Healing History

By LAUREN WILCOX
Photography by JAMES GROVES

Paul Smith, director of Heifer's Indigenous Peoples Initiative, is working to raise awareness of diet-related illnesses among Native Americans and to educate them about the role a more traditional diet can play in prevention.

North America's Indigenous Peoples Look to the Past to Find a Healthier Future

When you meet Oneida tribe member Paul Smith, you might suspect his white gym socks with sandals mean he's making the most of Wisconsin's last warm autumn days. In truth, his footwear hints at something ominous.

"Among native peoples, that's how you know someone is having trouble with his feet," said Smith, director of Heifer International's Indigenous Peoples Initiative.

Like many people in the Oneida community around Green Bay, the 56-year-old Smith suffers from type 2 diabetes. This manageable but incurable disease affects the body's ability to process sugar, and in its later stages can also cause kidney failure, retinal damage and blindness. It can cause infections in the extremities due to poor circulation, which can lead to amputation.

Healthy-looking and trim with a grey ponytail, Smith hardly cuts the figure of someone suffering from a potentially deadly disease.

"This is our world," he said, shaking a plastic bag of pill bottles he takes everywhere, along with his compact insulin testing kit.

By "our," he means his family. Smith's six brothers and sisters all have type 2 diabetes. So do his four children, who all developed the disease in their early 20s. Diabetes killed Smith's mother at the age of 52.

By "our," Smith also means the Oneidas and the entire North American indigenous community, which has seen the rates of diabetes and other diet-related illnesses skyrocket in recent years.

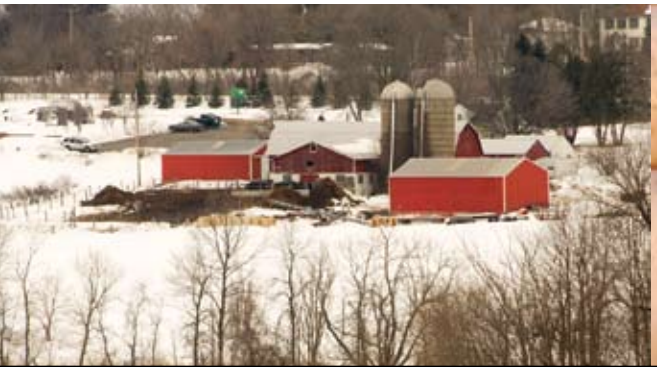
The disease is becoming so commonplace that the attitude within the native communities is often one of resignation.

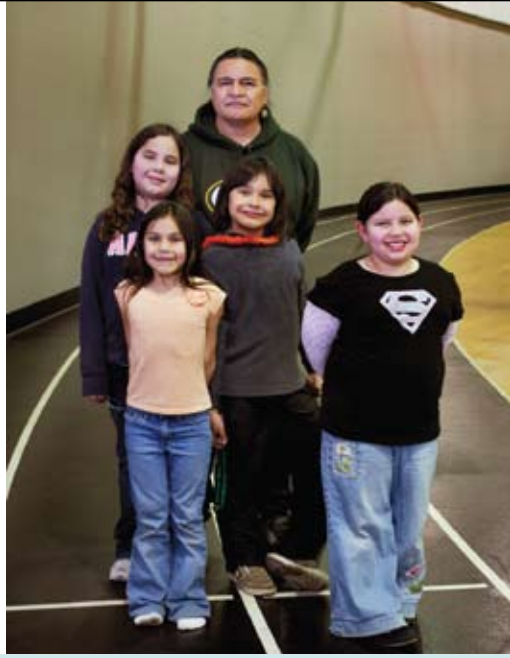
"They accept it," Smith said.

What was once a relatively rare disease in the Native American community has become, during the last 50 years, epidemic. Among the Pima tribe in Arizona, where diabetes rates are the highest in the country, about 65 percent of tribe members over age 40 have the disease. Among Native Americans as a group, the rate of type 2 diabetes is estimated to be more than twice as high as among whites.

