

Six Pillars of Indigenous Food Sovereignty

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Why Food Systems Work Must Go Beyond Access

At the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (NAFSA), we often get asked "What is Indigenous food sovereignty?"

The diversity within our communities and members makes it hard to define in just one way. A common misconception is that it's only about food access. But it's much broader. Indigenous food sovereignty is about systems. It's about power. It is about who decides where and how food is harvested, gathered, hunted, fished, grown, prepared, distributed, and shared, and who benefits from those decisions.

We organize our work and advocacy around six connected areas that show up in every region and every type of food system, from salmon and seal oil to beans, berries, and buffalo. Each area matters. Each one rebuilds control, creates healing, and deepens the roots of Indigenous decision-making related to our foodways, economies, and ecosystems

Food Security

Food security is the starting point. Many Native households, especially in rural or remote areas, experience high rates of food insecurity, according to a 2024 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office. These conditions are the result of long-standing infrastructure gaps, land dispossession, and federal food policies that replaced traditional diets with processed commodities. Examples include Alaska Native families in remote villages who rely on irregular barge or air deliveries for food.

These communities face fragile supply chains and some of the highest grocery prices in the country. On the Navajo Nation, many Diné families live more than an hour from the nearest full-service grocery store, often depending on convenience stores or trading posts for daily needs. Research from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the Navajo Nation Division of Economic Development has documented these ongoing challenges in food access.

Food Access

Food access includes affordability, transportation, proximity, and infrastructure. In Indigenous communities, access also means having a relationship with foods that hold cultural and historical meaning. These foods are not always available in stores or permitted under state regulation. Some come from seeds stolen by colonial institutions. Seal hunters may face restricted access to coastal areas. Rice harvesters may be blocked by development or degraded waterways. Fishing rights can be limited by state permitting. Indigenous communities continue to build systems that improve access by reclaiming Indigenous seeds, expanding harvesting opportunities, restoring trade routes, and investing in shared infrastructure.

Food Justice

Food justice addresses the systemic causes of inequity. It requires acknowledging how colonization, federal policy, and environmental harm have shaped current food realities. This includes forced relocations, the disruption of intergenerational knowledge, and the targeting of food sources. From the extermination of bison to the boarding school era's erasure of food knowledge, these disruptions attempted to sever relationships with land and food. Their effects continue in contaminated lands, restrictive policies, and chronic health disparities.

A lesser-discussed but ongoing issue is the institutional control over Indigenous-origin seeds. Many of these seeds are stored in federal germplasm repositories, university seed banks, and private collections. Although these seeds were originally cultivated and stewarded by Indigenous communities, their descendants often face

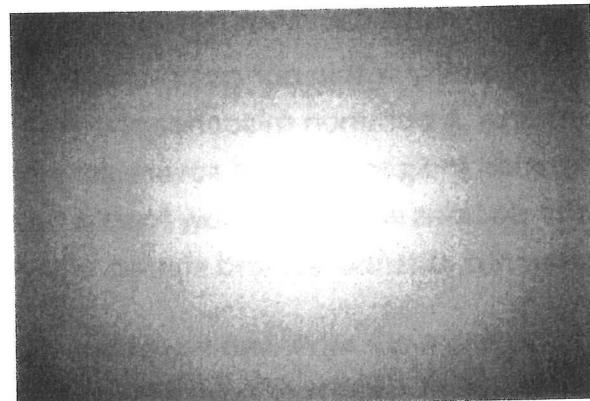


Photo Courtesy of NAFSA

bureaucratic or legal barriers when trying to access them. The current system of seed conservation and research typically lacks meaningful tribal consultation, consent processes, or clear pathways for return.

Restoring access to these seeds, referred to as rematriation, has become an area of increasing attention in food justice work. Return of these seeds to their communities of origin is not only culturally significant, it is essential for restoring nutrition, biodiversity, and seed stewardship knowledge that was interrupted through policy and extraction. Even Indigenous communities with the seeds of their ancestors are fighting to reclaim land, access water, and restore support networks to steward these seeds, feed the people, and promote economic development.

