Native Food Security from Lack to Abundance

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Distinguishing between Native Food Sovereignty and Native Food Security in Indian Country: Part 2
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INTRODUCTION

Before there was a need for words like food security, Indigenous peoples stewarded the land through cultural foodways as a means of sustenance in harmony with the natural world. According to global definitions, food security exists “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” In juxtaposition, Native Food Security exists when American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians, at all times, have access to an abundance of culturally relevant foods to meet their dietary needs and preferences for a healthy tribal community.

The difference between food security and Native Food Security is cultural. Food security, in general, focuses on the needs of individuals or individual households. Native Food Security concerns both the physical and spiritual nourishment of the family, household, tribe, clan, community, place, land, and the foods themselves. A healthy tribal community fosters intergenerational responsibility through reciprocal relationships with all relations.
FOOD INSECURITY AND FOOD SECURITY

The ways in which food security is framed shapes the kinds of solutions that are proposed. Discourse on food security is largely framed through a deficit lens as “food insecurity” highlighting the lack of access to food for healthy living. This needs-driven perspective is often applied in order to determine the allocation of federal and state resources through grants and programs. However, needs-driven data, over time, for Indigenous populations, on the issues of food and hunger have many gaps and constraints given the lack of measures that are culturally based and unique to each tribe or nation.

Native communities are tasked with measuring the condition of their community to extract arguments of lack in order to gain access to resources. To counter this approach, Native communities have begun to conduct food sovereignty assessments and Indigenous research methodologies that seek to gather information in culturally appropriate ways. The data is positioned to portray more relevant information that expresses strengths, desires, challenges, and needs in context.

From a tribal perspective, Native people are not food secure until their communities are food secure. Restoring Native Food Security depends on Native Food Sovereignty and returning to ancestral foodways that restore balance and harmony to the entire food system. The aims of Native Food Security can only be reached when the story and experience of food shift from lack to steadfast abundance.

Overcoming chronic food insecurity in Native communities requires understanding Native Food Security from both a historical and contemporary perspective.

HISTORY OF NATIVE FOOD INSECURITY

Historically, military action of the United States and subsequent federal policies set a course for the destruction of Indigenous populations by eliminating vital food sources. The removal and relocation of Native American peoples from ancestral homelands severed communities from the food resources necessary for sustenance and healthy societies. By intentionally disrupting traditional foodways and food practices, federal programs have continued to create food insecurity for Native people.³

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 removed Native Peoples from their bountiful lands onto infertile land causing the loss of culture, language, and traditions. “This forced relocation remains an underlying issue as tribal nations today are trying to cultivate their lands, learn their environments and adjust to the abrupt transitions. Imagine a thousand-year-old society moved suddenly and is now forced to rebuild,” shares A-dae Romero-Briones, Director of Programs for Nourishing Native Foods and Health at First Nations Development Institute.

Stripping Native Peoples of their traditional food systems and food sources is a colonizing strategy used to control and defeat tribes. Fields were burned during the American Revolution to prevent American Indians from replanting their crops. Bison were hunted to near extinction by the U.S. government to promote westward expansion, devastating food sources for Plains Tribes. An estimated 31 million bison were killed between 1868 and 1881 with only hundreds of bison left by the end of the 19th century. Working papers shared by the National Bureau of Economic Research point to the devastating and irreversible impacts of the slaughter of bison on the livelihood of Plains Tribes.⁴ The current condition of food insecurity in Native communities can be traced to the deliberate actions to destroy and disrupt Native life and culture through colonial expansion and repeated acts of systemic injustice.

The Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 gave the U.S. president the right to regulate land rights

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on tribal territories. Also known as the General Allotment Act, the federal government effectively stole tribally-held reservation lands. Native Americans were forced to adopt a proprietary relationship with the land as individuals. With the appropriation of 90 million acres of land, kinship systems and traditional practices, including farming, fishing, and migratory seasonal harvesting, were further diminished.

Lauded as a turning point in the treatment of Native Americans by the federal government, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 ended the practice of allotment and attempted to reframe how American Indians were treated in the aftermath of war and displacement but instilled an unfamiliar way of life that separated children from their community, family, culture, and foodways. Children were placed in boarding schools where they received a diet designed for soldiers in place of their cultural and regional diets. The substitution of culturally appropriate foods continued for decades in the commodity food program where Native families received provisions of dairy, processed wheat, sugars, and meats that were unfamiliar to their preferred diets.

Not only did reorganization not restore what was lost for Indigenous peoples, but the practice was also harmful to Native children, families, and communities. What policymakers label progress has left a devastating legacy of cultural suppression, widespread intergenerational trauma, disease, poverty, and chronic food insecurity. The Relocation Act of 1956, pushed Native Americans off reservation lands into urban areas to acquire vocational skills, continuing efforts of forced assimilation and the resulting loss of relationship with land, culture, and traditional foodways.