Researchers believe that type 2 diabetes has a genetic component, as rates are higher among full-blooded Native Americans. Indigenous populations become more vulnerable as fast food and convenience foods edge out more wholesome, traditional diets.

The disease is taking a toll on the health of native peoples around the country as they struggle with amputations and dialysis. The toll is also "social, mental and spiritual," said Beverly Scow, Smith's partner and a member of the Kwakwakawak Nation of British Columbia, Canada. For native peoples, diet is more than the food one eats, she said.





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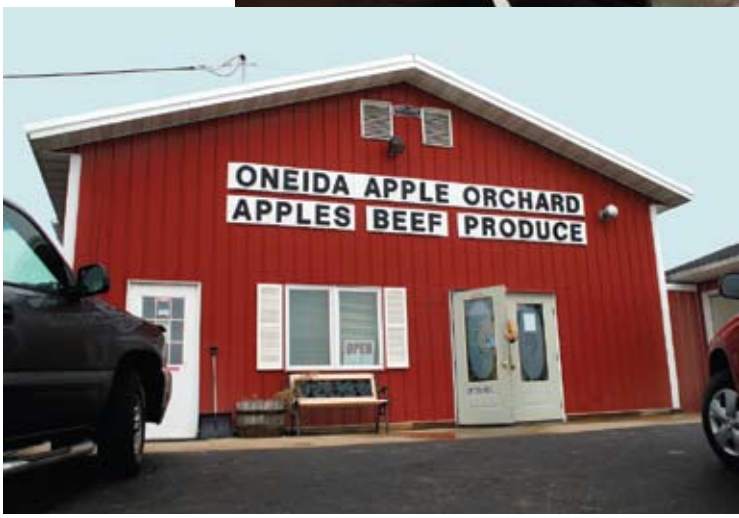
It is an integral part of a person's lifestyle and the vast, complex system of life in the natural world. When one part of this system is disrupted, the entire lifestyle swings out of balance.

As a result, remedying a diet-related illness is not as straightforward as changing what one eats. Rather, it is about reconnecting to one's role in the natural order of the world to re-establish a lifestyle that nourishes the mind and spirit as well as the body.

Smith and the Oneida Nation are among those working to re-establish that lifestyle. Heifer International is playing a role by helping indigenous populations reconnect with their food traditions and discover balance again.



A DIFFICULT HISTORY

Before Europeans began colonizing the continent, Native American tribes flourished from coast to coast, and their diets, culture and spirituality were connected to the places they lived.

"Some regions were more suitable for buffalo," Smith said. "Others had a fishing culture, or hunter-gatherer. The Navajo have sheep; the Pueblos [in the Southwest] have corn, beans and squash; there are the whale people of the Northwest."

Ceremonies were connected to certain foods and to the seasons, Smith said. Native Americans considered the foods of their region, plentiful and renewable, to be gifts from the Creator; they were the spiritual touchstone of a people.

After Europeans arrived, Native Americans' lifestyles changed. Many were forced to relocate and adapt to different landscapes and foods. The land that tribes were allotted for reservations was often resource-poor with limited access to game and fish. Lands once freely available to Native Americans for hunting and cultivation were developed for other purposes.

The first half of the 20th century brought more changes. Government-driven efforts at assimilation removed Native American children from their families and sent them to white schools where rules prohibited them from speaking their native languages, and the students had no access to traditional foods. On the reservations, the government replaced traditional local and seasonal foods with highly processed, high-calorie commodities.

A gap was opening between a people and their culture, and the damage was both mental and physical.

Clockwise from top left: Paul Smith—here with family members Synala, 9, Kwinwatha, 8, Ariel, 7, and Qualayou, 6—stresses the importance of not only traditional foods but also exercise in the prevention of diabetes. Flint corn is a traditional dietary staple for the Oneida in Wisconsin, who preserve it by braiding together the ears and hanging them to dry. A new store makes healthy meat and produce from local Oneida farms available to community members.

"How we're supposed to eat is in the traditional teachings, but we've become disconnected from it because of colonization and historical traumas," said Norma General from Six Nations Reserve in Ontario, Canada. General teaches health professionals about well-being through traditional ways.

