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HALI JAMA: From Wisconsin Sea Grant, I'm Hali.

**BONNIE
WILLISON:** And I'm Bonnie.

HALI JAMA: And you're listening to *The Water We Swim In*, stories about the Great Lakes, and the people working towards equity.

**BONNIE
WILLISON:** Wisconsin Sea Grant is based at UW Madison, which occupies the traditional land of the Ho-Chunk people. The stories on this podcast span the area we now know as Wisconsin, where the lands and waters are cared for by the 12 native nations that call Wisconsin home.

Today, we're talking about Wisconsin's largest inland lake, Lake Winnebago. The lake is important to many people, the indigenous people who live there now, the indigenous people who have a long history on its shores, the non-indigenous residents of the Fox Valley, and the local plants and animals.

On this episode, we talk about one inter-tribal group that is looking to unite everyone for the health of the lake and for indigenous sovereignty.

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The first water walk around Lake Winnebago was in 2015.

In 2015, there was a collaborative effort by Indian and non-Indian community members to come together and initiate a water walk around Lake Winnebago. And there was an invitation to the Brothertown because our reservation historically is on Lake Winnebago on the Eastern shores there-- our office is presently located in Fond du Lac.

JESSICA RYAN: So with those water walks, the water is collected up on the Eastern shores there because on the East is where everything starts. And a portion of that water is carried in a copper vessel.

As we make our journey by foot around that lake, we take turns in a collaborative way, working together to put our prayers into that water for healing, and for understanding, and for all of those things that are necessary to have a better outcome for the water, which is our lifeblood.

**BONNIE
WILLISON:** That was the Vice Chair for the Brothertown Indian nation, Jessica Ryan.

JESSICA RYAN: Good morning. I am Jessica Ryan. And I am a proud member of the Brothertown Indian nation. My family lines are many within our tribe. But the primary lines are the Skeesuck, the Fowler, the Dick, and the Johnson lines. And I have the honor to serve as the Vice Chair of our tribe at this time.

**BONNIE
WILLISON:** We also had the pleasure of speaking to Brothertown tribal council member, Skip Blanc.

SKIP BLANC: My name is Skip Blanc. I live in Escanaba, Michigan. I'm a tribal council member. My family line runs through the Brushes and Quinneys. I enjoy teaching crafts and helping out where I can.

I've been involved with our water walk, and other water walks, for a while now. I feel that water is the lifeblood of Mother Earth. And I just want to help take care of things.

BONNIE WILLISON: One important person in the water walk movement is Josephine Mandamin. She is an Anishinaabe grandmother who led a ceremonial walk around all five Great Lakes. In total, that was 10,900 miles.

And it took almost three months. She started doing this to raise awareness of the problems of water pollution and environmental degradation on the Great Lakes and on indigenous reservations in Canada.

HALI JAMA: So I'm wondering, why did they start the Lake Winnebago Water Walk in 2015?

BONNIE WILLISON: Yeah, so the year before, in the summer of 2014, there was a manure spill near the lake. The manure got into the lake. And fish died. And things got really out of balance. In fact, over the last few decades, the Lake Winnebago watershed has faced some water quality threats, landing it on Wisconsin's Impaired Waters listing.

The Lake Winnebago water walkers invited Josephine Mandamin to Wisconsin. And she joined them in 2015 to start off the walk in a good way.

JESSICA RYAN: As you know, it's about 90 miles around Lake Winnebago. And so we walked for three days, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. We take turns leapfrogging, so to speak, with our walking. So each male female team typically just walks a short distance. And then we relay-style hand-off the water and that staff to the next pair.

And then that next pair is able to continue their prayers and protections for the water in that way, and then hand off to the next team. And so we share that responsibility in a interwoven, collaborative, connected kind of way. It's really a grassroots effort. And it's really-- we're connected to the water in a good way during that time.

BONNIE WILLISON: So the Lake Winnebago water walks have happened each year since then.

