

The sounds of a lake come in. We hear the call of a loon and a paddle dipping into the water.

Narration (Lindsey Bacigal)

Manoomin, the gift that grows on water

Manoomin, a rice that can carry us through the hardest of times.

Manoomin, some of us may have forgotten, but the seed remembers.

These are the messages of Manoomin (Wild Rice) that Anishinabeeg people hold with them.

Those who grew up around Manoomin know the importance of a single grain and the work that goes into taking care of it.

From the first time the paddle touches the water, to the delicate way the rice needs to be knocked off the plant, to the steady rhythm that's kept while dancing on the rice - the process of harvesting the sacred food requires care and respect.

Some remember the teachings around Manoomin, and have passed it down to future generations. But what happens when the teachings are taken away and nearly forgotten? What happens to the people, the land? How do we come back from that? That's what we are going to discover.

Our story begins with 83-year-old grandfather William Yerxa and his granddaughter Jana Rae Yerxa from Couchiching First Nation.

Jane-Rae Yerxa

Okay, hi!

Lindsey (Interviewing)

Hi!

Jana-Rae Yerxa

My grandpa's never been on Zoom before.

Lindsey

You've got such a fancy setup.

Jana

Yeah, we're at Seven Generations Education Institute.

Oh, he has been on Zoom, he told me.

Narration

Manoomin has been a part of William's life since childhood. But the teachings were not

always allowed in his life. As Jana mentioned, she and her grandfather conducted their interview from Seven Generations Education Institute and that holds a lot of significance.

William Yerxa

This is the first time I've walked into this building. It's the first time I've ever been in here. And here I am. But I could never even think about these things. I never even talk about our ways of life because it was never taught to me that way.

Jana

Yeah. Just to provide some context, we're in the new building for the Seven Generations Education Institute, and on this area here, is the old Indian Residential School that my grandfather attended for nine years. And those buildings are still standing.

So this is my grandfather's first time being in this building, and that's why he's telling you all that. It was unheard of that he could speak this way in this area, when he was a young boy going to Indian Residential School.

And so he is happy to be talking with Anishinaabe about Manomin.

Narration

But it wasn't always this way. As a young child, harvesting Manoomin was an integral part of William's life.

William

My earliest memories...I started when I was very young. My mom and dad and I used to go out harvest. There was a lot of elderly people harvesting wild rice at that time. I was there and I used to see them dancing on it. At that time I didn't really like to see them do that because they were kind of up in ages. So I asked my mom about it and then she made me a pair of moccasins.

Narration

The moccasins William received from his mother were gifted, so that he could go and help the elderly dance on the rice.

William

So then I started going around and I used to dance for them on their rice. I wanted to help them, to make it easier for them.

Narration

As a young boy, William would stand with his moccasins on the freshly roasted rice. Hanging on to two poles placed on either side of the rice bed he would dance - stepping and twisting his feet in rhythm to remove the hulls from the rice.

This was a regular practice, every fall William would help with the harvest of Manoomin, taking joy in assisting others.

But that all stopped around the age of 7 when William was forced to attend St. Margaret's Indian Residential School in Couchiching First Nation.

By this point, we hope that all of our listeners have learned of the history and tragedies of Residential Schools, and if you haven't, please pause this podcast, take a moment to learn and then come back. We won't be discussing those past traumas today. They're a truth that many Indigenous Peoples know all too well; being removed from the land and its teachings. One that William was subjected to.

At 15, William was able to return to his community, but nine years is a long time to be away from the teachings and the process of Manoomin. He had to begin his learning again.

William

After I left there, I was about 15, 16 years old. So this is where I started to go out with my dad and mom to harvest wild rice. It really took me into something that I wanted to learn, to really learn. And it was a process that I had to start learning right from the beginning, the steps and the depth and the depth of how to do proper way. I had to learn.

And I shouldn't have been learning at 15 years old.

Narration

Despite the loss of time, William worked hard to regain his knowledge, learning not just from his parents but Elders in the community.

William

I was given a great opportunity after Residential School. I traveled with two Elders. I traveled with them and they never went to school. They never went to school. They didn't know how to read and write. And when I traveled with them on the lakes and the rivers and the land, and harvested wild rice with them, they taught me all the process of doing and the important part of it, that it was a gift from the Creator, so it was sacred.