"We're eating all kinds of foods from all different countries that aren't from where our people are from, and our DNA is confused by that," she said.

The epidemic of obesity and diet-related diseases spread through tribal communities gradually but steadily. Today, diabetes has become a troubling fact of life in virtually every Native American community. Many of those needing treatment live in rural areas and must travel long distances for medical care. Due to the high demand, some tribes are building their own dialysis centers on reservations.

BEGINNING TO HEAL

The diabetes epidemic is having at least one positive effect. There is a renewed focus on the traditional Native American foods, lifestyles and teachings, and how those may restore health and balance.

On Oneida Nation lands outside Green Bay, the tribe established organic farms, an apple orchard, a cannery and a herd of buffalo. The name of one of these farms, Tsyunhehkwa (pronounced joon-HAY-kwah) is an Oneida word that means "that which supports us." This and the other projects are demonstration sites to teach Native Americans from around the country the fundamentals of setting up and operating small, sustainable farms.

The projects focus on white flint corn and other foods central to the Oneida culture. The goal is to create a sustainable and renewable source of nutrition and income. It is a system that will, ideally, draw on the old foods and traditions and make them a productive part of modern tribal life.

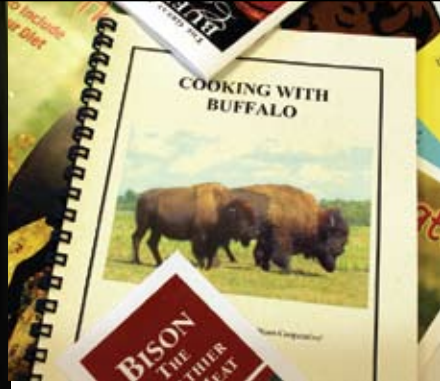
THE THREE SISTERS OF LIFE

On an afternoon last fall, a small group of representatives from Native American communities gathered at Tsyunhehkwa during the white corn harvest. Hosted by Heifer International, the group learned about organic farming, shared information on their own work and connected with others with similar goals. Participants, whose tribal affiliations included the Onondaga Nation, the Akwasasne Mohawks, the Cayuga Nation, the Menomonee Nation and the Oneida Nation, came from as far away as upstate New York.

Smith, who has a degree in agriculture from the University of Wisconsin, shared technical information on cultivating crops. Part of the challenge, he said, is adapting traditional ways to modern practices. He told the group a story from when he first started farming, when he planted beans from seeds he bought at a farm supply store. He saved the seeds from that crop and planted them the following year—but the seeds were sterile, and nothing grew.

"The old guy down the road was laughing at me," he said. "He told me, 'You planted white-man beans. You've got to plant our beans!'"

Ironically, those traditional ways—like saving seeds from year to year and planting crops together



Pat Cornelius, an Oneidan, raises buffalo on her farm near Green Bay, Wisc., and sells the frozen meat at the Oneida produce store. Cornelius is a local expert on raising and cooking with this traditional meat.

DIABETES IN NATIVE AMERICAN POPULATIONS

Native Americans and Alaska Natives on average are 2.2 times more likely to have diabetes than non-Hispanic whites.

Diabetes is most common among Native Americans living in the southern United States, 26.7 percent, and southern Arizona, 27.6 percent.

Diabetes is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease, which is the leading cause of death among Native Americans.

People with diabetes are 2 to 4 times more likely to have heart disease or suffer a stroke.

Perhaps the steepest obstacle is helping people understand the value of ancestral knowledge.

that sustain each other, like the "Three Sisters" of squash, beans and corn—are often closer to the popular organic and sustainable methods than to modern agriculture. It is important, the group agreed, to recognize these techniques for what they are: part of an entire worldview that values balance, renewability and the cycle of life and death.

