

Native Agriculture & Food Systems Initiative

A Program of First Nations Development Institute



Strengthening Native American Communities and Producers through Ecological Stewardship

A First Nations Project Outcome Report

January 30, 2018





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1. Executive Summary

The Colorado Plateau spans across New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado totaling approximately 130,000 square miles and is home to seven Tribal Nations, five located in Arizona. As these Tribal Nations worked to regain control of community foods systems, economic opportunities, and ecological stewardship, the lack of technical assistance, networking opportunities and access to resources generated the need to unite Native American producers. This need served as the impetus for the creation of the Arizona Association of Tribal Conservation Districts (AATCD) by resolution on August 10, 2010, with the overall goal of addressing the needs and practices of natural resource conservation among the ten Arizona Tribal Conservation Districts.

This report summarizes strategies, outcomes, and impact resulting from the 2-year project conducted by First Nations Development Institute in partnership with The Christensen Fund, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) and the Arizona Association of Conservation District (AACD).

According to a 2015 study conducted by First Nations Development Institute, Native nonprofits provide a platform for identifying and giving voice to diverse issues related to environmental, social, political and community interests, in addition to providing a pathway for collaboration and networking. Formalizing the AATCD has confirmed the study as it has generated a unified voice for Arizona tribes around the issues of conservation and rangeland management and has narrowed the gap between USDA opportunities and Native American producers. Through the provision of onsite visits, technical assistance, training, and financial support, the Arizona Association of Tribal Conservation Districts (AATCD) was granted IRS tax exempt status in September 2017. The goal of the AATCD is to provide assistance and develop a network of Tribal entities working to maintain and restore ecological stewardship in Tribal communities, thereby increasing Native control of Native natural resources assets and local food systems. The AATCD currently consists of five districts on the Navajo Nation and one district each on the Hopi Nation, Hualapai Tribe, San Carlos Apache Nation, White Mountain Apache Tribe, and the Tohono O'odham Nation.

In addition, through the provision of technical assistance and training and in partnership with the USDA-NRCS, First Nations was able to develop and pilot a *community-tiered* approach to conservation planning that infuses traditional ecological knowledge, community engagement and collaboration into USDA-NRCS conservation planning process. The community-tiered approach has proven to be a successful model in the development of conservation plans for Native American producers. In the last two years, this conservation planning process was piloted in three Arizona communities that has resulted in increased opportunities, new markets, and community engagement.

The impact of this 2-year project with Tribal communities, producers, and federal agencies that serve them has been overwhelming.

1. Arizona Tribal Conservation Districts now have a unified voice and advocate through the Arizona Association of Tribal Conservation Districts (AATCD). They can approach federal and state leaders to advocate and insure that tribal leaders are included in the conversation. Lastly, since formalizing the AATCD as nonprofit, the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) has adopted a tribal section to insure Tribal representation on a national scale. The vice president of the AATCD has served as the Tribal representative.
2. The development of a community tiered approach to conservation planning has greatly reduce time spent on outreach and greatly increased effectiveness and success for USDA-NRCS representatives. In six days, one USDA-NRCS representative and his/her assistant could guide 50 tribal members through the conservation planning process and increase the number producers entering into USDA programs, primarily EQIP. As experienced in one community, 50 tribal members participated in the

process, 5 conservation plans completed with more in process, and 3 producers entered into USDA-EQIP.

3. The impact of First Nations' efforts around conservation planning has been acknowledged by the USDA-NRCS national office as a success story. As a result of the publication on their website, First Nations has been receiving increased calls for assistance, support, and copies of the *Conservation Planning Guide for Native American Ranchers*. First Nations has received requests from USDA-NRCS offices nationwide for use in their work not only with Native American producers but with non-Native producers as well.

2. Background

In order to advance local food systems in Indian Country, it is essential for Native communities to regain control of ecological stewardship practices. This is nowhere more evident than on the Colorado Plateau, an arid to semi-arid region comprised of mesas, canyons, and barren badlands that is known for some of the most iconic landmarks in the west. For centuries, Native people have inhabited this region and hold the traditional and ecological knowledge that sustained themselves for centuries.

