



Native Farming Practices

Organic and sustainable by tradition.

Over the past several hundred years, traditional Native crops—important sources of food, fiber, and medicine—have disappeared as traditional farming practices were lost and forgotten. In many Native communities, traditional farming was replaced with industrialized food production. Yet some of the traditional farming practices have survived, and many Native communities are establishing new models to restore traditional food systems, conserve seeds, and rebuild agricultural systems.

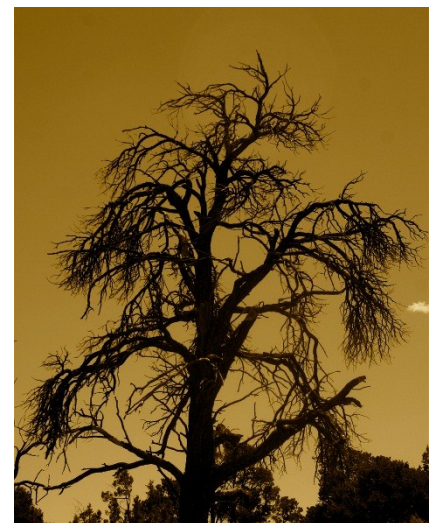


Growing and eating traditional foods is one way to reconnect with traditions. It may help inform progress and change in tribal food policy, Farm to School programs, and sustainable agriculture, as well as create strategies for broader discussions on all of these issues.

AN ENDANGERED FOOD SYSTEM



Everyone is affected by impacts on the food system from environmental degradation and climate change. However, those people living closest to the land, those most dependent on “ecological services” for their livelihood, are likely to be the first to notice the effects of climate change—rising temperatures, fluctuating seasons, extreme precipitation and wind, drought, and the accompanying effects of these changes. Many Native communities have been reporting such changes already. Some such communities, in remote



and susceptible areas, are the most vulnerable to changes and disasters that could lead to permanent loss of land and livelihoods.

People with generational knowledge of climate extremes and traditional ways of coping and adapting have much to contribute in creating resilient and sustainable systems of food production. From heirloom varieties of open-pollinated seeds that hold the genetic potential for crop adaptation against climate extremes to practices for growing crops in marginal soil and water conditions, traditional agriculture holds keys to sustainability that deserve serious

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consideration as we identify strategies to restore our global food systems. Collaboration between Native and non-Native farmers to address common issues of food security, GMOs, and agricultural education, can provide much hope for a more sustainable future for everyone.

ORGANIC BY TRADITION

While traditional farmers and ranchers may be practicing methods handed down through generations, they are doing so in a contemporary context. For instance, many Native farming practices and food system approaches can be called “organic and sustainable by tradition.” In essence, organic farming can be defined as an environmentally responsible approach to producing healthy, nutritious, high-quality food and fiber. Traditionally in Native communities, food has been produced in this way—organically, without the use of chemicals—and consumed locally.



In most Native communities, food was grown for direct use of the family and extended family and sometimes a surplus was sold

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KEYS TO SUSTAINABILITY IN NATIVE TRADITIONS

- Food is produced more in concert with nature, primarily relying on biological elements and forces.
- Appropriate technology and appropriate scale are guiding principles.
- Food production is complemented and enhanced by hunting and gathering in the wild.
- Biodiversity and other resources are protected and enhanced.
- Agriculture is a family and community activity.
- Agriculture is an economic activity guided by cultural and spiritual values.
- Cultural appropriateness and tribal land use constraints help inform the limits to growth.
- Sufficiency and cultural survival are goals, as well as economic profitability.
- Dependence on non-renewable resources or extractive industries is reduced.

How do these keys parallel organic and sustainability practices?

- Maintain and enhance soil productivity.
- Protect water quality and conserve water.
- Conserve energy and reduce reliance on non-renewable resources.
- Maintain and increase domesticated and wild biodiversity.
- Increase a sense of community.
- Promote cultural survival and strengthen cultural values.
- Enhance the health of individuals, families, and communities.
- Enhance the connection to nature and the food that sustains communities.

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directly by the grower. Increasingly, however, cash income has become a more important factor and some traditional farmers are looking to earn a premium for their crops. Many traditional and organic crops bring a premium price, along with lower costs of production, than the same conventionally produced crops. While getting a premium for crops in the marketplace has become an economic imperative, many Native communities continue focusing on food for local consumption and nutrition programs. The process of restoring traditional agriculture and food holds great promise in restoring health and prosperity to Native communities.



FOOD SECURITY (FIRST NATIONS DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE)

“A community is defined as food secure if all its members have access to nutritionally good, safe, affordable, culturally acceptable food at all times through local non-emergency sources. The food traditions and agricultural holdings of Native tribes and communities afford strong incentives for renewing Native food systems so as to improve food security across Indian Country and the Native Americas.

Today, according to the United States Congress, almost 47 million of the more than 54 million acres of tribal and individual Indian trust lands are rangeland and cropland, an enormous potential food resource.

Seventy percent of cropland is leased to non-Indians, and 20 percent of rangeland, reducing Native control of tribal food systems at their source.

More than 8,000 Native farms operate on reservations, but they produce few crops for consumption by local households.”

Website at www.firstnations.org



EXAMPLE: PICURIS PUEBLO

Picuris Pueblo started their bison program in 1993 and are committed through their Bison Agricultural Project to restoring the bison population in a manner that is culturally compatible with tribal beliefs and practices. As a member of the Intertribal Bison Cooperative, which includes 58 members nationwide, Picuris Pueblo is one of nine tribes in New Mexico that keep a bison herd and work cooperatively to establish new blood lines. Picuris Pueblo currently has a herd of 85 bison that graze on wild alfalfa, amaranth, and grass.



The project provides a nutritious food source for tribal members and increases community self-sufficiency and economic development through meat and by-product sales. Historically, Native peoples were known for their complete use of the bison, and the Picuris are continuing this tradition. At Picuris Pueblo, the buffalo dance takes place during the winter months, honoring the bison for the food, hides, sacred objects, and tools the animal provides for them. In this way, bison continue to be a sustainable food source that was—and continues to be—a part of the Picuris traditional diet.

Picuris Pueblo has incorporated bison into a diabetes-prevention program that includes food fairs, exercise, and working with the diabetics at the pueblo. In the face of the diabetes epidemic, reviving bison as a primary food can help prevent diabetes and other diet-related diseases.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Find online resources for this tool, as well as additional tool booklets on other community food topics, under “Food System Tools” at www.healthycommunityfoodsystems.org or www.HCFS.org



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