Perspectives on Native Food Sovereignty & Health Equity

By Richard Elm-Hill, M.A., Dr. Rebecca M. Webster, and Aiko Allen, M.S.

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Distinguishing between Native Food Sovereignty and Native Food Security in Indian Country: Part 1
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INTRODUCTION:
NATIVE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY & HEALTH EQUITY

Food sovereignty is the peoples’ right to have and sustainably produce food that is safe, nutritious and appropriate. As defined by First Nations Development Institute, Native Food Sovereignty is “the right of American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians to produce their own traditional foods on their own lands to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities.” Native Food Sovereignty also “defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation.”

Native Food Sovereignty requires that we address inequity that exists in relation to health and well-being. In a world where we’ve achieved health equity all Native people are able to attain their full potential for health and well-being. From an Indigenous viewpoint, physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental health have always been interconnected in terms of well-being and harmony—seated in ancestral lands and lifeways as aspects of cultural, family, and community identity. The practice of cultural foodways is essential for the health and well-being of Native peoples. Practicing cultural foodways is entwined with access to land and control of the growing, processing, and sharing of food in Native communities.

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CULTURAL FOODWAYS ARE ESSENTIAL TO NATIVE HEALTH

In Indigenous communities, cultural foodways are central to Native health and identity. Health has a wider definition among Indigenous tribes and nations than the definition held by Western science and medicine. Not just the absence of disease and illness, health is a multi-dimensional sense of well-being—what it means to live in harmony and balance emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and physically interconnected with a belonging to land, ancestors, and all surrounding sentient beings.

Native foodways are embedded in the cyclical, seasonal, and regional environmental changes and the ways Native communities carry out their responsibilities to the land. Communities participate in maintaining balance with the natural environment through their hunting, fishing, gathering and agricultural practices. Ancestral practices hold kincentric ecological knowledge that supports balance in the food system and recognizes the responsibility in land stewardship. When there is disruption to cultural foodways or the environment that holds the food system, the health of the tribal community is at risk. The impacts of colonization have compromised Native health for generations. Native people experience far higher rates of disease compared to other populations. Cultural foodways are a necessary practice and an indicator for health in tribal communities. The efficacy of community involvement and collaboration in addressing the root causes of chronic diseases, concomitant mental health, and behavioral health illnesses is long established. Research shows that when Native communities move away from Western foods to a diet that emphasizes traditional foods they experience positive impacts on health and well-being.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a landmark article in the journal Preventing Chronic Disease: Public Health Research, Practice, and Policy entitled, “Integrating Culture and History to Promote Health and Help Prevent Type 2 Diabetes in American Indian/Alaska Native Communities: Traditional Foods Have Become a Way to Talk about Health.” Interfacing Western science and Indigenous wisdom, it posits that traditional foods and food sovereignty are important public health topics for chronic disease risk reduction and management based on a project developed and implemented among 17 Indigenous tribes and nations. Qualitative results demonstrated the importance of tribally-driven programs and emphasized the significance of traditional foods in relation to land, identity, food sovereignty, and food security.

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5 DeBruyn L, Fullerton L, Satterfield D, Frank M. Integrating Culture and History to Promote Health and Help Prevent Type 2 Diabetes in American Indian/Alaska Native Communities: Traditional Foods Have Become a Way to Talk About Health. Prev Chronic Dis 2020; 17:190213. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd17.190213
Tribal partner perspectives informed the role of traditional foods among Indigenous nations. Seven themes were identified, relevant in understanding commonalities between four tribal organizations and their aim to achieve identified long-term outcomes for better health and thriving communities into the future. The relevant themes identified are 1) the transmission of traditional knowledge and interactions at the grassroots level; 2) storytelling and the power of oral tradition in skills building; 3) community engagement; 4) knowledge sharing and gratitude; 5) the flexibility to do what works, and 6) program sustainability. The seventh theme, 7) connections to health, makes a case for understanding that chronic disease is “deeply connected to social determinants of health, such as historical trauma, adverse childhood experiences, and loss of traditional foodways.” During the virtual peer learning session, one participant commented that part of the motivation for the reclamation of traditional foodways and agricultural systems is rooted in “having everything taken from us.”

Part of healing the destruction and disruption of cultural lifeways during colonial and post-colonial eras comes from rebuilding and nurturing a sense of identity and direction for contemporary youth and families centered on food sovereignty. Similarly, partners in the diabetes prevention program stated, “The way to reclaim health... is to reconnect with the land, water, traditional foodways, and all that they mean (DeBruyn et al. 2020, p. 6).”

Revitalization of cultural foodways is necessary to overcome inequity and improve the health and well-being of Native people and communities. An increase in the availability of traditional foods to support reclamation of cultural foodways requires access to land.

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See footnote 5.
LAND RIGHTS ARE ENTWINED WITH CULTURAL FOODWAYS

For Indigenous people to engage in hunting, fishing, trapping, gathering, and agriculture, there needs to be access to land. To increase the amount of traditional foods available in Native communities, there needs to be access to land. Prior to European contact, access to land was not an issue. The expansion of colonial territories in the few centuries after contact led to the displacement of Indigenous peoples through treaties that moved tribes west.

In 1887, Congress passed the General Allotment Act that broke up communal tribal landholdings and gave ownership of land to individual tribal members. Due to tax foreclosures, mortgage foreclosures, and unscrupulous land sales, Indigenous people lost ownership of their land at astonishing rates. Within a single generation, tribal landholdings went from 138 million acres to 48 million acres.

The purposeful displacement would continue through the 1970s with the voluntary urban relocation program that provided financial incentives to move Indigenous people off reservations and into cities. The continual displacement and loss of land made it extremely difficult for Indigenous people to have access to their traditional foods. Colonization continues to have a direct impact on land and food systems.

