WILD FOOD SUMMIT

Anishinaabe relearning traditional gathering practices

By Barbara Ellen Sorensen

The Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) people of the White Earth Reservation in White Earth, MN, have always been involved in the harvesting of rice, maple syrup, and berries. On the land that they own, which encompasses more than 70,000 acres, they also hunt and fish. Yet health problems plague the tribal members, primarily because of the government foods that were forced on them when they were settled on the reservation.

Of the many people there beginning to involve themselves with projects that promote a healthy and traditional way of eating and living, Winona LaDuke (Anishinaabe) is the best known. A Native American activist, environmentalist, economist, and writer, LaDuke founded Honor the Earth, a nonprofit organization raising awareness and financial support for indigenous environmental justice.

Less well known is a program initiated by Steve Dahlberg, the White Earth Tribal & Community College Extension director. Dahlberg began Wild Food Summits to teach people about identifying and gathering wild greens, mushrooms, and other edible plant life. The whole community comes together to cook and eat the foods.

Dahlberg is of Swedish/Saami heritage, so he is familiar with many of the health problems that afflict Indigenous people, such as diabetes, obesity, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). According to the Centers for Disease Control, diabetes ranks number four in the 10 leading causes of death among American Indians and Alaska Natives. The Mayo Clinic says food additives probably cause ADHD. Many of the families on the White Earth Reservation still receive government commodities, which are full of additives. It is not surprising that Dahlberg, along with many health professionals, believes diet has something to do with these conditions.

> ***"The conventional food system is never going to bring in good food or invest in it because it is not profitable for them."***

UMMMM, MUSHROOMS. Anil Ramer (10), Sadie Allen (7, Lakota), and Zoe Allen (10, Lakota) hold a prize basketful of Lobster mushrooms they gathered in the pine forest. Photo by Rebecca Dallinger

To address these health problems, the tribal college also encourages community gardens and buying from local farmers, as well as wild foods. Dahlberg says, "The conventional food system is never going to bring in good food or invest in it because it is not profitable for them."

WILD FOOD SUMMIT

The tribal college has sponsored five annual Wild Food Summits, and interest keeps growing. "We get people from Canada and the four or five states around us," says Dahlberg.

"We are relatively thin on local people." When asked why this is, he says it is hard to change the paradigm of thinking about food, especially among adults who have been brought up on government commodities and assume diabetes is a fact of life.

"We're just not on their register quite yet," he states. "The local people are primarily involved with harvesting rice, maple syrup, and berries. We are trying to re-educate them in the knowledge that was lost years ago with assimilation. The people need to know there are other foods rich in nutrients, which can be foraged from their land."

Dahlberg focuses on the foraging and gathering component of food. "The other knowledge—rice, maple syrup, berries—is in no danger of disappearing, which is why I chose to look at the different foods necessary to a healthy diet. I recognized that people needed more detailed knowledge of gathering wild edibles."

People who attend the summits get the message. Two Lakota girls at the Wild Food Summit discussed their experience. "At the Wild Food Summit I liked that most of it we gathered ourselves and made," says Zoe, a 10-year-old fifth grader. "I learned how to get to the edible part of cattails—the inner part. It tastes kind of cinnamon-y." She also likes sumac lemonade. "I don't really want pop anymore. I don't eat as much junk food and don't like it much," she says. "Now I know what things are and how to look for wild edibles."

"I liked the wild rice. It is kind of crunchy," says Sadie, a seven-year-old first grader. "In the garden I like the potatoes, our beets, and carrots. With beets you have to cook them and then you could put vinegar on them. My favorite tea is raspberry leaf."

To garner more interest from locals, Dahlberg hired Robert Shimek, who also works with Winona LaDuke on some of her sustainability projects. Shimek (Red Lake Band of Ojibwe) grew up on White Earth Reservation and having lived here his entire life, has a vested interest in spurring this effort forward. They are also trying to involve people from Red Lake, Fond du Lac, Turtle Mountain, and other surrounding reservations.

Shimek attended his first Wild Food Summit three years ago. "I remember how incredibly good I felt after eating wild foods," he says. "I believe that wild foods are alive in a way that other foods are not. This was my driving consideration behind wanting to help make this project work and to share the gift with others."

RESTORATIVE KNOWLEDGE OF HEALTHY EATING

The 2010 summit attracted more than 100 people, including about 15 from White Earth. Dahlberg says this is about a 30% increase from the previous year's local participation. "We will continue to build on that constituency," Shimek says. "The locals will benefit the most from it."

CATTAIL STIR-FRY. The Wild Food Summit focuses on nutritious foods that can be foraged locally. Photo by Tammy Bellanger

CHICKEN. The chicken was wrapped in local burdock leaves before it was cooked in the fire pit. Photo by Tammy Bellanger

In addition to trying to increase the local participation, Dahlberg is beginning to focus on very young children in the local Head Start program. "If you don't get kids before the age of six, you're not going to alter their eating habits."

When asked why the effort to get more local people involved is so important, Shimek states, "I think the benefits of an effort like this is coming to know wild foods intimately and how healthy they are for all of us, not only physically, but

as part of our cultural understanding of our original way of life. Our goal is to better understand our relationship with this land and work to sustain the habitat that surrounds us."

"We have this connection with the wild foods of the land and yet we have serious problems with diabetes, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in children, and obesity. The work we are doing with locally grown and wild food gathering is just one more way to help resolve these health conditions."

Barbara Ellen Sorensen freelances for the Tribal College Journal and SACNAS News, writes web content, and is a member of the Denver Women's Press Club. For more information on the Wild Food Summit, visit www.wildfoodsummit.org. For more information about Honor the Earth, visit www.honorearth.org. TCJ

CINNAMON. The edible, inner part of cattails tastes a little like cinnamon.

BIG POT. Cole Bellanger stokes the wood-fired canner used to cook food for the crowd. Photo by Tammy Bellanger