

Sacred & Profane, Season 4 Episode 9  
The Food that Grows on the Water

Martien Halvorson-Taylor [00:00:00] I'm Martien Halvorson-Taylor.

Kurtis Schaeffer [00:00:02] And I'm Kurtis Schaeffer.

Martien Halvorson-Taylor [00:00:04] And this is Sacred and Profane.

Kurtis Schaeffer [00:00:08] If you're new to the show, this episode is part of our season Between Heaven and Earth, which focuses on climate change and religions in the US. And our story today starts with a prophecy.

Joe LaGarde [00:00:28] So, the prophecy itself. It's actually the third prophecy. The Third fire, of our people. Years ago, our people were basically put on the East Coast when the spirits appeared to our people and said that we were to move west and we would find our home where the food grows on the water, which happens to be our manoomin.

Kurtis Schaeffer [00:00:53] That's Joe LaGarde. He's a member of the White Earth Nation in what's now Minnesota.

Joe LaGarde [00:01:00] I'm Joe LaGarde, executive director of the Niibi center here.

Kurtis Schaeffer [00:01:05] We reached him at the Niibi Center. Niibi being the Anishinaabe word for water.

Joe LaGarde [00:01:11] We work on protecting, conserving, I guess, language, rights of nature. Of course, and traditional women's gatherings.

Martien Halvorson-Taylor [00:01:25] And that plant he's talking about manoomin. The food that grows on the water, also known as wild rice, isn't just part of an historic prophecy. It's been part of his life as long as Joe LaGarde can remember.

Joe LaGarde [00:01:43] When I was young, racing was really a good time of the year. At that time, with poor transportation, we actually moved into camps and we would camp there for two weeks. You know, you didn't rice every day. They had committees that, guarantee where you were to rice, when to rice.

Amy Myszko [00:02:08] So I can try to give you a little visual of wild rice.

Martien Halvorson-Taylor [00:02:11] That's Amy Myszko.

Amy Myszko [00:02:14] I'm Amy Myszko, I'm the program manager at the Niibi center here on the Wighton's reservation in northern Minnesota. So it's in the same family as rice. And it's a grass family out in the lakes here and the rivers. They're just like grass stalks out in the water.

Joe LaGarde [00:02:32] We go out in, canoes. We have, people that one is got, the, what we call the pounders, the knockers.

Amy Myszko [00:02:42] They're made of cedar because they're light. They only take off at the right rice.

Amy Myszko [00:02:49] They're green grasses growing out of the river, and then they get these darker seed heads. And as they, go from green to ripe, they turn kind of brown and they get dried out a little bit.

Joe LaGarde [00:02:58] You have pounders, and you're going to start right in the rice and it's not going to, ripen it. All right? It doesn't ripen in one day.

Amy Myszko [00:03:10] They go out in the canoes and they just sort of gently tap those little seed heads into the canoe, and they'll fill the whole thing up with, with the rice grains that way.

Kurtis Schaeffer [00:03:20] For those of us who haven't been lucky enough to taste it, what does it taste like?

Joe LaGarde [00:03:25] It it varies. It varies.

Amy Myszko [00:03:28] It's kind of nutty. It has a really nice, chewy mouth feel. Like you can cook it a really long time and put it in soups. And it doesn't dissolve like white rice does.

Joe LaGarde [00:03:36] The manoomin itself is there's, a lot of different varieties and a lot of different water systems that it grows on. So that too can affect the taste. Like a sandy or bottom, like a river. The rice is a lot smaller, as opposed to a lake that has, more of a muddier bottom. And so the taste varies.

Amy Myszko [00:04:02] Old timers or real experienced ricers can take a look at rice and tell you what lake it kind of came out of sometimes, you know, they just from looking at it or tasting it.

Martien Halvorson-Taylor [00:04:12] It's an important relationship, a reciprocal one, and one that is under threat as manoomin's natural habitat is squeezed by commercial rice farms, rising temperatures and a pipeline. That's what originally brought Amy to the Niibi Center.

Amy Myszko [00:04:29] I came up to Minnesota in 2021, the very beginning actually, I was up here on on New Year's Day to help to stand with Anishinaabe people who had put a call out for help in stopping the line three pipeline, the Enbridge pipeline project that was rammed through northern Minnesota in 2021. I thought I was coming up here for a couple weeks or a couple months, and I ended up staying that whole year into this summer, fighting that pipeline. And Joe found me in the ditch, where they were actually putting the pipeline under the headwaters of the Mississippi River in the LaSalle Valley. And I was living at the wild rice protector camp.

