

Homestead

Traditional sweetgrass harvest may return to Acadia National Park



Courtesy Suzanne Greenlaw | BDN

Sweetgrass gatherers Tania Morey, Zi'gwan Paul, Lia Thurlow and Mishun Morey at work last summer in a research plot set up in Bass Harbor Marsh at Acadia National Park.

By **Abigail Curtis**, BDN Staff • May 3, 2018 6:00 am

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There's something timeless about the scent of sweetgrass. **Even baskets woven long ago by Maine Indian basket makers** still give off a whiff of the hay-fresh, vanilla-sweet smell that almost seems like an aromatic portal to the past.

Sweetgrass, though, isn't something from yesteryear. Also known as holy grass, the grass is native to North America and grows in wet meadows, bogs, marshes and along lakeshores. It is used for baskets, ceremonies and more, and is an important part of the cultural heritage of members of the Penobscot nation and the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet and Micmac tribes here, who are collectively known as the Wabanaki people. Wabanaki basket making continues to be a vibrant, important art form, and **Maine Indian basketmakers have won national accolades and attention for their baskets in recent years.** But harvesting sweetgrass for those baskets isn't as simple as it used to be. Gatherers often have to drive long distances to find it and when they do, accessing it is not guaranteed.

“The majority of the older gatherers have stories of going to patches they had long gone to and being denied access,” Suzanne Greenlaw, a member of the Houlton Band of Maliseets and a doctoral candidate in the University of Maine School of Forest Resources, said recently. “And even being threatened with guns or dogs.”

Those stories can be hard to hear — but they are also part of the reason why Greenlaw is feeling optimistic about the sweetgrass research project she is working on at Acadia National Park. If all goes well, tribal basket makers eventually will be allowed to harvest sweetgrass in Bass Harbor Marsh within the park, and accessing a good patch of grass will no longer be in doubt.

For many years, park visitors only have been allowed to gather blueberries and apples (along with their photographs and memories). But recently, an effort was launched at the national level to see whether the parks could provide opportunities for traditional tribal gathering needs. In 2016, the **National Park Service modified the plant-gathering regulation** to allow members of federally recognized Indian tribes to gather and remove plant

parts for traditional purposes. In order to be eligible, tribes need to have a traditional association to the park lands and the agreements between tribes and the National Park Service will specify which plants may be gathered and in what quantities. The change is a positive one, according to Rebecca Cole-Will, Acadia's chief of resource management.

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“We've always known how important the places we now call national parks are to tribal members. In many cases, national parks were carved out of tribal lands that were always used and important,” she said.

For three seasons now, park officials and tribal members have been working to figure out if a sustainable sweetgrass harvest could happen at the park.

“Parks are places set aside for all time, and for all people. This project gives us the opportunity to do that,” Cole-Will said.

The research project is headed up by Greenlaw and Michelle Baumflek, a research biologist with the United States Forest Service. They've interviewed many Indian sweetgrass gatherers to find out where they go, what obstacles they have faced and how important sweetgrass is to them. Greenlaw, whose husband, Gabriel Frey, is an acclaimed Passamaquoddy basketmaker, said that the Wabanaki people have a long history of basketmaking.

“Basketmaking, which included sweetgrass baskets, was a form of resistance to assimilation policies,” she said. “And has always been a consistent source of spiritual, cultural and economic significance.”

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One basketmaker in her 60s remembered gathering sweetgrass with her grandmother when she was a child, and translating for her grandmother, who did not speak English. Those memories are powerful, Greenlaw said.

“There’d be sweetgrass hanging up in their house. The smell of it brings them back to their childhood. It’s a cultural identifier,” she said.

But even though sweetgrass remains just as important to Indians as ever, the land where it grows has changed. Coastal development has put pressure on traditional sweetgrass areas and even marshy parts of Aroostook County, where it also grows, have more restricted access now than before.

“A lot of people talk about how when they go to sweetgrass patches they’ll never know if they can go back,” Greenlaw said. “They have to be really quiet and keep a low profile. Not be seen.”

But if a sweetgrass harvest at Bass Harbor Marsh is found to be sustainable and is given the official go-ahead, gatherers won’t have to worry about that. So far, the harvest potential seems promising, the researchers said. Last summer, they asked gatherers to identify locations where they would like to harvest sweetgrass in the marsh, then set up their test plots accordingly.

“We’re trying to really think about different ways to gather knowledge,” Baumflek said. “We’re trying to not misrepresent what people do. As there’s

been a history with or about native people that doesn't incorporate their knowledge, we're trying to be extremely careful."

Last summer, gatherers harvested sweetgrass in the test plots in the marsh. This year, Greenlaw and Baumflek will go back to the plots and see how the grasses are coming back. Wabanaki people believe that harvesting is not detrimental to sweetgrass, and the scientific research done so far seems to bear this out.

"Gatherers are excited about coming back," Baumflek said. "It's warmed our hearts, and raised a hope that we can do shared research projects where everybody is respected and valued."

And if, ultimately, the sweetgrass harvest at Acadia is allowed, it will mean a lot to the gatherers.

"A question we asked is, 'What does harvesting here mean to you?'" Greenlaw said, adding that the answers they heard were powerful. "People said they feel like they are sitting next to their ancestors, harvesting," Greenlaw said. "That time is not linear. That plants remember us, that the landscape remembers us. That they are sharing with their ancestors, and that this is another way to practice your culture."

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