

NATIVE LIFE AND FOOD

Food Is More Than Just What We Eat

Indigenous ways of life and traditions are highly connected to the environment and the foods it provides. [Long before their contact with Europeans, Indigenous Peoples populated the Americas and were successful stewards and managers of the land.](#)

Indigenous Andeans, for example, developed more than a thousand different species of potato, each of which thrived in its own distinct growing conditions. Along with potatoes, many other foods—including corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, peppers, tomatoes, yams, peanuts, wild rice, chocolate, pineapples, avocados, papayas, pecans, strawberries, cranberries, and blueberries, to name a few, are indigenous to the Americas. More than half the crops grown worldwide today were first cultivated successfully and scientifically in the Americas by Indigenous People. Crops and other foods were exchanged along vast, distinct, and complex trade routes. [American Indians traded, exchanged, gifted, and negotiated the purchase of goods, foods, technologies, domestic animals, ideas, and cultural practices with one another.](#)



Muckleshoot community members harvesting from a two-acre orchard with dozens of local fruits. Photo courtesy of the [Muckleshoot Sovereignty Project](#).

Many Native food systems were disrupted due to European settlement and the displacement of Native peoples from their lands. Then, for over a hundred years, the U.S. government issued foodstuffs to Native Americans. The food was unhealthy and substantially different from traditional diets. Unhealthy food, combined with uneven quality of and access to medical care, continues to leave many American Indians fighting an uphill battle for their health. Still, American Indians are working to restore their environments and original food sources through political action and sustainable practice. For example, the Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project was founded in 2010 to promote a return to traditional foods and food practices. This is an example of food sovereignty, which means that a community chooses those foods they will use to sustain themselves and their cultures. Traditional foods support physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Try these culturally sensitive activities and lessons:

- For grades 5–8, use the NK360° lesson plan [The Inka Empire: What Innovations Can Provide Food and Water for Millions?](#) For the same lesson in español - [El Imperio Inka](#).
- For grades 6–8, check out this NMAI teaching poster, [Native People and the Land: The A:Shiwi \(Zuni\) People](#).
- For grades 9–12, use the NK360° lesson plans [Pacific Northwest History and Cultures: Why Do the Foods We Eat Matter?](#) And [The Pacific Northwest Fish Wars: What Kinds of Actions Can Lead to Justice?](#)
- Check out the [NMAI Haudenosaunee Guide for Educators](#) to learn about Haudenosaunee relationships with the natural world!
- For Pre-K and early elementary check out the illustrative book, *Wild Berries* by Julie Flett (Simply Read Books, 2013).
- For elementary and middle-school students, plant/sustain a small garden of foods indigenous to your area.