

Finding Our Roots: Indigenous Foods and the Food Sovereignty Movement in the United States

Food sovereignty is the ability of an indigenous nation or community to control its own food system and food-producing resources free of control or limitations put on it by an outside power (such as a settler/colonizer government). Food sovereignty includes creating access to healthy food resources of one's own choice, assuming control over food production and distribution, and integrating cultural practices and values concerning diet, food production, distribution, and the entire food system.

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labor, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and societies.

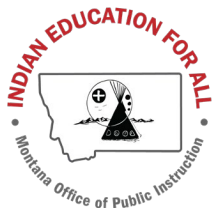
- Political Statement of the NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty is an affirmation of who we are as indigenous peoples and a way, one of the most surefooted ways, to restore our relationship with the world around us.

- Winona LaDuke (Anishinaabe)

The land is our identity and holds for us all the answers we need to be a healthy, vibrant, and thriving community. In our oral traditions, our creation story, we are taught that the land that provides the foods and medicines we need are a part of who we are. Without the elk, salmon, huckleberries, shellfish, and cedar trees, we are nobody. ... This is our medicine; remembering who we are and the lands that we come from.

- VALERIE SEGREST (Muckleshoot), Muckleshoot Traditional Foods and Medicines Program, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015).



Fast Facts

- Prior to European arrival, indigenous peoples of North America had diverse and regionally unique food resources. Each tribal group had developed culturally specific methods of food procurement (hunting, fishing, gathering, and farming), preservation, and distribution.
- Indigenous North American peoples created diverse social systems and ceremonies that supported and enhanced food security within their respective communities and that reinforced their relationships to the natural world.
- European and American settlement of North America displaced indigenous peoples from their lands and dispossessed them of their resources, resulting in lack of access to traditional foods and widespread food insecurity.
- Attempts to assimilate indigenous peoples into Euro-American society included considerable efforts to change their diets and their methods of food procurement or production. In turn, these changes altered Native peoples' relationship to foods, initiated new ways of interacting with the natural environment, and undermined their ability to maintain sustainable food practices and systems.
- The introduction of new foods as trade goods, rations, or through the dominance of European dietary preferences has damaged the health and well-being of indigenous peoples, while increased dependency on commercial food systems has undercut indigenous food security.
- Current efforts by indigenous peoples to address poor nutrition, ill health, and food insecurity often necessitate confronting the underlying and intertwined issues of colonization, food sovereignty, and identity.
- Exercising food sovereignty strengthens indigenous cultures and reinforces indigenous value systems and is a key part of maintaining political sovereignty.

Resources for Research

[Buffalo Nations Food System Initiative](#), Montana State University

- **educate** and train the coming generations of Indigenous food system professionals
- **create** more opportunities for Indigenous food producers and businesses
- **strengthen** communities through Indigenous food knowledge and access
- **invest** in Indigenous research scholarship toward cultural knowledge recovery of foodways and innovations towards vital 21stst century Indigenous food systems
- **heal** *the Land and the People*

[Winona LaDuke - Seeds of Our Ancestors, Seeds of Life](#), TEDx Talks, posted March 4, 2012. (16:36 minutes)

Winona LaDuke is an internationally renowned activist working on issues of sustainable development, renewable energy, and food systems. She lives and works on the White Earth Reservation in northern Minnesota. She works nationally and internationally on the issues of climate change, renewable energy, and environmental justice with Indigenous communities.

[Regaining Food Sovereignty: Neyaab Nimamoomin Mewinzha Gaa-inajigeyang.](#) (58:17 minutes)

Sponsored by the Indigenous Environmental Network. Made in Minnesota. Lakeland Public Television, posted June 20, 2013.

The video addresses colonization, environmental destruction, climate change, traditional stories, food sustainability, illness/disease/diabetes and cancer, values related to traditional foods and environment, sobriety, processed foods, genetic engineering, and environmental justice as relates to food. It also addresses empowerment through taking responsibility for one's health and food.

[Native Chefs](#) (3 minutes): *Native Chefs*, posted July 7, 2013.

Inspirational film on indigenous chefs Apaches in the Kitchen.

[Traditional Foods in Native America, Parts 1-5.](#) Native Diabetes Wellness Program, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015.

Provides information on the importance and meaning of traditional foods across Indian Country.

[Native American Food Sovereignty, Explained – A Peoples History – PBS](#) . (9:16 minutes) produced by Tsanavi Spoonhunter (director) and Christian Lee Collins, public Broadcasting System, 2024.

“This digital miniseries explores the current social climate in Native America, diving deep into the history of tribal nations and the external factors that have shaped their contemporary circumstances. Comedian and actor Tai LeClaire and several topical experts will guide A People’s History of Native America, chronicling the accurate history with humor and brevity.”

[The USDA Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative](#), U.S. Department of Agriculture.

This initiative promotes traditional food ways, Indian Country food and agriculture markets, and Indigenous health through foods tailored to American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) dietary needs. The USDA is partnering with tribal-serving organizations on projects to reimagine federal food and agriculture programs from an Indigenous perspective and inform future USDA programs and policies.