

Traditional Indigenous economies in North America have always been rooted in deeply encoded cultural understanding of reciprocity, stewardship, relationships, and the innate abundance of living ecological systems. Cultivating and harvesting food was done with the belief that humans are part of the living system and that they must take care of the earth and it would take care of them. Our precious seeds were often cared for by women, who cultivated the earth with loving care as they sang and prayed on behalf of future generations. Our ancestors had vibrant regional and intertribal trade networks to exchange seed, food, crafts and other necessities, that were also sites of social and cultural sharing.

Indigenous peoples in the Americas domesticated some of the most valuable crops to the world, including corn, beans, squash, potatoes, tomatoes, and chocolate. Indigenous food systems also included fish, game and highly nutritious wild harvested foods. Unfortunately, US government assimilation programmes replaced traditional foods and diets with commodity foods such as wheat, sugar and processed fats. As food is central to Indigenous cultures, many communities also lost the knowledge and skills for growing and preparing these foods, as well as the ceremonies and prayers that accompanied each season. Today, the combined impacts of colonisation and commodity foods have devastated the health and culture of Native communities.

The shift from the relational worldview that informs Indigenous economies, to an extractive, capitalist worldview that regards everything—land, water, plants, animals—as a commodity to be exploited for profit has been devastating. The modern, industrial food system is embedded in economic logic based on short-term gains without regard for long-term consequences or relationships. This has led to the mistreatment of our ancestral seeds, which corporations feel they can genetically alter and control, at the expense of nutritional value, seed sovereignty and resilience.

We believe that Indigenous cultural restoration is inextricably linked to the revitalisation of our traditional seeds and food systems. Cultivating ancestral foods helps Indigenous peoples heal from historical trauma, remember who we are, and to honor our reciprocal agreements to care for our Mother Earth. At NAFSA, through our Indigenous Seedkeepers Network we organise seed exchanges, workshops and matriation of indigenous heirloom seeds from institutions back to their home communities. NAFSA's Culinary Program pairs Native chefs-in-training with more experienced Native chefs.

Reclaiming traditional foodways reinforces community initiatives such as language immersion, revitalisation of cultural rites of passage, and other deeply spiritual, culture-based initiatives. By growing, cooking and sharing our ancestral foods, we are literally re-indigenising our bodies from the inside out.

The Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (NAFSA) in the US is a national network of indigenous leaders dedicated to restoring food systems that support tribal self-determination, community wellness, and rebuilding relationships with the land, water, plants and animals.

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Reclaiming our Indigenous food economies