JESSIE CONAWAY: I've joined in for three water walks for Lake Winnebago. And the first one, I walked 12 miles with no socks on. So that was memorable.

BONNIE WILLISON: Dr. Jessie Conway is based at the University of Wisconsin Madison, where she's an outreach specialist, educator, and researcher, in partnership with native nations in Wisconsin.

JESSIE CONAWAY: You know, I think what I've learned in my work with tribal nations and water conservation is that ceremony is part of stewardship-- of water. Ceremony is part of water stewardship. Also, direct action is part of water stewardship, as is community education.

We are not going to be able to think our way through solving these big environmental issues. We have to be embodied scholars. We have to show up and put our backs into it, and also put our hearts into it, and our spirits.

BONNIE WILLISON: This team is embarking on a really big environmental project, a multi-year collaborative, wide-ranging project to help one of the area's biggest lakes with centuries of history, Lake Winnebago.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

In English, we call it Lake Winnebago.

SUBJECT 1: Wenepekow Nepehsaeh.

BONNIE That was the Menominee language.

WILLISON:

SUBJECT 2: Wiinibiigoo-zaaga'igan.

BONNIE That was the Ojibwe language.

WILLISON:

SUBJECT 3: Kanyataláhele.

BONNIE That was the Oneida language. You just heard recordings that I found while doing some online research. It isn't

WILLISON: just these tribal nations that have a history with the lake. These are just a few of the many examples.

Whether or not you have a history with the lake, you might know that it's the largest lake in Wisconsin, besides the Great Lakes, Lake Michigan and Lake Superior. Obviously it's the largest inland lake. Lake Winnebago spans more than 130,000 acres and touches three Wisconsin counties.

Lake Winnebago actually flows into Green Bay and then into Lake Michigan. So the lake is really tied to the health of the bay of Green Bay. The area surrounding the lake is called the Fox Valley. It's the third largest population area in Wisconsin, outside of Madison and Milwaukee. The lake supports cities like Appleton, Oshkosh, and Fond du Lac.

JESSICA RYAN: There are many, many tribes that have called Lake Winnebago and the Lake Winnebago waterway system, home over the generations. So the Ho-Chunk have a long history of being settled around those waters and caring for those waters. There are tribes that are no longer located in Wisconsin that also lived and had responsibilities for that water, including the Sac and the Fox.

But we know the Ho-Chunk had responsibilities here, and have a long history and tradition related to these bodies of water. We also know the Menominee have a long history of residing on and caring for these waterways as well, especially in the northern region of Lake Winnebago and around there.

I would just take a couple of minutes to share our history for the Brothertown people. We were forced to relocate, along with the Stockbridge and the Oneida, from New York. And in that forced relocation, we arrived in this watershed area. There were several thousand acres that were negotiated in treaty where we were able to move and to raise our families.

And it was very important to us to continue to be by the water. Our people originally were on the East Coast along the water, and depended tremendously on the water each and every day for sustaining our life. And so it was important to us to be able to be near the water again. And we were grateful that we were able to arrange that.

As you know, the water does sustain not only us, but it sustains all the animals that we live on, right? All of those relatives of ours, the two-legged, the four-legged, the winged, depend on it. And so it's been important to us to have that connection.

BONNIE Here's Dr. Conaway.

WILLISON:

JESSIE So as Jess was mentioning, a lot of tribal nations in Wisconsin are connected to Lake Winnebago. It's a border area for people. And it's also a border area for wild rice. Both the rices grow there.

CONAWAY:

BONNIE So Lake Winnebago is unique because both the Northern wild rice and the Southern wild rice can be found around the lake, historically.

WILLISON:

HALI JAMA: So can you tell me what the Northern wild rice is like?

BONNIE So the Northern wild rice is, I think, what a lot of people think about when they think of wild rice around the Great Lakes region. It grows in wetlands. And a wild rice lake, you can almost hardly tell that it's a lake just because it's so packed with wild rice when the rice is standing up during ricing season.