Food Policy and Governance

Food policy and governance shape every part of the food system. This includes land codes, funding mechanisms, agricultural laws, and recognition of Indigenous authority. Many existing policies are not designed with Indigenous communities in mind and actively limit traditional food practices through regulation, oversight, or omission.

Seed laws may restrict sharing. Food assistance programs may define nutrition in ways that ignore cultural diets. Funding structures often prioritize large-scale, non-Native models and require Tribal programs to conform to external formats. Intellectual property and institutional claims over seed collections present an additional barrier. Federal and academic institutions may retain control over seed varieties originally cultivated by Indigenous peoples, while offering limited or conditional access.

There is no standardized legal or policy framework that guarantees Indigenous communities the right to recover these ancestral seeds. Without clear mechanisms for return or recognition of tribal governance in seed stewardship, the existing system reinforces a power imbalance rooted in extractive history. Effective food sovereignty policy must address these gaps and support community-led control, not just institutional permission.

Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty is about the right of Indigenous communities to make decisions about their own food systems and to define success on their own terms. The concept of food sovereignty emerged globally through movements such as La Vía Campesina. The 2007 Nyéléni Declaration defined it as the right of peoples to

healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.

Indigenous food sovereignty builds on this foundation but is distinct in its grounding in relationships, responsibilities, and place-based cultural knowledge. It emphasizes the restoration of food systems that are interconnected with language, ceremony, land, kinship, and community governance. It is not only about access or production, but about cultural continuity and decision-making authority, as scholar Charlotte Coté has written.

Key components of Indigenous food sovereignty include the protection of ancestral knowledge, the revitalization of traditional foods, the restoration of Indigenous decision-making, and the integration of cultural protocols into food systems. As Anishinaabe seedkeeper and organizer Shiloh Maples explains, "Our seeds are our relatives ... they're living beings, so we need to treat them with the utmost respect." This perspective reflects the deep relationships, responsibilities, and ecological stewardship at the heart of Indigenous foodways (Whetstone Radio, 2021, Spirit Plate).

Indigenous food sovereignty explicitly calls for the rematriation of seeds, the decolonization of food systems, and the return of inherent governance over land, water, and food. These aren't abstract ideals, they are lived responsibilities shaped by community consensus, cultural practices, and ancestral knowledge. Examples include:

- **Karuk Tribe: Eco-Cultural Restoration**
 - Tribal-led restoration of salmon fisheries through Indigenous ecological calendars, cultural burning, and river stewardship. Integrates traditional knowledge, ceremony, and ecosystem management.
- **Alaska Native Communities: Marine Mammal Co-Management**
 - Subsistence practices for seal and whale coordinated through cultural law, community consensus, and formal co-management agreements. Emphasizes self-governance in harvesting and distribution based on ancestral protocols.
- **All Pueblo Grows: Seed Lending Library (via Pueblo Extension)**
 - Community-based seed library supporting Pueblo and local growers. Grounded in seasonal knowledge, cultural preservation, and

intergenerational training. Encourages access to regionally adapted, culturally significant seeds.

Land Access, Justice, and Sovereignty

Land is the foundation of Indigenous food systems. Without access to land, Indigenous communities cannot hunt, fish, gather, farm, or practice the cultural and spiritual relationships that define food sovereignty. Yet across Turtle Island, the vast majority of land remains under settler colonial control. Land dispossession is both a historic trauma and a present-day barrier that Indigenous peoples continue to navigate.

This sixth pillar affirms that restoring land access and Indigenous land governance is essential to any food sovereignty effort. It includes the return of ancestral lands, creation of Indigenous-protected and conserved areas, cultural conservation easements, reparations frameworks, and long-term secure tenure for Native growers, harvesters, and water protectors. It also requires addressing policies and systems that continue to alienate Indigenous peoples from their lands— including extractive industries, settler land trusts, zoning laws, and the commodification of land as private property.

