

Background Information on the Leech Lake Ojibwe

The Native people of the Leech Lake Reservation in Minnesota are part of the Ojibwe tribe. The Ojibwe, also known as the Anishinaabe (ah-nish-i-NAH-bay) and the Chippewa, are the second largest tribe in North America. The original homeland of the Ojibwe stretched from Saskatchewan to Ontario in Canada, and in the United States it included parts of North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and Ohio. The Ojibwe lived in small bands throughout the region and were primarily a woodlands people, although some Ojibwe bands moved further west and adapted to the culture of the Plains Indians. Bands were usually made up of about 20 to 50 people.

The Ojibwe people call themselves Anishinaabe, which in their language means “original people.” In the United States, “Chippewa” was used in all treaties, and remains the official name of the tribe. The Ojibwe language is part of the Algonquin language family, which can be found from Hudson Bay to North Carolina and as far west as the Rocky Mountains.

Although much of their land was lost over the years, today, most of the Ojibwe people still live in the Great Lakes region. Many Ojibwe live in Canada in communities known as reserves and there are 19 Ojibwe bands in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. The Leech Lake Band is a federally recognized tribe with a long history of relations with the United States, with the reservation being established by treaty in 1855. Federally recognized Indian tribes possess, among other things, the right of self-government. “Recognition” is a legal term meaning that the United States recognizes a government-to-government relationship with a tribe.

The Leech Lake Tribal Council provides leadership for more than 8,000 enrolled members. The tribe works with five other tribal governments as part of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe to promote their common interests. The other members of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe include the Bois Forte, Fond du Lac, Grand Portage, Mille Lacs, and White Earth bands. The Minnesota Chippewa Tribe is also federally recognized by the United States government. Tribal members are eligible for citizenship in their bands, in the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, or both.

Traditional Ojibwe society was egalitarian, but people achieved positions of importance as a result of their abilities as warriors, civil leaders, and religious leaders. Everyone was a member of a clan named after an animal, bird, or fish. Their society was patrilineal. People married outside their clan, and the children became members of the father’s clan.

The Ojibwe had great respect for the land and what it offered. Nothing was taken without something given in return. Gifts of food and tobacco were made to the spirits. When the life of an animal was taken, the Ojibwe used the entire body, letting nothing go to waste. Like many other Native people, they followed the rule of the Seventh Generation, which means that all their actions were to consider the needs of the generations to come.

The basis of Ojibwe culture was the forest, lakes, and rivers of the region. Wood was used to make utensils, tools and weapons. Birchbark was used for wigwam coverings, containers, and as the skin of canoes. Medicines were made from roots and plants. Ojibwe knowledge of the forest and its resources rivaled that of today's environmentalists and botanists.

Wild rice, or *manoomin*, (ma-Noo-min) has been a central component of the culture of the Ojibwe people for thousands of years. It was a centerpiece of the nutrition and sustenance for the community, a crucial foodstuff, a sacred resource, and an important ingredient of social and ceremonial life. It is a food that is uniquely Ojibwe. According to the Ojibwe migration story, the people once lived in the Northeast by a great sea but were told to migrate west until they found "the food that grows upon the water." This wild grain continues to be of great importance to many tribal communities, including Leech Lake. It is a presence in everyday life, in ceremonies, and in thanksgiving feasts, but is also a commodity to sell for extra cash. In early fall, the people of Leech Lake harvest wild rice just as their ancestors did, demonstrating an important continuum of culture.

Unfortunately, wild-rice populations have declined throughout much of the plant's historic range, due in large part to human activities. Wild rice grows in shallow water under fairly specific conditions. Changes in water levels and flows have hurt the rice in many lakes. Human activity—the building of roads, small dams, ditches, and culverts—is largely to blame for these changes. Logging has changed the composition of the forests. Forests that were once primarily pine were cut down, leaving the land open for aspen trees, which in turn has caused beavers to flourish. The beavers dam lake outlets and drown the rice. And there are new threats: cheap domesticated wild rice, developed in agricultural research stations, cultivated in manmade paddies, and harvested by machine, has flooded the market.

The Leech Lake Band of the Ojibwe, determined to sustain this important cultural resource, is engaged in sustaining their wild-rice beds using approaches that respect and weave together both traditional knowledge and Western science. These efforts include monitoring the production of the rice beds to collect baseline information, combating invasive species, and seeking other ways to restore the ecological conditions in which wild rice flourishes.

Regarding the traditional use of tobacco among the Ojibwe:

Tobacco is used in spiritual and religious ways among the Ojibwe. They believe that the Creator gave them tobacco and instructed them on its use. Tobacco carries people's thoughts and prayers to the Creator. It is also customary to offer tobacco when seeking knowledge or advice from an elder. When the Ojibwe offer tobacco before they harvest rice, they are asking for permission to take the rice, for blessings, and for good thoughts to be present as they do the work of harvesting.