Following the civil rights era, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 was passed allowing for federal agencies to make grants directly to federally recognized Tribes. The federally funded Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) was established under the Food Stamp Act of 1977. As funding and policy changes shifted to support self-determination, Native American Tribes began coordinating stronger efforts at the community, regional, tribal, and government-to-government levels to reclaim their foods and traditional ways. The Native Farm Bill Coalition was established in 2017 to represent and advance tribal interests in federal food, agriculture and nutrition policy in the quinquennial Farm Bill.9

Hundreds of years later, amidst progress, Native Americans continue to experience disruption to their foods and food systems. An ongoing crisis exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the inadequate government response to carry out treaty obligations that promised to meet the food security needs of Native communities.

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Native Food Security means that Native Americans have an abundance of traditional foods available to meet their dietary needs and food preferences at all times.

The food security rate is a relatively new phenomenon considering that until the early 1900s Indigenous people produced nearly all of their own food locally. The availability and access to traditional foods was supported through ancestral foodways, trade routes, and a reciprocal relationship to the land, food, and environment. The continuation of broken treaties with the federal government pushed tribes onto reservations further and further west, constricting the ability of tribal communities to hunt, fish, farm, and gather traditional place-based foods.

When we consider the availability of traditional foods, we must consider that there are many tribes with differing cultural, nutritional, ceremonial, and community needs that align with the cultural foodways and food practices of their region. Today, there are 574 Federally recognized Tribes and more than 200 unrecognized tribes. Native Food Security means that there is availability of a variety of traditional foods to meet the needs of many culturally diverse members of different sovereign tribal nations and all Native communities.

The availability of traditional foods considers the place and the food themselves. Is there land and fresh water to support Salmon running? The Yurok are a coastal people located in what is now Northern California, along the Klamath River. The natural environment of the Pacific Ocean, Klamath River, redwoods, marshes, and prairies make up their ancestral territory. Access to traditional Yurok foods like salmon, sturgeon, steelhead, eels, elk, deer, ducks, sea lions, whales, shellfish, acorn, berries, and seaweed is dependent on the health of the natural ecosystem. Samuel Gensaw, a Native youth leader and member of the Yurok, shares, “As Indigenous people, we’re part of this environment and salmon are a huge part of our life; we’re fishermen and once the salmon are gone, it’s the end of the world for us and there’s no going back.”

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7 See footnote 3.
8 See footnote 7.
10 See footnote 1.
The Sioux Nation in South and North Dakota relied on bison for their way of life. Bison provided means for the location, ceremony, subsistence, economy, shelter, and clothing. As the Lakota, Dakota, or Nakota Tribes that make up the Sioux Nation share how important it is to have bison as a preferred food, they also stress the need for their full traditional diet of other large game and wild poultry.

When we consider the availability of traditional foods, we must consider the availability of traditional seeds. Native Food Security includes the right to seed, where seeds can be freely saved, stored, traded, and passed down. While the availability of seeds has been diminished over generations, acts of seed sovereignty like the repatriation of seeds protects the future of the availability of traditional foods.

Today, less than 20% of the food Indigenous people consume is grown locally. And while the number of Native American farmers and agricultural producers is on the rise, there aren’t enough traditional foods available to meet the need. The availability and quality of traditional foods is often limited by restrictive laws and habitat degradation. Further, Native foods are threatened by legislation that supports extractive industrial agriculture, negatively impacting the natural environment necessary for the cultivation of traditional foods.

ACCESS TO TRADITIONAL FOODS

*Native Food Security means that Native Americans have adequate income, resources, and knowledge to access traditional foods at all times.*

ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE

While access to Native foods themselves is a concern, Tribal Peoples also need access to the food practices, protocols, knowledge, and places that are the origins of traditional foods and foodways. When we speak of access to ways of being and knowing, some of the ways belong to tribes and elders in Native communities; therefore they are the only people who can give and share access to members of their communities. Wisdom keepers and knowledge holders carry a responsibility to make sure the communities have access to traditional foods and foodways. Seedkeepers carry the responsibility to ensure traditional seeds are protected. Tribal community members may receive access within their family, clan, tribal economic systems, tribal educational systems, tribal cultural ceremonies, and systems, or tribal relationships. Remember that Native cultures are relearning and remaking traditional foodways in a

contemporary setting, changing in relationship with the land and foods to reclaim a once intact food system.

