

# FIGHT FOR FOOD

## CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ECUADOR AND MINNESOTA

By Anthony Post Johnson

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“Only when the last tree has been cut down, the last fish has been caught, and the last stream poisoned, will we realize we cannot eat money.”

—Cree Prophecy

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The first time I left the United States was for the Exploring Ecuador study abroad program. I received a scholarship from the Earl and Kathy Hoagland Sacred Manoomin Scholarship Fund to learn more about the preservation of water and sacred Manoomin (wild rice). I had traveled around the US quite a bit with my family but had never had the chance to visit another country until this opportunity. In this experience, I would be leaving my comfort zone, discovering a new culture and learning more about who I am in the process.

I study finance at the University of Minnesota. In many of my classes, the main goal or outcome is to make a profit. In management, we learn about how to effectively manage those below us to increase output and profit. In finance and accounting, we learn how to identify worthwhile investments and how to report those investments to upper management. In operations, we learn about how to make production and transportation more efficient to increase shareholder value. In marketing, we learn how to influence others to buy our product. The morals and values that I have been taught through the university are centered around one

thing: money. In the interest of spreadsheets and bottom lines, the curriculum forgets to look at real people and their needs. I discovered on my trip and in looking at my own culture, that people need access to natural resources. Without clean land and water and the nutritious food grown on it, money is useless.

After my experience in Ecuador, I have come to some powerful conclusions, and I believe that because I had never been outside

of the U.S., I paid far closer attention to the culture and tradition of the people. I watched with my actual eyes, instead of taking pictures on a three-inch phone. I tried to put myself in the shoes of every person I was lucky enough to meet. I did all that I could to develop my mind, heart and character from this opportunity. I am also able to tie together many of the economic, food sustainability and cultural issues seen both in Ecuador and Minnesota.



## FOOD, WATER, ECONOMICS

One of the most prominent parallels between Ecuador and Minnesota became clear to me during our visit to a small farm near Cotacachi. This local Indigenous community competes for water with a nearby corporate rose farm. Every month the government allocates water to each farm. The local farm's water allocation is roughly a 10x15x3 ft. reservoir. The monthly allocation does not change from the wet season to the dry season. It remains the same regardless of rainfall. The rose producer's monthly water allotment is nearly 30 times that of the farmer's. The government chooses to give the rose company the same amount as the farmer's monthly water allotment, every single day. As the local farmer explained to our translator, the reasoning behind this water allocation is due to simple economics. Ecuador is one of the world's largest exporters of roses.

Annually, nearly \$240 million dollars of roses are exported. These roses end up primarily in the United States and Europe. As a result, the Ecuadorian government believes that the interests of corporations that produce the most GDP should be supported. Rose corporations are given priority over water access because they generate more income and provide

more jobs. These corporations inherently have a stronger influence over the government and are able to represent themselves more effectively than a small-time farmer can. This scenario has played out time and time again. As long as the concept of money has been around, those with larger bank accounts have had more power and influence.

After our visit to this farm, I began to draw quite a few parallels between Minnesota's Manoomin production and the issues we had just experienced. Farther back

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*"There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered."*

—Nelson Mandela

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than it is possible to date, the Anishinaabe people (a Minnesota Indigenous people) were living on the east coast in a place that translates to English as Turtle Island. The Prophets of the Seven Fires came to teach, instruct and warn the Anishinaabe people. The Anishinaabe were advised to follow and listen to their instructions or they would be destroyed by an awful spirit. The first prophet told the Anishinaabe to migrate and follow the Migis Shell, as it would lead them to their land: the Anishinaabe aking, or lands of the Anishinaabe. They were told, "You will know that the chosen ground has been reached when you come to a land where food grows on water." Across the different regions of Anishinaabe people, this teaching remains consistent. The Great

Lakes region has been filled with the sacred grass Manoomin and the Anishinaabe have since thrived off this medicine.

It is rare to find western society treating food as such. Western food is made to taste good, regardless of quality or nutrition. During the time I spent in Ecuador, I saw food treated the same way that Anishinaabe treat it. Food in the Indigenous Quichua communities we visited is sacred and special.

The most prominent example occurred the same day we visited the farm. We had travelled to Otavalo to visit an Indigenous Quichua community. This community was led by a man named Guillermo. The instant we arrived, I knew we were going to receive an in-depth view into Indigenous culture in Ecuador. Our meal was prepared in the most unique way possible. A three foot hole was dug into the ground. Nearby, a fire had been roaring with soccer ball-sized boulders. Guillermo and his family began preparing our dinner by using a pitchfork to transport the boulders into the hole in the ground. They carefully formed a base with the boulders and then began pouring in many different vegetables. This form of cooking a meal was very much a carefully orchestrated process. Each family member had a very specific role in this process. It reminded me of the way in which Manoomin is harvested and prepared. Certain family members have roles in this process that they can and cannot do. It was very exciting to experience some of the parallels between the Ecuadorian and the Minnesotan Indigenous populations and their sacred food traditions.





