

Conference Focuses on Value of Traditional Foods

by Glenn Lamberg, NRCS American Indian Liaison

The resounding message from the 3rd Annual Indigenous Farming Conference, held February 2-5, 2006 at Oneida, Wisc., was the health benefits of Indigenous people being in control of their own food systems. The Conference was hosted by White Earth Land Recovery Project, Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council and the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin.

The diet of the original peoples of the Americas was balanced and suited for the people that lived on this continent for thousands of years before the Europeans arrived. The metabolism and digestive system of the original peoples were adapted to the food systems that had been a part of the natural and grown foods of their ancestors for generations.

The title of the conference: “Restoring Food Sovereignty through Integrating Local Food Systems; Those who Feed, Lead” was supported by workshops and themes that encouraged tribal attendees to evaluate their local foods and food systems. The values of traditional foods were compared to the food systems that have evolved in our society in the last 40 to 100 years.

Differences that were illustrated:

- Foods are being selected today for shelf life, appearance and transportation adaptability.
- Where our foods come from is usually unknown today.
- The seeds that are used to produce foods

locally are usually purchased rather than saved from year to year as the ancestors in the past did.

- The foods consumed today are much different than 50 years ago and certainly much different from the period prior to European settlement into the area.



- Typical traditional foods included: venison, turkey, birds, small mammals, fish, squash, corn, potatoes, beans, wild rice, natural herbs, maple syrup, wild fruits/berries and native plants.

- Introduced foods in the forms of government supplied foods: bacon, beef, lard, wheat & other small grain flour, breads from flours, white rice, milk, pasta, sugar, oatmeal, peanut butter, and other items.

- The habit of eating out and consuming foods that others prepare is different for the metabolism that we have inherited from our ancestors: fast foods, fried foods, additives and ethnically different types of foods. Very good to the taste, but foreign to the ancient digestive system.

Winona LaDuke, a member of the White Earth Band of Chippewa from Minnesota was the keynote speaker and inspirational leader to persons attending the conference. Winona pointed out that the Ojibwa words Amino Midjim could be translated to “the Good Food”.

Oneida Tribal Health official, Sylvia Cornelius pointed out many valuable facts. Some of those points included:

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Traditional Native American Foods

- Diabetes which has plagued native people for years, is now attacking younger people.
- Heart problems and obesity continue to grow in tribal communities.
- The change in food and lifestyle is attributing to the decline in health of native people.
- Science is showing that heritage foods have more nutrients than modern day vegetables and fruits.
- There are 20x more antioxidants in heirloom varieties (corn and beans) as compared to new varieties.
- Traditional foods are abundant in nutrients and very good for the native metabolism.
- Her information sources believe that “a behavioral disorder is the first sign of a nutrient deficiency!”

Considerations regarding food values

- Nutrient and micronutrient values:
 - B1-Thiamine:
 - Lack of can cause:
 - Confusion
 - Poor memory
 - Depression
 - Anxiety
 - Aggressive behavior
 - Foods that provide B1 are white corn, wild rice and grains.
- Omega 3 comes to the native through: Fish, nuts and venison
- Vitamin C and Antioxidants are available

in traditional foods in:

- Berries
- Squash
- Tryptophan –is an essential amino acid. It is related to 5HTP which is related to Serotonin production or activity!
 - Turkey
 - Other birds
 - Corn
 - Beans
- Wild rice is very good for you. The native metabolism gets much lesser values from white rice.

To insure that healthy foods are available now and for future generations Tribal Communities are being encouraged to grow more of their own foods, gain more knowledge on traditional foods, maintain their own seed sources and incorporate locally grown foods in their homes, schools and community food programs.

In an effort to assist tribes to evaluate the values of traditional foods, USDA through work by the Agriculture Research Service has developed a program that is measuring food values of traditional foods for tribes throughout the United States. More information can be found at: <http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/search/index.html> (Nutrient database)

<http://www.ars.usda.gov/is/AR/archive/sep05/native0905.htm> (article about database)

Winona LaDuke’s book on “Food is Medicine” can be obtained at: <http://honorearth.com/multimedia/books.html>