

Sustainable Foraging Task Force Testimony

Boozhoo. My name is Leanna Goose, and I am from Leech Lake. Miigwech to the task force for the opportunity to share.

“Sustainable foraging” is a good way to begin framing this work, but I would encourage your team to take it a step further, and begin considering what **regenerative foraging looks like** and how policy that comes from this task force can make that happen. Sustainable means maintaining things at a healthy enough rate that they stay the same or don’t degrade.

Regenerative means doing things in a way that not only protects what is there but leaves things better than we found them. My ancestors looked seven generations ahead, and I think that incorporating that type of thinking into policy-making spaces like these needs to happen.

I want to share some teachings from our Anishinaabe culture, in the hope that they are helpful. First, we are taught that we don’t take the first of anything we see in case that is the only one left, and never take all of what a plant has to offer, and we always leave some behind for the next person or being who may need it. We also offer our thanks to these relatives for their gifts. Offering thanks acknowledges that the plants, animals, and waters bring us life and creates a relationship of respect. These teachings allow for plants to stay healthy and ensure the supply can recover over time.

When looking for chaga with classmates in our woodland plants class, our teacher taught us that we should never take the entire growth. Leaving a good portion behind allows that medicine to regrow. This is not only sustainable, but regenerative—because it can recover and regrow if harvested correctly and be there for the next person who may need it.

When harvesting manoomin, my father taught us to put a handful of seeds back into the water. That act ensures some of the plant returns to the lake, providing for the next year and future generations. It honors the understanding that we are responsible for those who come after us.

When picking sage, we gather above the roots and never pull out the whole plant. We sprinkle any seeds that are on the plant back onto the ground, ensuring they can grow into next year's harvest. An elder told me that spreading those seeds is a good practice in traditional harvesting.

When picking blueberries, if we do not find enough, we simply do not pick at all in that area. There have been a few years in a row where we do not find enough. We know the other animals are hungry, and we see their habitats and food sources shrinking. Sometimes our trips in the woods are anishaa or the ojibwe word for just for fun and that's ok. We try to think not only of ourselves but of all other beings who may need those berries to survive. Protecting our wild spaces not only for humans but nindanawemaginadog or all of our relatives is important in this moment and I hope this task force considers that too.

These same values guide us when harvesting maple syrup. Things start by showing gratitude. I can remember following in my dad's footsteps through the deep snow and offering aasemaa to every tree before we tapped. The tree was about to give us a gift, and for that we must be thankful. We take our taps out each year so the trees have time to heal and continue offering their gifts. I saw a piece of legislation introduced that would have allowed people to leave taps and tubes in year-round, but this would leave the trees unable to heal and vulnerable to disease and is not good practice if we want them to remain healthy. The trees are already struggling with the changing of the climate and it is predicted that the sugar maple may be gone in 100 years from MN if nothing changes.

<https://b105country.com/minnesota-dnr-we-could-lose-maple-trees-in-100-years-due-to-climate-change/>:

In our community, many people chose not to tap at all one season because the winter was off and the trees were clearly stressed. It was difficult—because it felt like our cultural traditions were at risk due to climate change—but it also felt good to know we were standing together to protect the health of the maple trees, knowing they have cared for our people for generations.

I tell my kids in the sugar bush that these trees gave syrup to my dad, they gave syrup to me, and they can continue to give syrup to them too—if we *take care of them*. I would like to see part of this task force’s work ensuring that these natural spaces remain healthy so our children and grandchildren can continue to enjoy their connections with the land and the gifts it offers. Protecting the places where we harvest wild rice, maple syrup, blueberries, and medicines is of the utmost importance. These are gifts that most Minnesotans enjoy as well. Ensuring that foraging is done respectfully and in a good way can be guided by the wisdom of my ancestors and the First Nations people of this land and I encourage you to bring in Indigenous wisdom to lead the way. Incorporating traditional Indigenous knowledge, we can ensure that these traditions remain for our children to enjoy.

I encourage this task force to use every tool available to protect our wild spaces and to push back against extractive threats that could leave behind a legacy of contamination for our children to face. On Leech Lake, we are already feeling the impacts of extraction on our life sources. PFAS have been found in our waters and in the groundwater at my children’s school, our fish, and our deer. These findings show how deeply interconnected and vulnerable our waters and ecosystems are, and how urgent protection is needed. Our choices are impacting our children at this moment and we must do better for them.

I also want to emphasize the critical difference between foraging and treaty rights. Whatever policies or recommendations come from this task force should **not** apply to the Anishinaabeg within the ceded territories. In **Minnesota, Chippewa tribes retained usufructuary rights to hunt, fish, and gather on ceded territories through treaties like the 1837 and 1854 agreements. These treaty rights, which allow tribes to use the land for their sustenance, were challenged but ultimately upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, notably in the *Minnesota v. Mille Lacs Band of Chippewa Indians* case.** These territories are places where our ancestors **reserved** the rights to hunt, fish, and gather. These are not rights granted by the United States, but rights we inherently hold so that our people can continue to survive and thrive. These rights are guaranteed and must be upheld as the supreme law of the land under Article VI of the U.S. Constitution.

The ceded territories in Minnesota hold immense life, beauty, and cultural meaning. Protecting these areas protects our identity, our traditions, and our connection to the land. Foraging is what the average person does in the woods. What our people do is a way of life—a relationship and responsibility that feeds us physically, culturally, and spiritually. I grew up following in my dad’s footsteps, relying on the woods and waters to take care of us. That was not “foraging”; that was how food was put on our table. Many of our people continue to rely on these relationships today.

The profits of extractive industries must never be placed above the culture, survival, and well-being of our people. At this moment, protecting our ceded territories and honoring treaty rights must remain a priority. When the ceded territories are safeguarded from extraction, our medicines can continue to heal our people. It means that manoomin can still provide for our children through the harsh Minnesota winters. It also means that not only the Anishinaabeg but all Minnesotans can continue to enjoy these lands and waters, which are gifts to all who live here.

Mining proposed within the ceded territories threatens to decimate manoomin, contaminate the wetlands where our medicines grow, and permanently alter our waters—leaving behind a legacy of pollution for our children to deal with. These impacts cannot be undone. Most plants absorb contaminants through their root systems just as they absorb nutrients. When the land and waters are contaminated, our plants become contaminated—and in turn, so do our bodies. For example, we cannot remove PFAS from the cedar trees, the deer, or the fish once they have been exposed, and no one has figured out how to remove them from our bodies either. Recent studies show that because PFAS can transfer from a mother to her baby, nearly all babies are born with these chemicals in their body. Once that contamination enters our medicines and foods there is no going back.

I urge this task force to use its powers to push back against extraction and prevent these environmental disasters before they begin.

Miigwech, Leanna Goose–Rise and Repair Alliance Organizer–Letter is on behalf of myself.

I also encourage you to think not only about sustainable foraging, but about what **regenerative foraging** could look like. Incorporating Traditional Indigenous Knowledge within this task force is critical, and I hope my words help bring that perspective forward.

Miigwech for listening, and miigwech for the work you are doing to protect these places and the beings we depend on.