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“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you did not do than by the ones you did. So... sail away from the safe harbor. Explore. Dream. Discover.”

—Mark Twain

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## HISTORY AND EXPERIENCE

In order to effectively tie together Manoomin sustainability and the Exploring Ecuador program, I had to establish an in-depth understanding of the history surrounding Manoomin. I turned to relatives and elders to gain this knowledge, and I discovered a very interesting treaty. In 1873, a treaty was made between the United States of America, and the Chippewa Nation of Indians. Article 5 of this treaty states: “The privilege of hunting, fishing, and gathering the wild rice, upon the lands, the rivers and the lakes included in the territory ceded, is guarantied to the Indians, during the pleasure of the President of the United States.” However, since the passing of the 1873 treaty, the federal government has had much say in Manoomin production. I believe that the issue facing both Minnesota and Ecuador stems from

the influence their respective governments have had. One sovereign nation has had control over another sovereign nation’s food supply. This was one of the many ways that the United States government started to assert their control over Indigenous peoples, much like the Ecuadorian government controls the Indigenous farmer’s water supply.

In the United States, matters have only been made worse by climate change and the impact that it has had on Manoomin output. Many of the once viable lakes and ponds where Manoomin is grown are now becoming unable to sustain the same amount. In Cotacachi, Ecuador the local farmers face very similar issues with their water allotment. As climate changes become worse, they will need to water their crops more often—but since they will not receive more water, it is likely that they

will produce fewer crops.

In Minnesota, Indigenous people have had to think of other ways to gather more Manoomin. One of the solutions is to gather Manoomin off reservation. This has sparked a lot of controversy. Per the 1873 treaty, this is completely legal. However, Indigenous people have been arrested for doing this. The crime they committed is called “poaching rice.” In the 1999 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Minnesota v. Mille Lacs Band of Chippewa Indians*, the Supreme Court upheld the decision of the 1873 treaty. The Supreme Court acknowledged the validity of the 1873 treaty and allowed Indigenous people to continue their tradition. Treaties still matter and Indigenous people have the legal and spiritual right to harvest Manoomin. In Ecuador, Indigenous people are fighting similar fights. However, with an unorganized and somewhat chaotic government, corporations speak a lot louder than small farmers. I believe that getting to the real issue and real problem behind both Manoomin sustainability and water allocation is crucial if there is to be a solution: In Minnesota, this means focusing on maintaining sustainable ricing practices and refraining from using harmful techniques; and in Ecuador, utilizing watershed management techniques to retain water in the soil.

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“A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike. And all plans, safeguards, policing, and coercion are fruitless. We find that after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us.”

—John Steinbeck

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### LIFE, LESSONS, CHANGES

Upon my arrival back to the United States, I worried that I would lose many of the ideas and takeaways that I thought of while in Ecuador. However, after being back in the States, I found it to be the complete opposite. I have come to realize more about myself and the program as a whole. On our last night in Ecuador, I had a very personal conversation with our guide, Ismael. He asked me to reflect upon the trip and share some of the most impactful memories or experiences. After I had given him a few examples, he asked me if that was all I got out of it. I felt somewhat bad that I didn't have better examples. I began to wonder if I truly immersed myself and put myself out there to try and absorb as much culture as possible. Seeing that I was distraught, Ismael began to explain something I will never forget. He told me that I shouldn't have a good answer for his question. He said that people never know the way that their life is impacted by programs like this until months or even years after the experience. Since then, I have tried my best to

set aside around ten minutes each day to reflect upon my experience. I was lucky enough to have financial and moral support to attend this program. I owe it to myself and the Earl and Kathy Hoagland Sacred Manoomin Scholarship Fund to use this experience to better the world.

This program opened my eyes to a new world. I experienced firsthand how real and serious water, land and cultural sustainability is. I consider myself to be very lucky to have been able to learn about why these problems are far more important than a firm's profit margins. More importantly, I have gained a new lens to view the world. I now look at these problems as my prob-

lems. I intend to use my education in finance and my own personal background to seek ways to pass legislation and regulations to ensure that there is a world for the next seven generations after me.

—Anthony Post Johnson is a student at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, MN and a recipient of the Earl and Kathy Hoagland Sacred Manoomin Scholarship Fund, facilitated by CRL to educate the need for protecting water and wild rice.