In 2012, First Nations initiated efforts to strengthen the organizational and programmatic capacity of native nonprofits and communities that were working toward food sovereignty, healthy food systems and a healthy diet for their community members located on the Colorado Plateau. Since that time, First Nations efforts have led to:

1. Identification of and collaboration with key regional stakeholders to implement strategies that have resulted in the development of a *First Nations Conservation Planning Guide for Native American Producers*
2. Expansion of existing and emerging Native nonprofits through the delivery of technical assistance and training, and the infusion of financial resources, and most recently,
3. Transition of a tribal conservation group to a formal nonprofit organization to provide a unified platform for Arizona tribes by which they could convey issues, influence policies, and educate lawmakers on the issues and challenges surrounding land management, centralize tribal efforts, advocate on the behalf of the conservation districts, and to work as a liaison between state, federal and tribal entities to increase opportunities.

In 2016, First Nations initiated the Strengthening Arizona Tribal Conservation Districts project to build on continued capacity building efforts on the Colorado Plateau by increasing the organizational capacity of a Native American conservation association in Arizona and the individual capacity of Native American ranchers and farmers located on the Colorado Plateau.

The goal of the project was intended to: a.) Strengthen the capacity and organizational infrastructure of the Arizona Association of Tribal Conservation Districts (AATCD), an emerging nonprofit dedicated to assisting Native American communities, ranchers, farmers, and Tribal conservation districts located in Arizona and the Navajo Nation (encompassing a majority of the Colorado Plateau) and b.) Provide capacity building training and technical assistance to Native nonprofits and producers working to restore local food systems and ecological stewardship.

The Arizona Association of Tribal Conservation Districts was an informal group of all 10 representatives of the conservation districts in Arizona established by Tribal Council law. Representatives from each tribal conservation district served as members and as a group convene through national and regional conferences to explore and share conservation practices. The goal of the AATCD is to provide assistance and to develop a network of Tribal entities working to maintain and restore ecological stewardship in Tribal communities, thereby increasing Native control of Native natural resources assets. The organization consists of five districts

on the Navajo Nation and one district each on the Hopi Nation, Hualapai Tribe, San Carlos Apache Nation, White Mountain Apache Tribe, and the Tohono O'odham Nation.

Developing and increasing the capacity of the AATCD, increases the sustainability of Native programs located on the Colorado Plateau by creating a unified voice, increasing access to resources, and providing a network that will positively impact their communities in the areas of food systems and health, ecological stewardship and economic opportunities. Thereby, removing barriers to local control of food systems, address policy issues and develop infrastructure and systems that support Native food-oriented development.

3. Training & Technical Assistance

To strengthen the organizational capacity of Native nonprofits and producers, training opportunities were provided in the areas of nonprofit management and conservation planning, respectively. Training was made available to organizational volunteers, board members, Tribal leaders, and other key stakeholders necessary to advance efforts.

In year 1 of the project, First Nations facilitated the opportunity for AATCD representatives to attend the 21st Annual First Nations L.E.A.D. conference held in Tulsa, Oklahoma in September 2016. The 2-day event encompassed three tracks that provided case studies, models, and best practices in the areas of Nonprofit Management, Native Food and Agriculture, and Native Youth and Culture. Participation at the conference provided participants opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and networking with other Native organizations and programs.

Additionally, in 2016 and 2017 First Nations collaborated with the AATCD and the Indian Nations Conservation Alliance (INCA) to coordinate a 3-day meeting which provided training, presentations, and information on best practices, case studies and opportunities in ecological stewardship. Topics included but were not limited to climate change, invasive species, watershed issues, resources and opportunities. To assist in producer participation, First Nations provided 20 travel scholarships in each year for a total of 40 attendees who participated in the trainings. The conference served as an AATCD membership meeting, to conduct outreach, attract new board members, and share with the tribal conservation districts they serve priorities for the coming year.

Other training provided included the Business of Indian Agriculture (BoIA). The Business of Indian Agriculture is designed to assist the launch, expansion or improved management of Native-controlled agribusiness operations. The curriculum is supported by an Instructor's Guide and a Participant Guide. The curriculum's five modules cover Business, Accounting, Financial Management, Agribusiness Economics and Marketing, and Land Use and Management with lesson plans covering such topics as: Native American examples of Agri-business; Basics of Agri-business; Preparing a Business Plan; Risk Management; Basics of Agribusiness Accounting; Journals and Ledgers; Preparing Financial Statements; Analyzing Financial Statements; Preparing for Credit Applications; Introduction to Native Land Use and Management; and Knowing Your Land. The curriculum effectively prepares Native American farmers and ranchers for the successful management and development of agriculturally-related small businesses.