When assessing the availability of foods for tribal communities, equity is a consideration not only for growing, processing, and preparing to make foods available, but also for the systems, policies, and distribution that determine what foods, of what quality, and in what quantities make it to grocery store shelves, pantries, schools, and communities that become access points for Native peoples.

**ACCESS TO “FOOD”**

The Federal Government has attempted to solve food insecurity in Native communities to meet treaty obligations by creating paternalistic access points for food through federal nutrition programs. The two largest food assistance programs serving Native Americans are the USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). SNAP eligible participants purchase food from authorized SNAP retailers and grocery stores. The location of the stores often poses a challenge for many rural Indigenous nations. Where SNAP is not feasible, the USDA funds FDPIR. The USDA purchases and ships selected foods to Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) that use warehouses, stores, and other local sites to distribute foods. Historically, distributed foods have been typically canned or packaged, highly processed, and high in fat, sugar, and salt. “The 2008 Farm Bill, included a provision authorizing the establishment of a fund to purchase traditional and locally grown foods for FDPIR, however, it wasn’t until 2015 that Congress appropriated funds for the program. For the first time, FDPIR began to offer clients a few traditional foods, including bison, blue cornmeal, salmon, and wild rice, on a more consistent basis.” (Mucioki et al. 2017, p.7)¹⁴

While safety nets might be well intentioned, they aren’t sufficient in prioritizing both the availability and access to traditional foods that serve diverse tribes with varying needs for differing traditional foods. In a policy brief on Integrating Traditional and Local Foods into the Tribal Commodities Program, it was noted by a respondent that “forcing or even encouraging Native American producers into an industrial food supplier model” was not a viable solution and might create more conflict between tribes.\(^\text{15}\) (Mucioki et al. 2017, p.24) Industrial agricultural models dismiss the known benefits garnered from food that is grown locally and regionally in culturally competent ways. It was also noted that the majority of traditional foods distributed were not grown by tribally owned or operated entities, and the extent to which the foods are produced according to Native values is in question. Native Food Security requires that Native communities have control over food in their region and have all the means necessary to provide access to traditional foods for themselves.

Even when food is distributed, Native people experience chronic food insecurity due to the lack of inclusion of culturally appropriate foods. A study from the University of California, Berkeley, determined that 92% of Native American households in the region suffer from food insecurity amongst tribal communities in Northern California and Oregon. This study also revealed that nearly 70% of households surveyed never or rarely get access to the Native foods they want and that households that have better access to Native foods experience higher levels of food security.\(^\text{16}\)

**ACCESS TO ECONOMIC RESOURCES**

Native Americans, whether living in urban settings or on reservations, have inherited a wealth gap caused by displacement and theft of land and resources that has yet to be rectified. By necessity, contemporary Native people hold concurrent views, where wealth is identified as knowledge, family, and communal assets as well as money and resources. In 2018, Native Americans held the highest poverty rate of 25.4% in the United States—more than any other ethnicity. The unemployment rate of 6.1% and the employment-to-population ratio of 57.1% put American Indians among the most economically marginalized groups.\(^\text{17}\) In a racial wealth snapshot, Native American wealth is estimated at $5,700 compared to a median of $65,000 for the American population as a whole.\(^\text{18}\) In a 2022 poll, 69% of Native Americans said price increases caused them serious financial problems.\(^\text{19}\) The increased costs of housing, medical care, childcare, gas, food, and other goods impact food security.

\(^{15}\) See footnote 14.
\(^{16}\) See footnote 13.
\(^{18}\) See footnote 17.
At the same time, Native Americans receive a disproportionately small amount of total philanthropic funds. Native Americans make up 2.9% of the U.S. population but only receive 0.4% of dollars from the philanthropic sector. Native nations face federal agency requirements that constrain efforts at land stewardship; water, wildlife, and forest resources management; processing, marketing, and sale of local Indigenous foods; and loan programs for small farm and ranch operations.

Improved infrastructure is necessary for Native communities to access traditional foods and foster food security. With the expansion of globalization, daily food increasingly comes from distant sources, and delivery is concentrated in urban areas. American Indians in rural areas are often limited to purchasing food from fast food restaurants and small grocery or convenience stores. Restaurants and stores in rural and remote areas have limited supplies of high-quality produce and low-fat foods, and rarely if ever have a supply of traditional foods available. According to the National Congress of American Indians, transportation infrastructure development is critical to economic development, job creation, and improving living conditions for individuals and families in American Indian/Alaska Native communities, and the millions of Americans who travel through reservations every day. Increasing the amount of philanthropic funds, supporting infrastructure, and Land Back initiatives, and addressing income and wealth inequality all support Native Food Security.

