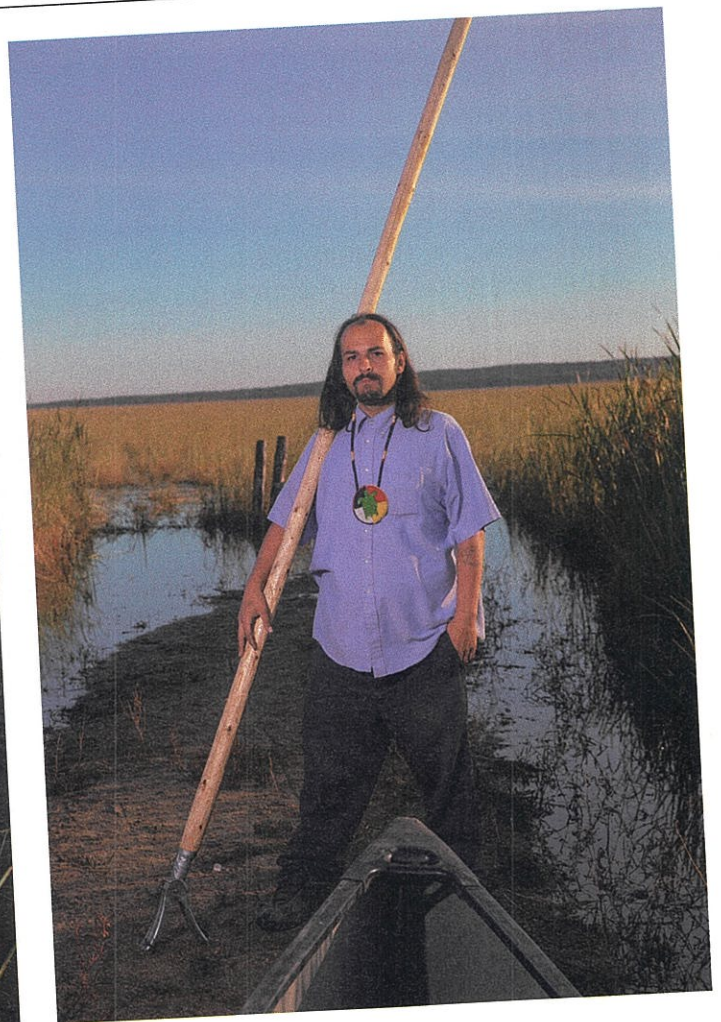
"Healthy, vigorous forests are really good for water," says Jim Manolis, the Forest Conservation Program director for the chapter, "and that's really good for wild rice."

Harvesting wild rice is also important for Ojibwe culture. "You're out there sharing stories of your parents doing it and your grandparents doing it," says Leech Lake Band member Gary Charwood. It's critical, he says, to sustaining the Ojibwe language, *Anishinaabemowin*. "There is a language along with those stories that has been passed down from generation to generation."



“This is wild rice. This is what our ancestors did.”

— Wesley Neeland



THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

Andy Auginaush (opposite) takes a break at the Bonga Landing on Lower Rice Lake, Minnesota, after a long day of ricing. Melanie Malmo (above, left) and John Rogers (above, right) gear up to head out in their canoes. While wild rice has faced growing pressures since the 1950s, including water pollution, commercial overharvesting and habitat destruction, the Ojibwe have taken measures to protect their traditional harvests.



RIVER OF RICE: Minnesota's lakes and rivers support an estimated 64,000 acres of wild rice—more than any other state in the country.



FROM LAKE TO TABLE: Brian Buck (above) helps the ricers parch their wild rice harvest by roasting the grains over a wood-burning fire in his small-scale facility in Mahnomon, Minnesota. Together with threshing and winnowing, the process helps separate rice grains from their grassy hulls (opposite).

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them to find a place “where the food grows on water,” they have relied on the wild rice they found. Wild rice—called *manomin*, or “good berry,” in Ojibwe—is a highly nutritious grain gathered from lakes and waterways in late summer and fall.

Much of the rice harvested by the Ojibwe is for individual families’ use. But the harvest also represents an important source of cash for many tribe members. During the season, Wesley and his father start on the northern lakes and gradually work their way south, spending their nights in hotel rooms. When the season is finished, they return home and pay their bills with the profits from their harvest.

The Ojibwe people harvest the rice in pairs. One person is the “poler,” responsible for pushing the boat through the water. The other is the “knocker,” charged with using two wooden sticks to knock mature rice into the boat. Any rice that falls into the water is left to lodge in the lake-bottom mud and grow into the next year’s rice stands—helping the