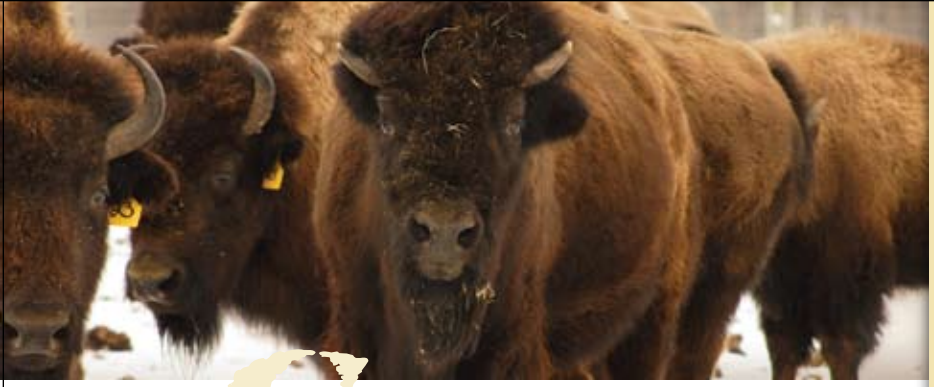
As Ann Marie Cross-Laughing of the Mohawk Nation said, "You can look at it the scientific way—that you plant corn, squash and beans together because the beans draw the nitrogen down and give it to the corn, and so on—or you can look at it and say, 'We were instructed by the Creator to plant the Three Sisters of life, and that's our way of thinking.'"

MAKING IT WORK

One of the biggest challenges for tribes hoping to nurture ties to a traditional way of life and reconnect to the land is how to make such an operation productive and sustainable. Not all indigenous groups have the resources of the Oneida, whose revenue from casinos helped start their farming projects. They run their operation to be self-sustaining and have been successful at marketing their goods.

Vegetables and apples from the Oneida farms and orchard are sold at a nearby store, along with buffalo steaks and products from the cannery.

Under the guidance of Pat Cornelius, an energetic woman who oversees the tribe's buffalo herd, the orchard has more than doubled in size.



Like the Three Sisters, it works best if everyone works together.

It now grows 37 varieties of apples and offers a successful pick-your-own operation. The orchard also offers customers a popular long-term payment plan. Cornelius is working to add buffalo meat, leaner and healthier than beef, to local school menus. Many of her products are now sold at Woodman's, a statewide chain store.

In the beginning, people around the Oneida community had their doubts about the project's viability.

"People are afraid the land is polluted," said Cross-Laughing, who lives near the Canadian border. "Also, farming isn't that lucrative, and there are better ways to make money, like working at the cigarette factory."

Perhaps the steepest obstacle is helping people understand the value of ancestral knowledge.

"The biggest issue," General said, "is recognizing that our way of life is beneficial to us."

Much of what Heifer, Smith and others are working toward is forging connections among the communities interested in re-establishing traditional food systems. The work can be difficult.

"We honestly don't have the communities we used to have and the connections we used to have," Cross-Laughing said.

Still, the work is helping to strengthen and heal communities scarred by the loss of traditional food systems and knowledge. It is, in a way, a form of cultivation. Like the Three Sisters, it works best if everyone works together.

"All we have to do is look at the plants," General said. "They can teach us about inclusion, support and helping each other grow. They can help us learn how to be a family."

the Three Sisters

The Iroquois revered squash, corn and beans as nature's life-sustaining gifts, which are known as the "Three Sisters." Native American legend tells of the spirits of the Three Sisters safeguarding and blessing the harvests of these three crops. The sisters are said to be inseparable, a blessing to be planted, eaten and celebrated together.

The Oneida Indian Nation Health Department began the "Three Sisters Nutrition Project" to improve the health of Native Americans living in central New York.

Find recipes from the *Three Sisters Cookbook* at **www.oneida-nation.net/cookbook**.

The companion planting of corns, beans and squash offers unique benefits to novice and expert gardeners. These crops optimize growing conditions for one another.

CORN provides sturdy stalks and supports the growing pole beans.

BEANS make the soil rich in nitrogen, which corn plants need to thrive.

SQUASH leaves surround the ground around the corn and bean plants, keeping the soil moist. The squash's prickly stems ward off hungry animals looking for a tasty meal.