



Reclaiming Native Food Systems and Promoting Cultural Practices

Traditional foods are an integral part of American Indian, Native Alaskan and Native Hawaiian cultural practices, values and belief systems. The routines and rituals of planning, assembling and retaining the local practices of our food systems and that knowledge is what historically brought our people together. This, in turn, led to our cultural ceremonies and celebrations.

Looking back, we can trace the decline in the production of Native foods and the destruction of our food systems to colonization, land consolidation and industrialization. Fast forward to more recent history and Native people experienced government-introduced low-quality commodity foods like flour, lard and sugar, which today is replaced with corporate subsidized frozen and prepackaged meals that we consume daily. With each progressive step to bring mass-produced food to Native people, we accept the displacement of our relationship between traditional food systems and our cultural practices.

While it may seem daunting to reclaim our traditional food systems, there is a movement underway in Indian Country to promote and preserve our cultures by retracing our steps to our traditional ways of harvesting, gathering and planting of food.

Just a few examples of Native communities reclaiming their traditional food systems come from a Centers for Disease Control program to use traditional foods and sustainable environmental practices to promote healthy lifestyles and prevent type 2 diabetes:¹

◆ *Old Ways for Today's Health* (Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians)

Using community elders for guidance, this project focuses on seasonal traditional foods teaching camps for youth and community members such as harvesting and gathering berries, wild rice, hunting and fishing, maple sugar bushing, and gardening in the four major reservation communities. A community health education campaign and community gatherings are used to increase family knowledge about and using traditional healthy foods.

◆ *Food is Good Medicine* (United Indian Health Services)

The project promotes the exchange of intergenerational cultural knowledge and practices related to traditional foods, contributing to healthy lifestyle and reduce type 2 diabetes. Youth are engaged in leadership projects and summer camps that include cooking demonstrations and digital storytelling. The project increases access and availability of produce from the Potawatomi Community Food Gardens that is distributed to communities served by United Indian Health Services. Materials, such as guides and toolkits, are being developed to promote and honor traditional foodways.



¹ Centers for Disease Control. Traditional Foods Project. Retrieved October 2013 from, <http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/projects/ndwp/traditional-foods.htm>.



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These are just a few examples of the many initiatives occurring in Native communities today. There is a renewed commitment to ensuring that we embrace the wisdom of our ancestors. Once again, we will know that we mark the rising sun against the horizon to signal the time to plant and understand that storytelling season of winter is a time when our tribal communities made plans for the upcoming seasons of food harvesting, gathering and planting. There is a renewed effort to pass this knowledge from elders to our youth. As Native people, when we once again give purpose to locally grown foods we also give meaning to our cultural practices that sustained the health our communities for many generations.

Where we're headed

Currently, Native communities have fought to retain over 54 million acres of their land base in the United States, making them collectively the single largest private owner of agricultural land.² Taking a lead role in local food production means regaining control of the most significant assets we have. Direct management of food supplies will eventually give tribes use of their land, deliberate control of health, sustainability of their environment and maintenance or revitalization of cultural integrity.³

For more information, visit:

- ◆ The Cultural Conservancy - Indigenous Health/Native Circle of Food www.nativeland.org/native_circle.html
- ◆ The Centers for Disease Control launched a five-year program to use traditional foods and sustainable environmental practices to promote healthy lifestyles and prevent type 2 diabetes in Native communities. 17 tribal communities are using traditional foods and use sustainable ecological approaches to promote healthier communities. www.cdc.gov/diabetes/projects/ndwp/traditional-foods.htm
- ◆ Planting for Justice www.plantingjustice.org
- ◆ Native Seeds www.nativeseeds.org
- ◆ White Earth Land Recovery Project <http://welrp.org/>
- ◆ Indigenous Food Systems Network www.indigenousfoodsystems.org/
- ◆ US Food Sovereignty Alliance <http://usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org/>

² Intertribal Agriculture Council. (1999). Indian Agriculture yesterday, today and tomorrow. *Hearing on H.R. 4328 Before the 105th Congress: Statement of the Intertribal Agriculture Council* (pp. 13-36).

³ Bell-Sheetter, A. (2004). *Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool*. Fredericksburg: First Nations Development Institute.