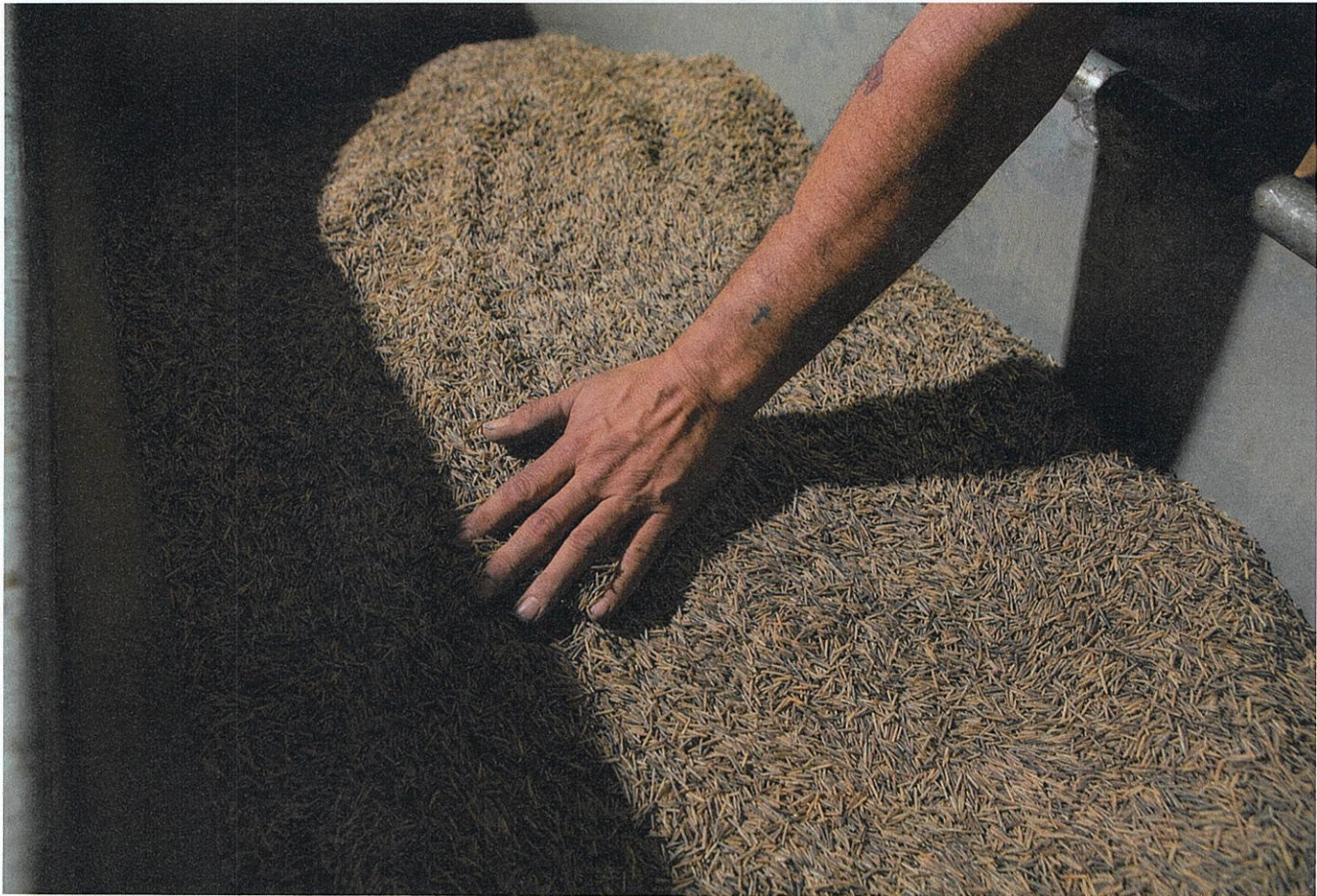
current generations of Ojibwe ensure that they don’t over-harvest the rice stands their ancestors traversed.

Once the rice is harvested, it is then parched—that is, roasted over a fire—and stepped on or danced on to loosen the hulls surrounding the grain. Finally, birch bark trays are used to toss the rice into the air to separate the hulls from the edible grains.

Simon Zornes, 51, has been harvesting and processing rice for more than 40 years. A citizen of the White Earth Nation of Ojibwe, Zornes learned to process rice from his uncle and grandfather when he was eight years old. “That’s just something we’ve always done,” he says. His family used to process rice in their yard. Nearly all of his grandfather’s 13 children would take part in the effort. Today, families harvesting wild rice have more options for parching and winnowing the grain.

“It’s not as prevalent as it was when I was younger, but it’s still a good option for those of us that are in the know, so to speak,” he says. “There’s money to be made.”

The demand for wild rice has been steadily growing since the late 1950s when entrepreneurs from outside the Ojibwe tribes began marketing it as a gourmet commodity. The resulting surge in demand led to overharvesting of the crop as non-Native ricers began competing with Native harvesters. Eventually, farmers began cultivating it on a larger



scale in paddies. Demand has skyrocketed in recent years as consumers—ever more health conscious—have become aware of the high nutritional quality of wild rice.

Despite the growth of wild rice's popularity, its future has become more imperiled. Zornes has watched more and more stands of rice disappear each year. He points to the threats of climate change, pollution, development, changing water levels and invasive species.

Today, the Ojibwe people are working to protect wild rice, developing plans to restore lost rice stands and establishing tribal nonprofits charged with buying and selling wild rice. And some Ojibwe have begun hosting camps to teach ricing and processing to younger generations.

Brandon Stevens, 32, harvests rice on the Leech Lake Reservation. He says he learned to harvest from his grandfather when he was five years old.

"It's really hard, tedious work," he says. "It's all about keeping traditions alive."

Stevens says he and his ricing partner, his uncle, often run into people on the lake whom they haven't seen for several years. Much has changed since he began harvesting rice. Back then, Stevens harvested primarily to earn money for school clothes. Schools would allow students to take time off dur-

ing ricing season. These days, he says, it's difficult to get young people to leave their air-conditioned living rooms to spend hours during the hottest days of summer collecting rice.

But Stevens sees ricing, as well as hunting and fishing, as a means to reconnect younger generations—like his own five-year-old son—with the earth and to the food they eat, as well as with their history and their ancestors who fought to survive and preserve their people's traditions.

"I think it's very important for people to get back to the old ways," he says. "Plus, it's very good to eat."

Today, 12 years after his first time in the canoe as a poler, Wesley Neeland says he hopes to continue ricing with his father as long as they are both able. And he hopes to someday teach his own 2-year-old daughter and 4-month-old son to harvest wild rice.

"I just like the feeling of being out there. I just feel like I'm more connected to myself," he says.

"This is wild rice. This is what our ancestors did." •

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