



Native Food Sovereignty

What is food sovereignty?

- ◆ Food sovereignty is the peoples' right to have and sustainably produce food that is safe, nutritious and appropriate.¹

What is *Native* food sovereignty?

- ◆ 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 Americans had food sovereignty for thousands of years before the first European contact in the Americas. Food systems have dramatically changed to the detriment of Native peoples' health.²

What is food insecurity?

- ◆ The inability to have access to quality and healthy food in sufficient quantities, which has a significant impact on hunger and negative nutritional outcomes for Native people.

The loss of traditional food systems and food insecurity is the result of government policies. In fact, stripping Natives of their traditional food systems was a strategy colonizers used to control and defeat tribes. Examples include:

- ◆ Native fields were burned during the American Revolution to prevent American Indians from replanting their crops.
- ◆ The Indian Removal Act of 1830 removed Natives from their traditional bountiful lands and onto infertile land.
- ◆ Buffalo were hunted to near extinction by the U.S. government and its hired buffalo hunters to promote western expansion and cripple the Plains tribes. Thus, an estimated 31 million buffalo were killed between the years of 1868 and 1881 with only 500 buffalo left by the year of 1885.³

Isolation and economic disparity force people to consume cheaper, more accessible, yet unhealthy foods. The good news is that a major shift is occurring in Indian Country, as Native people are demanding access to healthy food on their own terms as an act of true sovereignty.

1 Food Sovereignty: A Right for All NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty, June 13, 2002, Rome.

2 The Cultural Conservancy. Retrieved October 2013, from www.nativeland.org.

3 InterTribal Bison Cooperative. Retrieved October 2013 from, www.itcbuffalo.com.





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Why do we *need* Native food sovereignty now?

The loss of food sovereignty had a devastating effect on Native America. Reservation communities are inundated by malnutrition, diabetes and obesity.

Consider this:

- ◆ According to recent government data, one-fourth of all Native American households are food insecure or can't access quality and healthy food in sufficient quantities;
- ◆ Native Americans and Alaska Natives have the highest age adjusted rate of diabetes of any group within the United States at nearly 16.1 percent;⁴ and
- ◆ American Indian children are experiencing obesity at a startling rate with 31.2% of four year olds currently obese, which is a rate higher than any other racial or ethnic group, according to a 2009 report by the Centers for Disease Control.

Did you know?

- ◆ Native Americans discovered and cultivated food crops that currently account for more than 52 percent of all foods now consumed by people worldwide;
- ◆ The Bureau of Indian Affairs estimated that, as of 1986 (the last year for which data are available), more than 65 percent of Indian-owned farmland was leased to non-Indians;⁵ and
- ◆ Approximately one-third of all grazing permits on Native-owned land are also awarded to non-Indians.⁶

The federal government has tried and failed to address nutritional issues in Native communities. Not only is their food aid insufficient, it is often of low quality, which exacerbates all of the above-mentioned health problems.

Traditional foods, however, are nutritious and recommended for the control of weight, diabetes control and other health problems. Interestingly, neither of these was an issue before European contact. Why Native food sovereignty to address these issues? Because it's traditional and it works.

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. Unfortunately, many Native communities choose to lease this land out to non-Native farmers for cultivation and management.⁷

4 American Diabetes Association. Retrieved October 2013, from <http://www.diabetes.org/in-my-community/programs/native-american-programs/>.

5 National Agricultural Statistics Service. (2002). *American Indians be Counted! 2002 Census of Agriculture brochure*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture.

6 Smitman, G. E. (1998). Intertribal Agriculture Council: Perspectives on the history and current state of American Indian Agriculture. *American Indian and Cultural Research Journal*, vol. 22-23, 170-173.

7 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).





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Native Americans are not only the first peoples of the Americas, but also its first farmers. 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.⁸

Reclaiming our land is an engine for economic development in many rural and reservation-based communities. Tribes have the resources and knowledge and are poised to use them to ensure that community members produce their own healthy traditional foods on *their own* lands to sustain themselves, families and communities.

To learn more, visit:

- ◆ White Earth Land Recovery Project
<http://welrp.org/food-sovereignty>
- ◆ US Food Sovereignty Alliance
<http://usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org/>
- ◆ Tohono O'odham Community Action
www.tocaonline.org
- ◆ Institute for Food and Development Policy/Food First
www.foodfirst.org
- ◆ Northwest Indian College Food Sovereignty Programs
<http://nwicplantsandfoods.com/food-sovereignty>
- ◆ La Via Campesina International Peasant's Movement
<http://viacampesina.org/en/>

⁸ Bell-Sheetter, A. (2004). *Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool*. Fredericksburg: First Nations Development Institute.