Lastly, three tribal communities received conservation planning training using the community tiered approach piloted during the project. Three Navajo communities/organizations (Tolani Lake Water Users and Livestock Association, and Indian Wells Chapter) and the Tohono O'odham Gu Achi Livestock received 48 hours of onsite training that was followed up with one-on-one technical assistance to complete conservation plans. The onsite trainings included field work, mapping, development of conservation goals, and community engagement.

Overall, a total of 157 tribal community members benefited from training opportunities over the 2-year project period.

In First Nations' 35 years of experience working with Native American communities, individualized technical assistance and capacity building activities prove to be an excellent strategy for providing direct impact support to organizational programs, directors, board members and community in strengthening their skills, competencies, abilities, resources and technical expertise to carry out community-driven initiatives.

As a part of the project, First Nations provided technical assistance to assist the AATCD in obtaining their 501 (c) (3) tax exempt status. Technical assistance included the provision of resources, strategic planning, financial management support, website development, and the development of marketing strategies to expand nonprofit management capacity.

4. Community-Tiered Conservation Planning

When First Nations began capacity building efforts with Navajo communities and producers in 2011, a number of challenges were identified as hindering producer efforts in the expansion of local food systems and participation in USDA opportunities. They included:

1. Limited access to technical assistance for conservation planning as a result the small number of conservation specialists available through the Navajo Nation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and USDA-NRCS, who were already overextended,
2. The need for Navajo language translators who were knowledgeable of landscape, culture, history and ecology, and
3. Increased outreach and training on USDA and BIA conservation planning processes and access to opportunities through USDA.

In 2012 First Nations initiated a partnership with USDA-NRCS to develop a training curriculum that mirrored the USDA-NRCS Technical Service Provider (TSP) certification process, as a means to address the limited access of technical assistance resources. The curriculum was utilized to train six tribal members in conducting conservation planning using the USDA-NRCS 9-step planning process. Their participation in the 3-week field and classroom training sessions, provided participants with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to assist producers in the development of conservation plans before transitioning the work to USDA-NRCS for completion and approval. While this effort provided additional technical assistance resources, it did not sufficiently infuse traditional ecological stewardship practices, historical knowledge and community engagement in the process.



Figure 1- TSP Field Training

For the next two years, First Nations continued efforts with Navajo producers and expanded project focus to include other Tribes located within the Colorado Plateau region as way to obtain collective insight into challenges and identify strategies that would provide producers with the tools to initiate their own

conservation plans. The overall goal of this approach was to transition the process into the hands of individual producers so that they could regain ownership of their ecological stewardship practices in a manner consistent with their traditional and cultural values and conservation goals integrated with the USDA-NRCS conservation planning process. The result of these efforts led to the creation of the *Conservation Planning Guide for Native American Ranchers* finalized in 2016.

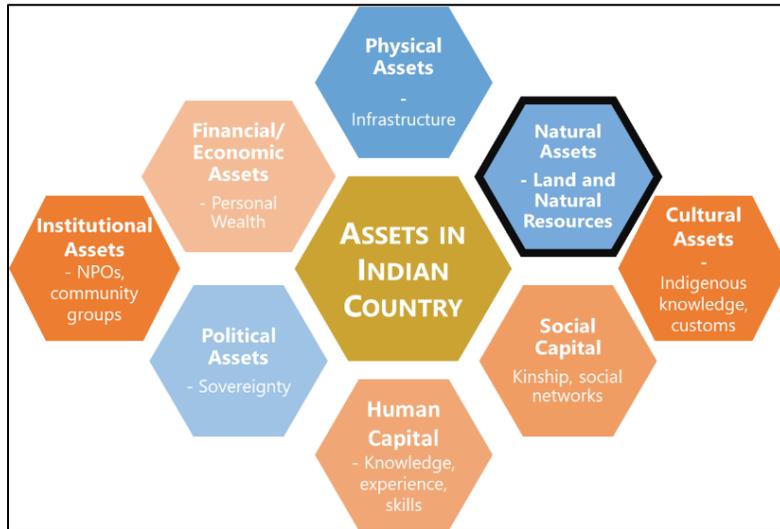


Figure 2-Assets in Indian Country

This approach in transitioning ecological stewardship strategies into the hands of Native American producers and communities is aligned with First Nations’ asset building strategy. It is a strategy that reflects on eight community assets, identified in Native American communities (Figure 2) and works to strengthen those assets, in this case, First Nations’ work with Tribes on the Colorado Plateau has been to strengthen and assist in regaining control of natural resources/land which contributes to the restoration of local food systems and local economies. In addition to strengthening those assets through the provision of resources, technical