Narration

By immersing himself in the land and traditional practices, William was figuring out who he was. But that didn't mean it was easy. Relearning how to harvest and process Manoomin came with many challenges, especially when it came to roasting the rice with his mom.

William

I was never patient when I wanted to do things. And my mom, she used to be very patient. I wanted to do it fast sometimes. I wanted to have a big fire, but she taught me how to

control that fire when I was roasting rice, how to get that even heat on the top. And it took time.

Narration

William's parents were incredibly gentle with him as he began to learn the practice of roasting rice. He soon discovered that he could tell by the look on his parents' faces if he was getting close to roasting it correctly or not.

William

When I was doing it, when I started doing it, my dad would look at it, then he'd just put the basket down. He wouldn't say anything. He wouldn't say anything. But I looked at the rice too. And I said, "What am I doing?" So I would go back and do some more and do some more.

Narration

Again and again, William would return to the fire trying to roast the perfect batch of rice and again and again his parents would give him the look that meant the roast wasn't quite right, and he'd have to start all over. Until one day he got it right.

William

I'd come back and my mom and dad were there and I'd come back and I showed them the rice I'd have finished. And after my dad looked at it, he didn't say anything; he just had a big smile on his face, so then I knew how he wanted me to finish that product of rice. So that took lots of patience on my part. So I had to learn patience and it helped me in life to be patient in other things.

Narration

The more time William spent on the land, the more his patience grew and the more he learned not only about himself but also the responsibilities that he had to the land, as well.

William

I'd become a trapper with my dad. Then, out on the land, I'd become a hunter. I'd become a gatherer of wild rice.

Narration

The key message that William was learning from his time on the land was that the gifts that he was receiving were not his to keep. They were gifts from the Creator and so they needed to be shared. This is where Jana, William's granddaughter, comes in. As William mentioned earlier, Manoomin is sacred for so many reasons, one of which is that it brings people together, and that's just what it did for Jana and William.

Jana

My earliest memories of wild rice? Well, my family, they always harvested wild rice so I always grew up around it and grew up eating it. And my grandpa's father, my great-grandfather, Burt, he used to live down the road from my grandpa, and a lot of my aunts and uncles and my cousins when we were younger, we used to play hide and seek outside my Grandpa Burt and Grandma Francis' house. And my Grandpa Burt, he used to dance on the rice, too.

And in the backyard, he had it set up, like there was a hole in the ground, and he had it all set up so he could dance back there. And I remember sometimes when we were playing hide and seek and we'd be running around all back there, he would stop us and just ask us to dance on the rice. And we'd do it for a little bit and then we'd go back to playing. So I remember that.

Narration

Despite being around her grandfather's practices from a young age, and seeing him regularly, Jana often felt like she didn't really know her grandfather.

Jana

My grandpa, he had this imposed break on his learning with going into the Residential School system. And for me, even though I was around it all the time, the significance wasn't there until I was much, much older. And really, it wasn't even that I wanted to learn about rice, to be honest. It was that I wanted to spend time with my grandpa.

He was always sitting around at the fire, and our family is no different than any other Indigenous family, like with colonialism, and with the impacts of Indian Residential Schools and how it creates familial disconnections. And that was very present in our relationship, and with me and my grandpa. So I just started sitting around the fire with him.

William

She phoned me up. She phoned me. She said, "I know you're my grandpa." She said, "But I want to know who in the heck you are." So that was the beginning of our real closeness. We sat by the fire. I remember roasting rice that day. It was the first time in a long time that I can remember that I ever cried about things, cause I was sharing things with her.

Jana

Somewhere along the lines, I learned not to ask my grandpa about his experience in Residential School. And I don't know. It's not like anyone explicitly ever said that to me. It was just like, I never talked about it or asked him. And I knew that that had a lot to do with this disconnection between us. So I called him and I did say, "I want to come see you, and I want to talk with you. And I want to know you. As long as you're here, I want to know you."

And that day, we sat together for literally, probably eight hours. And he talked to me about what his life was like before Residential School, what it was like the very first day he went

there, what happened to him there, what happened when he came out, and his own process of having to go through his own healing. And it was the most realest conversation. We laughed, we cried, we hugged. And it was really like a miracle, because all that whatever it was, it was gone.

Narration

“Can I come sit with you?” It’s such a simple question, and yet it unearthed so much. This question allowed for the space to strengthen Jana’s relationship with her grandfather, as well as her knowledge of Manoomin. And yet, many years later, Jana still struggles to find her own connection with the land.

