

## Wisconsin's Gikinoo'wizhiwe Onji Waaban Discovery Center

The Wisconsin Coastal Program funded an education program that raises awareness about the impacts of coastal hazards on tribal communities and promotes actions to build resilience.



Members of the Ojibwe tribe harvest wild rice

For hundreds of years, the Lake Superior Ojibwe thrived in the place we call Wisconsin. Over time, the Ojibwe gained special knowledge about the land and water, and the many plants and animals living alongside them. They learned the best way to gather wild rice and collect fish from the lake, passing techniques from generation to generation. These traditional lifeways illustrate a long relationship between the Ojibwe and Lake Superior's natural systems, offering strong insight into how the coastal region is changing. Since 2007, the unprecedented loss of wild rice due to flooding, high temperatures, drought, and disease has disrupted traditional tribal harvests. The impact on tribal resources has been so severe that the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission cites these extreme conditions,

and the increased risk of them in the future, as a threat to Ojibwe treaty rights.

During efforts to raise awareness, the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program (WCMP) and University of Wisconsin-Extension realized that science-only models of environmental education were not resonating with audiences in coastal communities. A new approach was needed to engage people on this issue. Funding from the WCMP enabled federal, state, and tribal partners to develop the Gikinoo'wizhiwe Onji Waaban (Guiding for Tomorrow) "Changing Climate, Changing Culture Initiative," nicknamed G-WOW. G-WOW is a new model of environmental education that links tribal culture with science to prompt actions that mitigate the impacts of extreme conditions. The G-WOW model helps people understand how key plant and animal species—those that support cultural and economic practices important to coastal communities—will be affected by a changing climate. It integrates scientific research with real world evidence of how changing coastal conditions are affecting traditional Ojibwe lifeways and people of all cultures.

In 2010, the WCMP funded the G-WOW Changing Climate, Changing Culture Discovery Center at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center in Ashland, Wisconsin. This 200 sq. ft. interpretive exhibit explores the impact of extreme conditions on Ojibwe wild rice harvesting, allowing visitors to interact with maps and data along with Ojibwe language displays and a birch bark canoe. Approximately 33,000 visitors, community members, and students view the G-WOW Discovery Center annually. It is a focal point for environmental education programs at local schools.

With continued WCMP funding and support, G-WOW developed a robust web-based curriculum featuring four seasonal units that study the Ojibwe lifeways of maple sugaring, birch bark harvesting, fishing, wild ricing, and respecting culture. Students test hypotheses about changing coastal conditions and develop a service learning project based on their results. G-WOW has gained recognition over the past several years, leading to the installation of more exhibits in the Great Lakes region, a professional development institute, and leveraging additional grants to deliver the curriculum to more communities. The G-WOW model is successful because it makes science accessible. By focusing on plant and animal species that are essential to a cultural practice,

information about changing coastal conditions becomes more relatable. This type of program is transferable to other cultures and locations as well.