WILLISON:

The rice plants get really tall. But they can vary a lot in what they look like, from the rivers, or the different lakes that they grow on.

HALI JAMA: Oh, OK, and what about the Southern wild rice?

BONNIE Yeah, the Southern wild rice, *zizania aquatica*, it is larger than the northern version. I read that it could be up to 14 feet tall, which is just wild. And it's found in the Great Lakes region and all the way south, down to Florida.

WILLISON:

So right now, Lake Winnebago when you go and look at it, it's a large lake, lots of open water. But that's not what it used to look like.

JESSICA RYAN: A number of years ago when I was doing research, for our tribe and our history, as you probably well know, we are still fighting for restoration of that federal trust relationship with the Brothertown Indian Nation and the United States government. And I have a passion for history and research in that regard.

And reading an old journal from many years ago, there was an entry that indicated and stated that there was wild rice in Lake Winnebago, that the lake was teeming with wild rice, such that the boats could not pass. And that really jumped out at me because I'm not aware of the rice being that present and that thick in the current day.

And so that stuck with me. We know there are many stories about the significance of the wild rice. And each and every tribe has its own personal connection with that rice. Wild rice is an important element for a food source for us and also for our relatives that live in the water and on the water.

And so acknowledging that all the way around the circle, there's all kinds of living bodies that depend on that historically. And that's been, since time immemorial, an important component of life. So trying to figure out where is it, what happened to it-- it was here, now it's not-- that's a big question for me.

I want to know where did it go? And what happened to it? And why don't we have it in the quantity that we once had it? And looking at that as something that's a significant indicator of what's happening with our environment, what's happening over time.

People talk about the miner's canary. And so many things are referred to as the miner's canary. But for me, the wild rice has a role that way. What's that indicating, that the water is not safe enough for the rice? Many tribes believe that each living thing is its own spirit. And we're all in the same plane with one another.

We're not in some kind of hierarchy where humans are above or below other things. We all are respectful. And we all live together and have an equal role. And that includes our animals. That includes the plants, the trees, all of that.

And it includes wild rice. And there are a number of tribes that have gone so far as to put that in writing, and to recognize and acknowledge that the wild rice is a being, and deserves to be protected.

And there's court cases that acknowledge that. And that's not a new concept because we believe in that way. The concept that's new is that they've had to go to court. And they've had to make laws, and have judicial decisions that acknowledge that role as being important.

SKIP BLANC: You're right, Jess. Everything that we believe in is on an equal plane. And it's that circle. Life has no beginning and no end. In our history, we needed rice to survive. It's what got us through the winters.

There's many places where I used to gather wild rice with my father. And it's not there anymore. And so it's a big question on why it's not there.

BONNIE WILLISON: After the break, what happened to the rice? Jess, Jessie, and Skip get started on a multi-year Lake Winnebago inter-tribal connectivity project.

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2015 was a big year. It was the year of the first Water Walk around Lake Winnebago. It was also the year of the Native Nations UW Leadership Summit, where Jess Ryan met Dr. Jessie Conaway. So UW Madison brought all 12 tribes of Wisconsin together at the summit, and talked about how they can help each other out, using a mixture of the University's brainpower, and the students that are at the University, and how they might be able to partner with tribes.

JESSICA RYAN: One of the things that was important to me was following up on the efforts that were happening around the state with regard to the wild rice. And so I asked-- we put that on the wish list of things to consider.

BONNIE WILLISON: So this Lake Winnebago wild rice idea went onto the wish list in 2015. And then if we jump forward to 2020, Ashley was a grad student working with Jessie Conaway on partnerships with native nations and the University. She was looking to connect with native nations who wanted to partner with UW Madison on some research. So she looped back in with the Brothertown Nation.

ASHLEY GRIES: A lot of times, universities will put forth their own research requests to nations. And it was really important for us to reverse those roles and ask of the nations what they were interested in pursuing, and finding ways that we could build a program together.