Kurtis Schaeffer [00:05:13] The pipeline poses a huge threat, and not just to the small fraction of their ancestral land that the Anishinaabe control by treaty today. It threatens the water quality across the region, and that means it threatens the existence of a long standing relationship between the Anishinaabe and the plant that has sustained them.

Amy Myszko [00:05:34] So they had to cross numerous rivers, hundreds of wetlands. Putting a pipe that's going to run sticky, thick crude oil from tar sands, Alberta, all the way to Superior to be shipped to China. Unfortunately, with the line three pipeline, all of the worst fears of all the indigenous people and everybody here, that was, you know, fighting this pipeline came true and they, punctured numerous aquifers. And it's never going to be repairable. And that's before the pipe even breaks. The likelihood of the pipe breaking is high. So it is extremely devastating. And on the wild rice, this is all wild rice territory. And it's the only place it grows right is northern Minnesota, Wisconsin a tiny bit into Michigan. And that's literally where these pipelines are going. It's a disaster. It's an environmental disaster.

Kurtis Schaeffer [00:06:23] The water defender camps that Amy talked about, led mainly by Anishinaabe women, were a first line of defense against the pipeline. And they did delay its construction. But the White Earth Nation also began assembling a legal case to protect manoomin.

Minnesota News Footage [00:06:41] Opponents of Enbridge Energy's Line three oil pipeline that's being replaced across northern Minnesota are taking a unique legal approach to try to halt construction. They're suing on behalf of wild rice, while the rice is the lead plaintiff. In a complaint filed Wednesday in White Earth Nation Tribal Court. Frank Bibeau, a lawyer for the White Earth Tribe, says the lawsuit, which names the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources among the defendants, is only the second Rights of Nature case to be filed in the U.S.. The DNR said it is reviewing the lawsuit and had no further comment.

Michael McNally [00:07:14] The relationship that Anishinaabe or Ojibwe people have with wild rice or manoomin is certainly not just religious. Yes, it's a sacred food, but it's also food and economic development and, a matter of treaty right. And all kinds of things.

Kurtis Schaeffer [00:07:36] That's Michael McNally. He's a professor at Carleton College and a collaborator of Joe Luard.

Michael McNally [00:07:43] I'm Michael McNally. I teach religion at Carleton College, and I don't speak as an Anishinaabe person. I speak as a scholar of religion who follows Anishinaabe interests and concerns, especially in the legal world. And I'm a scholar of the ill fit between the language of religion and native traditions, which are neither merely or solely religious. I think also that the language of religious studies, the language of myth, the language of ritual, the language of ethics and law, if you understand law in the sense of a religious law, helps understand what's at stake for Anishinaabe people as they act in to protect their relationship with manoomin or wild rice.

Martien Halvorson-Taylor [00:08:38] As Michael says, there's an essential disconnect between English concepts of religion and law and the relationship Anishinaabe people have with middlemen. But the relationship between them was acknowledged, at least on paper and treaty signed by the U.S. government in the 1800s.

Michael McNally [00:08:59] In the treaty of 1855, Anishinaabe leaders who engaged in diplomacy with the United States insisted that while they might cede territory, cede as in "c-e-d-e" territory to the United States, they also took pains to reserve the rights to hunt, fish and gather wild rice, you know, named specifically to gather wild rice on those ceded territories. So they insisted that they were, you know, ceding control in some regards of those territories to the United States. But they were retaining their rights to continue their relationship with wild rice and with the animals that are hunted and fished for under those ceded lands. That's super, super important. Those treaties, 1837 and 1854, specifically provided those reserved rights to hunt, fish and gather on the ceded territories. The courts have affirmed those rights all the way up to the United States Supreme Court in 1999, which held in the Mille Lacs Band of Chippewa v. the state of Minnesota upheld the rights, the treaty rights from the treaty of 1837.

Kurtis Schaeffer [00:10:21] Those treaties, and the Supreme Court case that affirmed the rights of native people to hunt and gather on the land outside of reservations, were part of the case that the White Earth Nation made when they sued to stop Line Three. But they also made what is still a novel argument in the United States, at least. In 2018, the White Earth Nation enshrined the rights of manoomin. While previous treaties with the United States had recognized the human right to gather wild rice. Manoomin itself has the right to exist, flourish, regenerate, and evolve.

Michael McNally [00:11:00] The 2018 assertion by the White Earth Nation's tribal government that many women are wild rice has inherent rights to exist and flourish. And subsequent litigation where manoomin or wild rice is the the party of interest in an action against the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources might sound like kind of an elegant strategy for the rights of nature. What a great way to get, you know, at what's really going to make a difference in addressing climate change and environmental injustice. And yet there's something about that that really flows from Anishinaabe tradition and Anishinaabe lore even.

