



Good Medicine Bundle

DIGITAL LESSONS

OPERATION
PREVENTION

Tribal Sovereignty and its Connection to Health



Middle School Activity



Activity

Tribal Sovereignty & its Connection to Health



Focus Skill

Personal Sovereignty



Time

60–90 minutes

OVERVIEW

In this activity, students learn the definition of sovereignty and how it relates to tribes as nations. Many Americans do not know that tribes are recognized as sovereign and that after years of suffering the effects of historical trauma, are reclaiming that sovereignty to grow traditional foods and practice traditional ways of healing. This lesson will show that the concept of reclaiming inherent sovereignty over their own lives can strengthen their bodies and minds rather than allow substances or other unhealthy choices bring harm to them.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- ◆ Define the word sovereignty and learn how it relates to American Indian tribes.
- ◆ Explore how some Navajo people are using food sovereignty to encourage more traditional food diets rather than viewing frybread as a cultural meal.
- ◆ Discuss how sovereignty and community access to food or food sources are connected.
- ◆ Discuss the relationship between food, community, personal health, and identity.

MATERIALS

- ◆ Student Handout 1: (*article: only page 1*) “*Understanding Tribal Sovereignty*”
- ◆ See, Think, Wonder activity images
- ◆ Student Handout 2: “*The Relationship of Sovereignty, Food, and Health*”
- ◆ Student Handout 3: *Activity Reflection*

LESSON RESOURCES

[“Understanding Tribal Sovereignty”](#)
Page 1 only

Student Handout 2: Evaluating My Own
Sovereignty

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[See, Think, Wonder](#) protocol for teachers
from “Facing History and Ourselves”

[The Long Walk presented by Native
Knowledge 360 from the National Museum
of the American Indian](#)

[Cross Cultural Contacts Changes in the
Diet and Nutrition of the Navajo Indians](#)

(Extension of learning) [Native Farm to
School Project and Webinar Series](#)

STANDARDS

National Health Education Standards

- ◆ Standard 5: Students will demonstrate the ability to use decision-making skills to enhance health.
- ◆ Standard 8: Students will demonstrate the ability to advocate for personal, family, and community health.

English Language Arts Common Core State Standards

- ◆ Reading:
 - ◆ R.1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
 - ◆ R.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details & ideas.
- ◆ Speaking & Listening:
 - ◆ SL.2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.



Procedure

1. Begin the activity by asking students to jot down what comes to their mind when they hear the word “sovereignty.” Then ask them to jot down what comes to their mind when they hear the word “power.” If students are unsure of the definition of sovereignty, spend time defining and discussing the meaning. Then ask students to think about what decisions they have the “power” to make for themselves at this stage in their lives. Share with students that today’s activity is going to share what sovereignty means to American Indian people and how that can help us think about our own health and choices.
2. Next, as a class read Student Handout 1: “Understanding Tribal Sovereignty.” This article shares an overview of what many Americans do not know about the American Indian tribes. They are recognized as sovereign nations. However, much of that sovereignty has been harmed by federal policies, broken treaties, and forced relocation that many tribes have suffered under. The sovereignty explained in this page is not given by a governing agency but is instead inherent. This is important to emphasize as the connection is that each person has an inherent sovereignty to determine their own health practices, beliefs, career choices, and other life directions. This is important also in considering harmful addictions such as alcohol and substance misuse or even lack of healthy food options, which takes away a person’s sovereignty.
3. To prepare for the focused reading, use a See, Think, Wonder task to introduce students to currently used traditional Navajo food sources. For time considerations, provide one image per small group. Give them time to complete the activity using the See, Think, Wonder protocol. Then, groups can share out as their image is shown to the whole class. Record student questions to answer during or after the next reading. Questions can also become a research activity after this lesson is completed. (Notes for the teacher: This activity shows a few of the traditional food sources from the land that Navajo people have relied on for centuries: sumac, berries, various types of corn, and sheep/mutton. Regional traditional foods also included beans and squash. While these images are current, many Navajo people have had to reintroduce these farming techniques to return to food heritage and reclaim their healthy balance with nature rather than rely on processed foods introduced post-colonization. One interesting fact is that sheep/wool have become very important parts of Navajo food and textile, however, sheep were introduced in the 1600s by Spanish explorers. Prior to that, Navajo hunted deer and prairie dogs.)