### Access to Land and Water

The Indigenous worldview doesn’t see land and water as resources to be exploited. For Native people, the Earth is Mother and cares for all living beings on the planet. Land is wealth that is communally-owned and the responsibility of the people is stewardship. Access to land ensures that Native communities can continue to practice their spiritual and cultural foodways. They can continue to hunt, fish, grow, and gather their food on their traditional lands. The relationship Native communities inherited with the land and water is to be taught and passed along to the next generation as a responsibility in relationship with reciprocity that feeds food security.

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FOOD IS MORE THAN CONSUMPTION

Native Food Security means that traditional foods are available and accessible for consumption to support the cultural and nutritional needs of Native people in Native communities and anywhere that Indigenous peoples find themselves.

Economic disparities create a variance in Native community health. While poverty is undoubtedly a cause of hunger, lack of adequate and proper nutrition itself is an underlying cause of poverty. Where Native Food Security requires that Native people have access to traditional foods to become food secure, an abundance of traditional foods becomes a potential source of poverty alleviation and improved well-being. When we consider that Native peoples have not had adequate amounts or access to traditional foods for over a century, the threat of undernourishment becomes glaringly apparent. A reality for a lot of tribal communities is that it is challenging to access the food needed to heal from diseases like diabetes and heart disease.

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When compared to the general population, Indigenous people have the lowest health,\textsuperscript{24} economic,\textsuperscript{25} and food security rates even without consistent comprehensive data.\textsuperscript{26} Diabetes prevalence in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) adults is the highest of any US racial or ethnic group.\textsuperscript{27} Native Americans living on reservations face higher rates of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and obesity.\textsuperscript{28} Persistent colonial assimilation policies, loss of language and culture, forced dietary changes, health inequity,\textsuperscript{29} and reliance on non-Indigenous foods all contribute to the prevalence of diabetes. Studies in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States reveal that returning to an Indigenous diet paired with an active lifestyle can: 1) control type 2 diabetes and prevent medical complications such as limb amputation, 2) reverse heart disease, and 3) reverse obesity. In the report, \textit{The Historical Determinants of Food Insecurity in Native Communities}, discussing the historical factors that underlie the high rates of food insecurity and poverty that Native communities now face, it is noted that Food Sovereignty and “the incorporation of traditional foods are important steps in addressing current rates of food insecurity, as well as diet-related diseases.”\textsuperscript{30}

Poor health outcomes are not merely a result of poverty, but also of centuries of economic and government policy that targets the right of Native Americans to live in a traditional, environmentally balanced manner.\textsuperscript{31} For many Native people, traditional foods are physical, mental, and spiritual medicine. The global perspective on food security oversimplifies the relationship that Native communities have with their cultural foods and foodways in focusing on availability, access, and utilization or consumption.

\textsuperscript{26} See footnote 6.
\textsuperscript{30} See footnote 3.
\textsuperscript{31} See footnote 11.
MITIGATING FOOD INSECURITY THROUGH NATIVE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Native Food Security means that the stability of the availability, access, and consumption of traditional foods in Native communities is steadfast and constant.

Chronic food insecurity is something that happened and is happening to Native people. Creating stability in the availability, access, and consumption of traditional foods for Native people means addressing chronic food insecurity as an interrelated issue and actively supporting Native Food Sovereignty.

Native Food Sovereignty looks like reclaiming food security, nutrition, and well-being by revitalizing food systems, livelihoods, knowledge systems, and governance.32 Without Native Food Sovereignty, strategies for food security fall short. Janie Simms Hipp, the founder of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Office of Tribal Relations in the Office of the Secretary, is quoted sharing, “When Indian Country lost its ability to feed itself, through whatever means, we lost that part of ourselves that supports our ability to thrive. It is only by regaining our foods will we be able to restore our health, our resilience as peoples and secure the stability and diversification within our own communities and local economies.”33

33 See footnote 3.
Native Food Security requires support for Native Food Sovereignty in policy and practice to address both current and future threats to food security. Sovereignty in practice continues to be misunderstood or ignored, although provisions at the state and federal levels for meaningful collaboration are more often now included in statutes defining the government-to-government relationships. To actualize the recognition of Tribal Sovereignty, policy funding needs to point to Native-led and Native-controlled solutions where Native and AI/AN communities “freely develop and implement self-determined definitions of food sovereignty; cultivate, access, and secure nutritious, culturally essential food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods; and design and maintain food systems and enact policies that advance tribal priorities for ensuring that tribal citizens have the sustenance they need to thrive physically, mentally, socially, and culturally — not just today, but for the generations to come.”

In practice, an Indigenous perspective considers food sovereignty, food security, health equity, environmental justice, climate justice, and food justice—bound together in their examination of laws and policies that impact Native Food Security. Rather than looking for lack, the Indigenous perspective asks, where can we create abundance?

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