This pillar uplifts the vision that land is not a commodity— it is a relative. Indigenous food sovereignty cannot exist without right relationship to land, and right relationship requires consent, recognition, and the rematriation of land and governance. Examples include:

- **Sogorea Te' Land Trust (Lisjan Ohlone territory)**

A women-led urban land trust facilitating land return to Indigenous stewardship in the San Francisco Bay Area. Sogorea Te' models urban

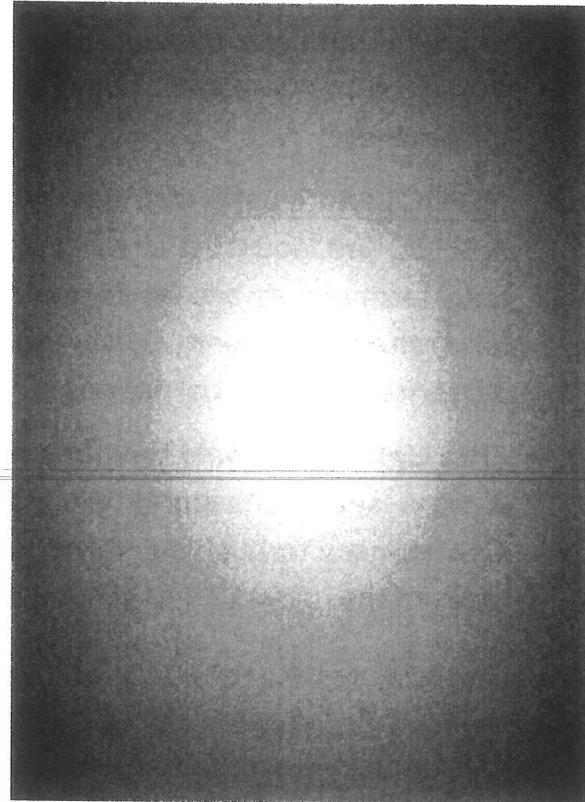


Photo Courtesy of Lashon Cate of Black Mesa Farm

rematriation, land tax systems (the Shuumi Land Tax), and ceremonial governance rooted in community healing and cultural continuity.

- **Ekvn-Yefolecv (Maskoke ancestral territory, Alabama)**

An intentional ecovillage of Maskoke people returning to their homelands to practice traditional lifeways, language immersion, and eco-cultural restoration through climate-resilient housing, traditional farming, and collective land governance.

- **NEFOC Land Trust (Northeast)**

A BIPOC-led land trust advancing Black and Indigenous land stewardship, long-term tenure, and land rematriation through a regional model of reparative land return, community-governed easements, and Indigenous reciprocity agreements with tribal nations.

- **First Light (Wabanaki territory, Maine)**

A cross-sector collaboration supporting land return to the Wabanaki Confederacy through co-stewardship, land trust partnerships, and legal innovations rooted in Indigenous land governance.

This sixth pillar ties together the food system and the land system, recognizing that sovereignty is not possible without territory. As the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance and partners like the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust affirm, land return is not symbolic—it is practical, possible, and necessary for the thriving of future generations.

Why This Framework Matters

These six areas are connected. Addressing one without the others will not lead to lasting change. Improving food access without shifting policy will not sustain progress. Supporting local food producers without addressing justice ignores the reasons access was lost in the first place. Indigenous food sovereignty is not a single outcome. It is an approach grounded in autonomy, accountability, and cultural continuity.

Through our seed, food, and culinary work, NAFSA supports communities who are restoring, protecting, and leading in this space. This is long-term, systems-level work that centers Indigenous leadership and the knowledge that has always sustained us.

What do you want to share about food sovereignty? Shoot us an [email](#) and tell us your story!