assistance and training, First Nations has found in over 35 years of work in Indian Country, a key factor contributing to the long-term success is active participation of tribal community members. When Native community members are active participants in the development of asset-building models and programs, they begin to develop a future orientation in the development of goals for community development, based on their own values and belief systems. Community involvement in long-term strategic planning, for example, allows tribal citizens to make choices and share their vision, and encourages political and civic participation.¹

Building on the knowledge, experience, and outcomes gained from projects conducted on the Colorado Plateau and with the Arizona tribal conservation districts, in 2017 First Nations piloted the *Community Tiered Approach to Conservation Planning*. Utilizing the USDA-NRCS 9-step conservation planning process as the core concept, First Nations infused the components of community engagement, institutional collaboration, cultural and traditional values, and traditional ecological knowledge. Figure 3.

This community approach has been piloted in three communities. Communities have included livestock associations, range management units, groups/families of producers co-managing livestock collectively, and Navajo Chapters primed to advance range management initiatives.

While the current USDA-NRCS technical assistance targets individual producers through a one-to-one approach, Native American communities require a community approach due to complex land management issues involving permittees, families, Bureau of Indian affairs, Tribal rangeland specialists, Tribal Department of Natural Resources and sometimes, Tribal leadership. Taking a community approach, expands outreach and effectiveness and creates a more efficient way of assisting multiple producers.

¹ First Nations Development Institute (2009). *Native American Asset Watch: Rethinking Asset-Building in Indian Country*. Longmont, CO: First Nations Development Institute.



Figure 3 – Community Tiered Approach to Conservation Planning

5. Lessons Learned

This project validates the importance of funding to Indian Country that extends beyond one year. First Nations appreciates The Christensen Fund’s willingness to provide a two-year award. With two years available for implementation First Nations was able to leverage funding to expand the project that resulted in development of the *Conservation Planning Guide for Native American Ranchers*, pilot the *Community Tiered Approach to Conservation Planning* and increase the number of tribal members that were able to benefit from technical assistance and training.

As Native American producers work to complete their individual conservation plans, it is important to engage key stakeholders who maybe be impacted by the conservation goals. The community tiered approach was not only an efficient process, it was informative to community members. While the focus was development of the conservation plans to gain access to USDA opportunities, the process provided:

- Community building
- Increased opportunities
- Acknowledgement of cultural and traditional values
- Skill building and education

- Family connection
- Opportunities for collaboration, and
- Pathways to regaining control of the land.

As Tribes work to restore and regain control of rangeland management, Tribal conservation districts can serve as resource and/or partner in those efforts. With producers working collectively, they are better positioned to obtain funding resources that will benefit in the expansion of agri-businesses, land management and community building.

6. Impact and Effectiveness

The impact of this 2-year project with Tribal communities, producers, and federal agencies that serve them has been overwhelming.

4. Arizona Tribal Conservation Districts now have a unified voice and advocate through the Arizona Association of Tribal Conservation Districts (AATCD). They can approach federal and state leaders to advocate and insure that tribal leaders are included in the conversation. Lastly, since formalizing the AATCD as nonprofit, the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) has adopted a tribal section to insure Tribal representation on a national scale. The vice president of the AATCD has served as the Tribal representative.
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7. Conclusions

As Tribal communities work to restore local food systems and strengthen their communities, it is essential to engage tribal members in the process in order to achieve long lasting impacts. Under the First Nations project, three key factors emerged as motivators for advancing Native American producers:

1. Restoring control of ecological stewardship to Native American producers and communities.
2. Acknowledging and integrating traditional and cultural ecological stewardship practices into existing processes.
3. Development of Native nonprofits that can advocate on behalf of Native communities and provide a voice for issues in Indian Country.

Unlike private landowners, many Native producers co-manage herds with other family and/or community members, therefore taking a community approach to conservation planning is critical to the success of their agricultural and food systems initiatives.