The ask from the Brothertown Indian Nation really stood out as a large project that could have really large, wide scale implications for the watershed, but as well as for food sovereignty in native nations around the lake.

BONNIE WILLISON: So the partnership began. The Brothertown Nation and Jessie Conaway and Ashley started building relationships, creating a team. They also started applying for funding from our organization, Wisconsin Sea Grant. After a competitive competition, they got the funding.

They'll be working on the Lake Winnebago Intertribal Connectivity Project between 2022 and 2024. As Ashley had helped develop the proposal, she had done lots of research on Lake Winnebago. But she hadn't visited. She remembers when she was finally able to visit the lake. She and Jessie Conaway went on a boat with the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Wisconsin DNR, who are both partners on the project as well.

ASHLEY GRIES: Lake Winnebago is a massive lake. It is one of the largest freshwater lakes in all of the United States, and certainly in Wisconsin. And so when you're on the edge of the lake, you can, at certain points, see the other side.

But at some points, it is quite a challenge. It's very wide, and very, very low at the southern end. I don't know exactly how long it is. But Fond du Lac up to the northern end of the lake is certainly something you would not be able to see.

BONNIE WILLISON: So if you travel north along the Western shore of the lake, you'll find a few smaller connected lakes, Lake Butte de Morts, Lake Winneconne, and Lake Poygan. Ashley and the others were heading there in search of wild rice.

ASHLEY GRIES: The portion where we found the wild rice in Lake Poygan was kind of in the northern portion of the lake that's a small inlet. There are some small homes and businesses along the lake shore. But primarily, it's a lot of aquatic plants.

BONNIE WILLISON: For the project, the team is looking at where wild rice currently exists and where it doesn't. What is the water quality of the lake? What's the quality of the sediment on the bottom? And why might wild rice be persisting in some of these places but not others?

ASHLEY GRIES: Finding that wild rice was really encouraging because it proved that there was a large need to protect that area of wild rice, being so challenged by water level changes, and fluctuations of silting and boat action. It was encouraging to find it there, to know that we could potentially reseed it also.

BONNIE WILLISON: For tribal vice chair Jessica Ryan, this whole process started with wild rice.

JESSICA RYAN: Starting this off, I wanted to be able to bring the rice back. And I don't know enough about the water. I don't know enough about the animals. I don't know enough about the land to be able to say if that's possible, if that's realistic. And if we try to restore the rice, how are we going to sustain it? What conditions does it need? And who's going to care for that in generations to come?

And so as I'm engaged with this project and listening to people from this wide variety of partners that have those kinds of knowledge and information, it's been really eye-opening and very helpful to me, to get a broader perspective on what we would need to do. And so I think our project is evolving, some of our goals-- we're learning more from each other. And that's helping revise and shape some of those goals.

BONNIE WILLISON: To answer that question of what happened to the rice, we've got to look at the history of the area.

JESSIE Where Wolf River and Fox River come in, what's now the open waters of Lake Poygan, Lake Winneconne, and
CONAWAY: Lake Butte de Morts, that used to be traditionally as a huge river marsh, before the dam at Neenah Menasha was built.

But that change decreases habitat for rice because rice grows the best in shallow water, and also with that seasonal water change. It's very ecologically connected to that seasonal water change.

BONNIE Even though these historic marshes are now more like lakes, the rice is persistent. That's why you can still find it
WILLISON: in certain areas.

JESSIE We've been shown by Wisconsin DNR, by the botanists, some of the rice occurrences in Lake Poygan. Lake
CONAWAY: Poygan comes from Menominee language, Pawahekaneh.

BONNIE That translates to wild rice threshing lake.
WILLISON:

JESSIE And so we're focusing in the Poygan area to learn why the rice has persisted there, and how it's protected and
CONAWAY: able to grow. So it's showing its resilience in a system that used to be a marsh and is now open water.

Our goal for this summer is to-- we've chosen five study sites within Poygan and connecting tributaries, where both of the rices are growing, to really learn about conditions there. And so that's what the graduate students are embarking on for their fieldwork this summer.

