Wild Rice and the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg

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Like Indigenous people the world over, the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg who have lived in the Kawartha Lakes for thousands of years have a culture rooted in a staple food: manoomin, which means "the good seed." Although maoomin is called “wild rice” by settlers, it is actually a grain. Manoomin was important for all of the relations that shared the waters: the muskrat and the beaver who used the fibres and ate the shoots; the redwing blackbirds, rails, pigeons, quails, heron, cedar birds, woodpeckers and ducks that ate the grain; the frogs, turtles, fish and insects that lived amongst the rice stalks; the deer, elk and moose that grazed the foliage.

According to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg knowledge keeper from Alderville First Nation, wild rice also held the knowledge and memories of the people. Traditional Indigenous knowledge was necessary throughout the harvest: for offering thanks to the Creator, building a canoe, shaping a paddle, finding an appropriate stick to knock the grain off the stalks, knowing when the rice was ready, building just the right fire for roasting the rice, sewing the moccasins for hulling and dancing, making the baskets used for the winnowing, making the birch and cedar bark containers for storage, and knowing how far down to dig and how well to wrap to keep moisture from the rice when it was buried in storage.

The harvest of manoomin was also crucial for creating bonds of kinship and community, for teaching patience, humility, cooperation and respect, and for providing a basis for governance and community organization.

As Betasamosake Simpson points out, this means that the wild rice harvest occurs in a context of love — for the land, for Creator, for all the human and animal relations that are enmeshed in the life of manoomin. Being rooted in such love enables the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabegto know who they are and how they are to live in the world. They are a people who live in the land where plants grow on the water, plants that sustain them and give them life.

With the coming of settlers, however, the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg were cut off from the traditional ways that they had harvested and hunted their food for generations**.** The deepening of the lakes when the Trent-Severn canal system was created drowned the majority of the manoomin in the lakes. Soon, the lakes were so polluted from settler sewage, farming chemicals and industry that the manoomin could not grow.

How could the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg teach their children the rhythms of the seasons, with no manoomin to harvest? How could they learn to judge the ripeness of the grains, the exact moment when the parching was enough? Why would they learn to make the birch bark baskets and the dancing moccasins?

Without manoomin, what would ground their ceremonies? How could they thank the Creator for a gift that had been taken away? About what would they sing? Over what would they dance? The manoomin grounded the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg in their place. Without it they were cast adrift. Betasamosake Simpson is clear: without the manoomin, their identity as a people will disappear.

Unless, of course, the manoomin begins to return and the knowledge holders begin to share their memories of the harvest, the ceremonies, the wisdom of old, the stories of manoomin. This is precisely what has happened, as the manoomin has begun to return to the less polluted lakes.

The return of the manoomin has not been without controversy. Even so, people like Betasamosake Simpson are determined that their children will learn the ways of the manoomin once more, and in so doing continue to be the people whose food grows upon the water.