Jana

I think Grandpa, when you were talking about how Manoomin taught you so much of who you are, I still feel really disconnected from the land, like, the land. I feel like even my knowledge, my relationship with Manoomin, I feel like such a baby when it comes to everything he knows. And yet, he always tells me that my relationship's going to be different, and that's okay. But I feel like Manoomin, yes, it's been a huge part of our own reconciliation process, I guess, with each other. And I really understand the teamwork it takes to harvest Manoomin, and how that helped to create good relationships amongst our people, and how that helps us to embody governance and nationhood with each other, amongst each other, and with our environment.

It's also very political. Food is very political because you think about even the settler state, how they imposed their laws. Like the Wild Rice Harvesting Act in 1960, the Indian Act when they outlawed trade with us and all these things, because Manoomin is a huge part of our economy. My grandfather still lives like that where he does a lot of trading.

Narration

Inspired by the actions of her grandfather, Jana is putting in the work to understand her own connection with the sacred practice. And a huge part of reclaiming her relationship with Manoomin, has come from an event she started called “Let’s Make Wild Rice at the Point.”

Jana

The Point, Neyashing, our people were displaced from that land well over 99 years ago. So there was a 99-year lease and we were displaced from it. And I always grew up knowing that that land was our land and that we were supposed to get it back in 2009. And that didn't happen. The town of Fort Francis continued to say that that was surrendered land, which forced a land claims dispute with the four communities with the town of Fort Francis.

And in that time, that land became known as Pither's Point Park and Pithers is the crooked Indian agent who displaced us from that land, my ancestors from that land. And the town of Fort Francis turned that into a recreational park. And so, I moved home to complete

some research for my master's degree and I was just thinking about the things I've read about, like how we used to harvest and how we used to do that together and how we used to come out of these imposed First Nation boundaries, right?

And so this one day I was just visiting with my grandpa over the summer and I said, "what would you think about roasting Manoomin at The Point?" And he was like, "man, that would be really cool." And so I took that as permission and then I got on the phone with my father and we started to work with our four communities that were in this land claims dispute to be there, to harvest Manoomin together, and that was really awesome to be there because that place actually holds a lot of significance to our people. It was where our people would gather, it was where our people would harvest and have meetings of political significance. And so my hope was that, just by us being out there, even if we were aware of it or not, we are reconnecting and we are embodying that governance, breathing life into it. So that's how that came to be with the help of so many of our people from our surrounding communities.

Narration

What's so powerful about this method of reclamation is that it is done in *our* way, within *our* communities. A lot of times it's easy to think of sovereignty and governance in relation to working through colonial systems like the court system. And for some, this thought can be overwhelming and disheartening. But work like this, it's fighting colonialism in a non-governmental way. It's claiming Indigenous governance and our ways of being. And as we look to the future the hope for both Jana and William is to keep educating and carrying the traditions forward to **empower** generations to come.

Jana

I think there's a lot more people that are wanting to pick up our knowledges again, around Manoomin. I think it's a huge part of our wellbeing, our liberation.

And when I think about Manoomin, it honestly reminds me of the best of who we are as Anishinaabe. And when I hear my grandpa talk about Manoomin, and when he talks about caring for it, because that's what he always says, is like, "We got to care for that rice." What I've come to understand, and even listening to him today, it's honestly like his love song to our family, like holding onto those teachings and revitalizing them.

William

We have to take care of it. We have to respect it. We have to learn what it is, that it was given for us to survive.

Narration

Like Jana and William said, Manoomin brings people together, but it also empowers and liberates them. For many communities, like Couchiching First Nation, harsh weather and winters are a reality of life, so Manoomin truly was a gift - carrying families through the

tough months.

But colonization has brought “laws” keeping us from our traditional territories and food systems. And Manoomin has been no exception.

James Whetung, founder of Black Duck Wild Rice, is on a lifelong mission to change that.

James Whetung

My first experience that I can remember was when I was probably three years old, and my uncle brought home wild rice. I can just remember us dancing on the wild rice, on the floor, in the mission house, where we used to live. I don't remember much after that as I became a teenager, it started to disappear and become practically extinct.

Narration

James is from Curve Lake First Nation, one of seven First Nations that were part of the destructive Williams Treaty of 1923.

James

The purpose of the Williams treaty was to take away our rights to hunt and fish and trap feed our families.