BONNIE Students are a big part of this project as well. Graduate students and a Brothertown assistant will be doing
WILLISON: fieldwork. And they're creating a tribal internship program, too.

JESSIE Our students, our cherished students, can really be the engines of our work. And they can really be very
CONAWAY: inspirational in the co-learning process. And so we research and also participate in tribal university partnerships. And what we know is successful.

And what I've learned through experience, but also what I research with other projects and other places, is that these alliances that affirm and leverage traditional ecological knowledge and a legacy over centuries and millennia of land and water stewardship, honoring and leveraging that, and then bringing Western science and contemporary science tools to the table-- these are powerful partnerships.

And we mentioned our project network that we're really proud of and thankful for. One of the processes that we use with our network that is a good process is feedback loops. And so we have seasonal meetings with our networks. And then we are engaged in listening and responding to feedback that comes out of those networks.

We build relationships that way, across boundaries that have been severely damaged through colonization, and genocide, and all the histories across all these nations. And so this coming together around water conservation and cultural priorities, such as wild rice, is powerful for relationship building.

And so I want to mention that in terms of processes that help us get off to a strong start, but also that help us endure watershed-wide projects that connect so many different facets across society and ecology. Our process of getting started a year ago before we applied for Sea Grant-- we really had engaged in this relationship building and this coalition building.

We're going to need a lot. We're going to need a lot of people to do this successfully and in a culturally-responsive way. So we're feeling good about our team.

JESSICA RYAN: One of the things that's really important to me in this process, and being collaborative about what we're doing, is to not blame or point out in a bad way what any one individual, or any one group, or any particular set of people is doing, with regard to impact on the water.

And so trying to find a way to work forward in a good way what each of us can do is super important to me in this process. And I think that that lends itself to a more positive, constructive, collaborative relationship among all of the individuals, and the tribes, and the entities that have responsibilities for this mammoth waterway system that we all really care about.

JESSIE CONAWAY: We're seeing that the local watershed citizens are very, very attached to open water. They love their boating. And we do, too-- and also fishing.

And so we're really wanting to convene around local watershed citizen priorities as well, and see how we can come together to work together for revitalizing wild rice, which benefits fisheries, and also to really educate non-tribal and tribal publics about the benefits of wetlands, of which wild rice is a part. There's a legacy in the industrial era of a hatred of wetlands, and a lot of destruction there.

And so there's a lot of revitalization that has to go on in terms of our attitudes towards wetlands, including wild rice, and all the ecosystem services, like fishing, having clean water that can support recreation and that our kids and grandkids can swim in and boat in and fish in. So we're really looking to revitalize our own attitudes and values about wetlands, and how we can heal what's been done.

SKIP BLANC: I'm looking forward to working with everybody. Life is a continuously learning process. Not all of our teachings come in a classroom, or, say, well, it's time to learn, type of deal. And I'm hoping that we can all work together.

And I believe that we can make this happen because water is life. And we all need to do our part-- and to making our waters healthy again. If it's putting our prayers down and doing what we have to do to make people aware of things. And yeah, this is all about water.

But it's something that we need to do for all things, whether it's the animals, or the people, the birds, all them nagees, them little ones, all the little insects, and stuff like that. It's all important and needs to be taken care of.

JESSICA RYAN: So within the Sea Grant application, we have a number of goals that have been identified. And I'm just going to touch generally on kind of some of the big picture goals. One of them we've talked about is bringing the tribal knowledge, tribal ecological knowledge. That's kind of the buzz phrase that people talk about it.

But those traditional ways, bringing that knowledge forward, and having that collected because we know there is a terrific amount of knowledge that our ancestors have with regard to caring for the water, and the land, and the animals that are related to those bodies.

And so having a way to gather that information and use that as the base for where this project starts is really important to us, and bringing in, also, the knowledge that we're able to learn from Western research and more modern research-- it's important to weave those ways of learning together, in our opinion, in our estimation.