Joe LaGarde [00:11:46] The legal right. I mean, it was always there. I mean, we can't really give rights to our sacred foods.

Amy Myszko [00:11:53] You were recognizing the right that you inherently as Anishinaabe people see that all beings have do anything that's inherently different than the rights that should be given to all of our non-human relatives. However, in the human realm, we haven't been really honoring that on a broad scale. So giving it the right of a personhood means that, for one, the tribe actually tried to sue the DNR. Like on behalf of manoomin.

Martien Halvorson-Taylor [00:12:21] That effort stalled on appeal in 2022, but that decision didn't directly challenge the White Earth nation's assertion of manoomin's fundamental rights. Outside the U.S., courts in Ecuador, Bolivia and New Zealand have recognized the rights of ecosystems to flourish. Joe and Amy's work at the Niibi Center includes efforts to try and make the rights of man, woman, and the rights of nature in general actionable law in Minnesota.

Amy Myszko [00:12:54] It's actually very, very complicated because for many reasons, because, you know, tribes are actually under the federal jurisdiction, but we have to work with state DNR. But that's why we're working to give these, to give it more teeth legally.

Joe LaGarde [00:13:10] The main threat is just big businesses. How I look at it and government that naturally, supports big business over, protecting the rights of nature. You know, they take and, look at everything, no matter what, what damage they cause, you know, to make money. Not only, you know, are we looking at protecting our manoomin. We looked at protecting all life. We see all life, all plants, everything as, as being sacred and has that right to live, the right to flourish. And right now, the way, governments go, I realize, you know, you gotta have, I suppose, some type of work. But it doesn't have to be the work that's going to end up killing you. And it won't leave a future for our young people if we continue down this road.

Martien Halvorson-Taylor [00:14:09] Time will tell if the White Earth Nation is able to successfully expand the legal rights of manoomin. We asked Joe if he saw any other threats to manoomin's thriving beside the pollution caused by Line Three.

Joe LaGarde [00:14:26] Climate change, I think myself. I've seen it over 30 years ago. I start seeing changes made my living out of the bush. You know, like the mosquitos, the ticks, the deer ticks, all that have all these different diseases they're carrying now. And so there's a lot of change that's happening out here, and it's not for the good.

Amy Myszko [00:14:51] Two years ago we had an unprecedented drought here and the lake levels were low and it really affected ricing. At the same time, Enbridge was taking out millions of gallons of water from these lakes that were actually illegally. That was devastating. And it feels like a harbinger of things to come with drying and warming.

Joe LaGarde [00:15:11] Yeah, winters are not as cold as they used to be. But, you know, I know there's a lot of talk out there right now that we have to do it well. We're a good 100 years behind on everything right now. So we if we're going to have any kind of future, we have to

change. I know it's hard because everybody's out there chasing the dollar when that happens. You know, things get put aside.

Kurtis Schaeffer [00:15:44] As we ended our conversation and prepared to say goodbye to Joe and Amy, Joe said something we couldn't quite hear over the line.

Amy Myszko [00:15:52] Well, if you were like, Joe is asking me to sing the Niibi song.

Joe LaGarde [00:15:55] With.

Amy Myszko [00:15:56] With my daughter, if you would like we could do that.

Martien Halvorson-Taylor [00:15:59] Oh, we would love that.

Kurtis Schaeffer [00:16:00] But we would love that.

Amy Myszko [00:16:02] Well, okay. She doesn't want to. I'm not gonna force her. Just so that people know this song has been, like, given to the world as a song that people, even non Anishinaabe people, are allowed to sing. So not all songs would be like that necessarily, like there are sacred and ceremony songs that wouldn't be free to share, but this one is very free to share. So, I will try not to screw it up.

Martien Halvorson-Taylor [00:17:01] Beautiful. Can you tell us a little bit about what it says?

Joe LaGarde [00:17:07] Thanking the water. Basically, you know, when we look at things for water versus a little different, but lots of water, good water, a lot of sunlight, like we're talking about, it's going to start to die out. So we need, that change now.

Kurtis Schaeffer [00:17:34] Sacred & Profane was produced for the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia. This episode was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Our senior producer is Emily Gadek

Martien Halvorson-Taylor [00:17:49] Today's guests are Joe LaGarde, Amy Myszko, and Michael McNally. Music in this episode came from Blue Dot Sessions. For more on our work, head to Religion lab.virginia.edu.