Narration

The Williams Treaty provided the Nations with a one time sum of money for their land, it provided no annuities, no Treaty rights and no reserve lands. It also completely ignored the Pre-Confederation Treaty which provided protection to First Nations' hunting grounds and their right to hunt.

James

So that treaty itself was devastating to us. It was a genocidal document and it was legal and so the courts would enforce the law when we went to catch fish, when it wasn't in season. And even if it was in season, you could only catch so many. So you may not be able to feed your family, or if you were providing food for more than one family, you would go to jail.

Narration

For James, this meant that his community was cut off from accessing many of the Wild Rice beds outside of their reservation, which they were used to harvesting for food.

James

There was very few places left on the lake where wild rice grew and my uncles would get me to paddle the canoe and they would shoot ducks, spear fish, trap muskrats or beavers, all those things. And I never knew how to gather and to process it because the genocide programs carried out on each and every reserve, we had been cut off from our sources of

food legally and isolated on a reserve where we were surrounded by colonists and they did not want wild rice grown in their lake.

Narration

But what's worse, not only were these communities not allowed to access the Wild Rice - corporations were beginning to try and commodify it.

In Ardoch Algonquin First Nation in 1978, the Ministry of Natural Resources tried to open Manoomin harvesting to commercial interests. This resulted in a 60 day standoff with the Ministry, Ontario Provincial Police, Ardoch Algonquin First Nation families, and allies, including James' family.

James

My dad and a couple of my brothers and the Chief and the Council went from Curve Lake up to Ardoch, Ontario to help the people there that lived at that community stop commercial wild rice harvester from going in and taking their wild rice. One of the Elders there at Ardoch said his grandmother brought the seeds from rice lake in a wagon. And they planted it in a river there at Ardoch on the Mississippi River and had been taking care of it as a source of food and a place of refuge for all the other critters that live in there. And so we went up there and we helped blockade the commercial wild rice harvester.

While we were there, they taught us what I had never learned during all my years, growing up how to gather, how to plant and how to process those seeds that grew on the water into food.

Narration

Being a part of the stand-off not only introduced James to the power of Manoomin, but also the methods of harvesting it.

This propelled him into taking restoration work into his own hands. James started what would eventually become Black Duck Wild Rice, to cultivate and harvest Manoomin.

James

After I left Ardoch they gave me seeds to bring up here to plant. And I went out to those places that my uncle showed me where there's a few spots of wild rice around. And I started gathering the seeds and planting them right at Curve Lake, right around the village so that people could just put their canoe in and go and get it because it was so hard to get wild rice before you'd have to travel. Like, I don't know, at least 50 miles for 60 miles to go and get your rice. And nobody was doing that.

Narration

At first, James gathered and processed only enough wild rice to meet the needs of his family. But, as time went by, he felt a responsibility to expand his operation so it could feed

the wider community. And with the expansion, he had to get savvy in order to speed up the harvesting process.

James

I was the only guy turning seeds into, into wild rice, into food. So I started making machines to help me make more food.

Narration

Yes, you heard that right, he began *making* Manoomin machines. And not just one - many.

James

Well, that was an experience I tell ya. I built a dancing machine. That was my first machine. And I didn't really know how to build anything. I had no money, well, I had very little money and I wanted to make a machine that anybody could build at home themselves. So I started using recycled materials.

Narration

James' dancing machine consisted of a barrel, tv antenna for the shaft, metal from an old fridge and rubber to hold the whole thing together. And to power it...

James

I hooked it up to a bicycle and I started pedaling and dancing on the rice as those things were turning around, it was rubbing the rice. But it was no faster than dancing on it with your moccasins, so it wasn't really an improvement.

Narration

But the lack of success didn't deter James, he was sure he could come up with something that would work.

James

So I bought a little cheap Honda motor, hooked it up to that machine and it was going so fast, it started to fly apart.

Sound of machine picking up speed and pieces of metal flying all over.

Narration

James kept adding on and taking off and adjusting this and adjusting that but to no avail.

James

It finally got to the point where I said, this is not working. People aren't just going to be able to build this out of stuff.

Narration

So James wiped the slate clean and began again, and this time he came up with something that stuck.

James

I started using metal and I got a guy to build my plan for a dancing machine. So that was the first machine that I built.

Then I built a roaster. And I got an air boat to gather with. And so with that machinery, I provide a service for people in the community who are say, maybe able to go out and gather the rice, but they don't have the capability of turning it into food.