Many tribes that have secured treaty rights to access off reservation territories are having to stand by while those areas are deforested, developed, or polluted. Complex policy navigation on a government-to-government basis often limits self-determination to manage land conservation, wildlife resources, forestry departments, and plans. To exacerbate the situation, those Indigenous people who are able to care for their traditional foods often face difficulties with the extreme weather patterns and overall changes in climate, which manifest as prolonged periods of drought, wildfires, flooding, hurricanes, and tornadoes.

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7 See footnote 3.
8 See footnote 7.
10 See footnote 1.
Many communities are now forced to adapt to changes and find ways to cope with the climate crisis. Planting seasons are changing, fish are spawning at different times, trees are ready for maple syrup tapping earlier, and foods stored in ice cellars in Alaska villages are thawing due to increasing temperatures. Juneberries, chokecherries, and buffalo berries—stable foods in traditional diets—are not as abundant some years, as trees and shrubs bud out earlier in the spring. Food sources for some animals are disappearing, such as lichen for reindeer grazing. In the Southwest, extreme drought conditions are challenging to Indigenous farmers and ranchers as they seek to grow crops and manage grazing lands.

As Native communities face the climate crisis, injustices of settler colonialism and Indigenous exploitation continue to be highlighted. Land reclamation supports the revitalization of Native foodways and Native food systems as an act of Native Food Sovereignty, but also racial, cultural, environmental, food, and climate justice.

REVITALIZING NATIVE FOOD SYSTEMS

There are currently 574 federally recognized tribal nations in the United States. There are also state-recognized and unrecognized tribes working on establishing or revitalizing their food systems. Each tribe has a unique history and relationship with Indigenous foods. Kibbe Conti, an Oglala Lakota dietician, writes that “every Native Tribe has a story about what happened to their food system.”

“Many Indigenous communities concerned about food insecurity, growing rates of diet-related disease, and inequities present in mainstream food systems, are actively working to restore their food systems through a food sovereignty approach.” Approaches across Turtle Island include community building, intergenerational learning, peer learning, tribal partnerships, food policy and practice.

In a recent virtual peer learning session held in September 2022, Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (Zuni Pueblo), Ukwakhwa (Oneida), Ndée Bikíyaa (The People’s Farm, White Mountain Apache Tribe), and Meskawki Food Sovereignty (Meskwaki Nation Sac & Fox Tribe of Mississippi in Iowa), self-defined Native Food Sovereignty to include “raising and sharing traditional foods, growing, harvesting, preserving, and cooking our food on our own terms.”

When asked, “How do you know when you have food sovereignty?” responses included “when everyone in the community has access to traditional knowledge about caring for our foods; when we can care for our Indigenous foods without interference from non-Indigenous actors; when we have the ability to share cultural traditions and foods; when someone has a garden, no matter how small…this is a part of food sovereignty.”

Regaining control of the food system is a means for Native Americans to address some of the long-term effects of colonization, determine better health outcomes, and strengthen Native Food Sovereignty.

STRENGTHENING NATIVE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

The Indigenous food sovereignty movement has been gaining momentum. In Guatemala, the Atitlán Declaration of Food Sovereignty defines Indigenous food sovereignty as the “right of Peoples to define their own policies and strategies for the sustainable production, distribution, and consumption of food, with respect for their own cultures and their own systems of managing natural resources and rural areas, and is considered to be a precondition for Food Security.” The food sovereignty movement in the United States (and likely in other countries as well) has three main goals. First, Indigenous people should have access to healthy and culturally appropriate food. Second, Indigenous people should be able to engage in sustainable food production. Third, Indigenous people should be able to safeguard their agricultural practices including planting, harvesting, and preservation.

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15 See footnote 14.
A focus on Native Food Sovereignty is rooted in the understanding that Native people have the right to reclaim, determine, and control how food is grown, processed, and shared in tribal communities. Tribal governments, grassroots community organizations, and families can make efforts to strengthen Native Food Sovereignty.

Tribal governments can provide education, funding, and land access to the community for hunting, fishing, trapping, gathering, and agriculture. Tribal food policy can be a safeguard for Native food systems and Native Food Sovereignty. Tribal Nations can lobby on behalf of their constituents for favorable legislation that safeguards Indigenous rights to protect the environment and the land that supports Indigenous foods. Tribal governments can also act as a conduit to filter federal funding to the community to support initiatives that strengthen food sovereignty.

Grassroots organizations like cooperatives or nonprofits can be established or strengthened to take on some of the responsibility to care for and harvest Indigenous foods. Unlike tribal governments, grassroots organizations can be more agile and create community ownership of the need for change through bottom-up decision-making. By organizing at a community level, community support is bolstered to help accomplish food sovereignty goals.

Families returning to caring for traditional foods have the most autonomy and can be flexible with changes. However, families may be the most vulnerable without a strong network to help in times of need. Families can serve in the same capacities as tribal governments and grassroots organizations by sharing their knowledge and being a source for Indigenous foods.

Strengthening Native Food Sovereignty emphasizes the right of Native American people to accomplish these goals for themselves, without interference. A precondition to Food Security, Native Food Sovereignty requires equity in health that remediates power dynamics to support policy and practice that revitalizes cultural foodways, gives access to land, and control of food systems to Native peoples, which in return supports the health and well-being of Native communities and the natural world.

**FURTHER READING IN THIS SERIES**

*Native Food Security from Lack to Abundance*
*By Richard Elm-Hill, M.A., Dr. Rebecca M. Webster, and Aiko Allen, M.S.*

*Serving Native Youth: A Dialogue on Native Food Sovereignty and Native Food Security*
*By Richard Elm-Hill, M.A., Dr. Rebecca M. Webster, and Aiko Allen, M.S.*