

Wild rice makes a comeback in the South Nation watershed

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Low water levels and overzealous waterfront residents have made life difficult for an important crop that grows in the South Nation Watershed.

Wild rice fields that grow along the riverbanks provide a home for the watershed's frogs, fish and turtles, and double as a food source for migratory birds and muskrats.

But what the winter ice doesn't uproot, residents often pluck out while clearing their properties to the shoreline come springtime, said South Nation Conservation (SNC) senior forestry technician Chris Craig.

"So what's happening is, there's just not a lot of vegetation growth in the water," he said.

No vegetation means less shelter and food for animals, and less oxygen in the water.

The stalk of the wild rice plant splits as it grows out of the water, trapping oxygen inside the sheaves.

"Every time the plant moves, it releases a couple bubbles into the water, so it adds oxygen into the water as it's growing," Craig explained.

Each fall, SNC staff and volunteers team up with Ducks Unlimited and Plenty Canada to harvest and replant the rice throughout parts of the 4,000 square-km watershed as a way to improve water quality and restore wildlife habitat.

At harvest time, volunteers and staff paddle down the river, a canoe on each side of the bank. The harvester knocks the grains of rice off the plants and into the canoe using a paddle or long stick.

Volunteers also get a close-up look at wildlife conservation and management techniques.

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A lack of nutrients in the water and fluctuating water levels – such as those caused by this season's drought conditions – negatively affect the plant's growth, and can result in what is called fractured rice, which is difficult to harvest and replant.

Non-fractured rice grows in a tightly packed grain stock that resists the wind and is easily harvested, while fractured rice falls off the stalk at the slightest disturbance.

As the rice grain waits to be replanted, it is stored in bags in the river so the embryos can still germinate.

During planting season – which is now underway – workers walk through the shallows, hand-spreading the seed, which settles over the winter and begins to grow in the spring.

These conservation efforts are paying off. Last year, 40 pounds of wild rice – both the northern and southern varieties – were harvested from the Payne River tributary.

This year, the harvest rose to 100 pounds, thanks in part to better weather.

One day, Craig hopes the harvest will generate food for Plenty Canada, an Algonquin non-profit organization that will use the rice as an ingredient in traditional foods.

"That's what the goal is, but it's not just for the food source," he said, adding that expanding the rice fields also helps limit the spread of invasive plant and fish species such as purple loosestrife and carp.

A wild rice public education campaign isn't needed at this time, Craig said, but he does ask watershed residents not to rip out or disturb the rice plants by the shoreline.

The fish and fowl also appreciate it.