Narration

This was a huge success in a few ways. First of all James was able to provide nourishing traditional food to a community where diabetes is very common. But also, the rice beds he was cultivating were helping the critters of Turtle Island as well.

James

There's so many things that have in that, in that wild rice, the fish, the beavers, the muskrats, the birds, the bugs, so many things. And so you got all these critters coming into the garden and it's not like a settler's garden where they put up things just to keep out the animals or people. No, we got to an open concept. And so we want those muskrats to come in because muskrats are good. They got nice hair. We make warm mucks out of them. And then mits and hats and the beavers too, and the ducks and geese. Oh my God. So it's not just about the wild rice. It's about all the things that go along with the wild rice.

Narration

With each passing year, James has expanded his practice. To those who support Indigenous food sovereignty, James is an inspiration. But, unfortunately not *everybody* thinks so. James has spent many years being challenged by another colonial disruption: the cottagers.

Since 2007, James has taken on the responsibility of bringing back wild rice to Pigeon Lake, Ontario. The lake has been his family's hunting, trapping and gathering spot for generations, and Wild Rice was once native to the area. But the cottagers on that lake have been protesting the regrowth of the marshy plant, which they say makes boating, and other activities, difficult.

James

My grandfather's hunting and trapping and gathering spot was on Pigeon Lake. His father's was on Pigeon Lake, too. So I feel like I have an obligation to take care of that place.

So I started planting at Pigeon Lake, replanting at Pigeon Lake, and the cottagers, didn't matter whether I was planting or gathering, they would come down and hassle us, swear at us, call us names, and tell us to get out of there. And there are some people who love wild

rice on Pigeon Lake, and they want to see the birds and the animals coming into there. And other people don't want it. They don't want it there. They want to get rid of it. And they don't want me going over there to get it. So they're doing everything to get rid of it.

Narration

And it's not just the cottagers, James also had to face-off with the Canadian government in order to keep planting.

James

Until recently the federal government or Parks Canada was against me gathering, planting, or selling wild rice.

They didn't support me. They didn't say, even though Parks Canada has a mandate to protect Canada's heritage. They don't protect Anishinaabeg heritage. They've sent me a letter trying to tell me not to gather. And they've told me not to plant. I didn't care what they said. I was going to do it for those animals that live in the rice and for the people that need to eat that rice, too.

Narration

Despite the push-back, James has continued with his mission of one day restoring Pigeon Lake to its original state, with rice beds overflowing.

But more than just the replanting of Wild Rice, just like Jana and William, James has used his knowledge and his work at Black Duck Wild Rice to help educate others.

James

So the future of Black Duck Wild Rice is like, it's, I don't know. I don't see it going on forever or anything. It's just a vehicle to help people learn about wild rice and not just go to school. I mean, *do it*, and that's where I want to see it going is, helping people want to help themselves.

And so I started a school and now, it's been going for a few years. I've had hundreds and hundreds of people come to go on these small eco tours that I take people out on they're like one day tours, take them out in the morning, show them how to gather wild rice and then bring them back. And then the afternoon is spent teaching them how to process the wild rice.

Narration

With time the Wild Rice in James' area has begun to see some protection. In November of 2020, the government of Canada stated that they would charge anybody who was caught destroying the rice. But James will not rest until he knows it's safe for good.

James

Most Anishinaabe know the story of wild rice, the problem, the prophecy of wild rice and how important it is to our culture, and food, like just being a food staple. People remember it when it was plentiful, but at lots of other reserves it's been wiped out. And so it needs protection. You can't have sovereignty without enforcement, enforcement and protection.

Narration

James' advocacy for Manoomin is inspiring a new generation of protectors and this is only the beginning of the food sovereignty revolution.

As William, Jana, and James have shown us, Manoomin is integral to the Anishinaabe way of life, nourishing both the body and the spirit, the lands and waters and all who rely on them. And it must be protected.

I wanted to end with a quote from James that I think sums up the episode perfectly:

Wild rice has been around for a very long time.

We are part of the garden.

We are all part of the garden and it's time we get back into the garden.

We want to say thank you to our interviewees for sharing their stories with us. And to everyone out there working to revitalize and protect traditional foods - thank *you* for all that you do.

For all of our listeners, thank you again for tuning in. Please share and give us a rating. You can also follow ICA on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook for more content on Indigenous knowledge and rights.