



## History of Native Food Systems

For thousands of years before European contact in the Americas, Native communities had complex food systems that sustained their families and their communities. These food systems were versatile and Native people adapted them to different regions and ecologies, while expanding their knowledge of food variety to maintain the health and viability of their own people.

An intimate understanding of seasonal food was important to diversify food types, enhance nutritional balance and ensure the long-term production of Native food systems. Seasonal food staples might include wild and cultivated crops such as squash, corn, beans, turnips and wild rice. Food-preservation techniques advanced and became specialized for specific foods such as game meat, berries or corn. Knowledge of winter food systems was essential as a key element in balancing the amount of fresh food against stored food consumed during the winter.<sup>1</sup> Out of these food systems grew the communal knowledge and traditions for how Native people prepared, harvested, stored and used food for ceremonial purposes.

### Did you know?

- ◆ 60% of crops now in cultivation were first domesticated and developed by indigenous people of the Americas;<sup>2</sup>
- ◆ Native Americans domesticated corn, which is now the world's most important crop by weight;<sup>3</sup>
- ◆ Native Americans learned to grow and use many different kinds of food that people eat today, including potatoes, beans, corn, peanuts, pumpkins, tomatoes, squash, peppers, nuts, melons, and sunflower seeds; and
- ◆ All of the world's squashes and many of the beans in cultivation today are thought to be domesticated by Native Americans.<sup>4</sup>

1 S. E. Colby, L.R. McDonald, G. Adkison. (2011-2012). Traditional Native American Foods: Stories from Northern Plains Elders. *Journal of Ecological Anthropology*, Vol. 25 No. 1.

2 Mann, C. C. (2011). *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*. NY: New York: Vintage Books.

3 Mann, C. C. (2011). *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*. NY: New York: Vintage Books.

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## What happened?

Hundreds of years of influence and policy targeting Native people have disrupted or destroyed traditional food practices. In many cases, these policies removed Native people from their most valuable agricultural land and natural resources, resulting in severe nutritional deficiencies or even starvation. A few examples include:<sup>5</sup>

- ◆ In the 1800s, the American bison or buffalo were systematically slaughtered to force the Plains tribes into submission through starvation and to relocate them to reservations. By 1890, only 790 buffalo remained.
- ◆ In 1830, the Indian Removal Act forced hundreds of thousands of Native Americans off their lands and onto the reservations with the promise of education, health care and food “rations.” Indian people were prevented from leaving reservations to seek traditional foods and were forced to rely on food rations.
- ◆ In 1887, the Dawes Act resulted in the transfer of 93 million acres of land out of Native American control.

## Moving forward

We know that returning to traditional foods is a compelling and effective way to reduce poor health outcomes for Native people, which is an important step toward restoring Native food systems. It also leads to reintroducing traditional beliefs and values surrounding food systems.

There is a major shift occurring in Indian Country as Native people are producing *their own* traditional foods on *their own* lands to sustain themselves, their families and their communities. This movement to improve health on our own terms is an act of sovereignty and will contribute to having a sustainable source of healthy foods that are safe and nutritious, which should lead to healthier Native communities in the coming years.

## For more information, visit:

- ◆ The Cultural Conservancy - Indigenous Health/Native Circle of Food  
[www.nativeland.org/native\\_circle.html](http://www.nativeland.org/native_circle.html)
- ◆ Planting for Justice  
[www.plantingjustice.org](http://www.plantingjustice.org)
- ◆ Native Seeds  
[www.nativeseeds.org](http://www.nativeseeds.org)
- ◆ White Earth Land Recovery Project  
<http://welrp.org/>
- ◆ Indigenous Food Systems Network  
[www.indigenousfoodsystems.org/](http://www.indigenousfoodsystems.org/)

<sup>5</sup> Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History. (1999, June). *Extermination of Buffalo*. Retrieved Oct 16, 2013, from Eyclopedia.com: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3406400126.html>.