That's our goal, so that we can have the best data set, the best-- every way that you want to quantify the information, that we can have a really well-rounded sense for what the information is so that we can make a really well-informed determination for next steps.

So one of the things that we've talked about with this inter-connectivity project-- and we shared a little bit earlier about the great many tribes that have called these waterways and this water system home, as well as the lands that's around there. Yes, these are international waters because this is how all the trading happened.

And you heard Skip speak eloquently about the water-- it is life that sustains us. That's the lifeblood of each and every one of us. And it's the lifeblood of Earth. Those are our teachings. And those teachings are different and unique for each of the tribal communities. But there is an acknowledgment among each of the tribal communities of the role, the key role, essential role that water has in sustaining us, and in our creation stories, and all of that.

You can see that the water is interwoven in a very big way in each and every one of those stories, from each of those unique tribal communities. So being able to acknowledge and draw on that history that each of the tribes has, that traditional knowledge, and the relation to the water and the Earth, and helping us connect together in that way, acknowledging that each tribe is unique.

Each tribe is a sovereign entity. But yet we have this connection that weaves our stories together in a good way, and weaves together our history with the non-Indian community as well.

And so this connectivity project is all about acknowledging that and bringing those pieces of knowledge to the front, and then weaving together the teachings that we have from so many different ways so that we can create the information and knowledge that we need to make decisions going forward.

Dr. Conaway mentioned there's two different kinds of rice that have been grown in these waterways, the Northern and the Southern rice. And we need to learn about those-- relearn about those. And we need to figure out, is this something that we want to pursue? And what are the positives if we do?

And what are the consequences if we do? And what are the responsibilities for the next generations as we look at this? How would it be sustained? And that was another thing that we had an opportunity to hear from one of our elders from Ho-Chunk, when we were at the Snow Snake event.

BONNIE WILLISON: When I talked to Jess, she had just gone to a Snow Snake event on Lake Poygan. Snow snake is a traditional winter game played by many tribal nations in the upper Great Lakes region. And this year's event was actually the first Snow Snake event at Lake Winnebago in 200 years. And it also gave the Intertribal Project team a chance to gather in person for the first time.

JESSICA RYAN: We used the fun of the snow snake and the history of that to bring people together. But we had a great many stories and histories that were shared on that water as well. And Bill Quackenbush was really articulate with, yeah, we need to learn all that we can.

And then we need to make a good decision after we've pulled together additional information that our ancestors knew and now we're learning. And so I just think this connectivity project puts a terrific platform out there for us to weave all of that together.

Of course I want to see the rice restored. That's a goal for me. I don't know if that's practical. I don't know if it can be done long term. And we talked earlier about using our minds and our hearts for this process and for the decision making. And that goes back to the ceremonial ways that Jessie was talking about earlier, is making sure that we're using both of those in balance when we're making decisions.

And that's some of those teachings that I received. Like, when we smudge and we start in a good way, we're always trying to make sure we have that balance between our head and our heart. And that's no different in this project that we're undertaking, is trying to find a way where we're able to use both of those and balance them out in a good way.

So that's exciting for me. And being able to learn from so many others that have so much knowledge, that brings a lot of feelings of good and feelings of hope.

SKIP BLANC: It's going to take all of us, native, non-native, people from all spectrums of life, to do this.

**BONNIE
WILLISON:** To stay up to date on this effort, the Wisconsin Intertribal Lake Winnebago Connectivity Project, subscribe to Wisconsin Sea Grant's newsletter at Seagrant.wisc.edu. To stay up-to-date on the work of the Brothertown Indian Nation, visit brothertownindians.org

Thank you, and oneeewe, to our guests, Vice Chair Jessica Ryan, Tribal Councilman Skip Blanc, Dr. Jessie Conaway, and Ashley Gries.

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You can find the Wisconsin Water Resources Institute at wri.wisc.edu. Thanks for tuning in. We'll see you next time.

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