Procedure (continued)

4. Next, share with students that they will be reading an article that connects what they read about sovereignty and the images of traditional foods. It is recommended that students read Student Handout 2: “The Relationship of Sovereignty, Food, and Health” as a shared read because of its complexity. Students may read this in small groups but because of the concepts, which may be new to many students, teacher guidance is recommended. Allow students time to answer the questions on the reading handout before opening a discussion.
5. As the image on page 2 of the handout demonstrates a reciprocal and cyclical process of food sovereignty, this discussion may be best if done in a circle. Tribes traditionally used talking circles as symbolic and inclusive methods to conversing and still practice this custom today. Open with the opportunity for students to share their reflections on the article and how it relates to their own community. Then, here are a few discussion points to direct students toward:
 - ◇ Our health is directly connected to identity. For Native people, that identity is even more grounded in the land in which they live and the connection to its resources. To feel balanced in our identity, we need to also feel balanced in our relationship with food, traditions, and our community. This is how people can heal from traumas or hurt more holistically than turning to substances or false relationships.
 - ◇ When this relationship with land or community is broken or disrupted, this is where trauma happens. Reclaiming those relationships or working toward new ones are how we respond to trauma and find harmony in our identity.
 - ◇ Our bodies and minds exist in a relationship with others and nature. There is a desire for harmony in this relationship.
 - ◇ Sovereignty can be enacted at a personal and community level. It is about making your decisions and not allowing yourself to be taken over by substance misuse or addiction, harmful thoughts, or negative habits.
 - ◇ Emphasize with students that exercising personal sovereignty means being able to avoid following others’ negative behaviors. People may try to convince you to take opioids or try pills that they found at home or to participate in illegal things. When you have control over your mind and emotions, you are less likely to be influenced by others’ poor decisions.
6. To close out the lesson give students time to complete the reflection questions on Student Handout 3. If students list any additional questions, consider seeking answers to those questions or reach out to a local tribe or Native organization for support.
7. This topic may be very new for many students and they may need more time to discuss or ask questions. If time allows, this may be an opportunity for students to explore the Native Knowledge 360 site by the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian or research other information on Native sovereignty. For additional resources or instructional materials, visit the National Indian Education Association Resources page at www.niea.org



Understanding Tribal Sovereignty

Part 1: Defining Tribal Sovereignty

Tribal sovereignty encompasses legal, cultural, political, and historical traditions that are a complex mix of both European and Indigenous approaches to governance. There are three types of sovereign governments in the United States: the federal government, state governments, and tribal governments.

- A *federal government* derives its sovereign power from the people—its voting citizens.
- A *state government* derives its sovereign power from the federal government.
- A *tribal government* derives its sovereign power from the people and from its connection to ancestral territory. Tribal sovereignty is not a gift bestowed by an external government and is not outlined in the U.S. Constitution, although the sovereign status of tribes is recognized by the U.S. government and has been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Sovereign nations have the right to form their own government, determine membership or citizenship, make and enforce laws, regulate trade within borders, and form alliances with other nations. Sovereignty is the internationally recognized right of a nation to govern itself, and American Indian tribes existed as sovereign governments long before Europeans settled in the Americas.

In the pre-contact period (see sidebar) tribes embodied sovereignty by negotiating treaties and agreements with each other. In the colonization period, sovereignty was inherent in the interactions between tribes and the developing government of the United States and was later described in the Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution, which states *“The Congress shall have power ... to regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several states, and with the Indian Tribes”* (Article I, Section 8, Clause 3). Many subsequent legal cases have firmly established the government-to-government relationship between American Indian tribes and the U.S. government.

IMPORTANT HISTORICAL PERIODS

The interaction between American Indian/Alaska Native people and Euro-Americans can be divided into the following historical periods:

- Pre-contact period, from time immemorial to 1492
- Colonization period, from 1492 to an indeterminate date
- Treaty period, 1789–1871
- Removal period, 1834–1871
- Allotment/assimilation period, 1887–1934
- Tribal reorganization, 1934–1958
- Termination, 1953–1988
- Self-determination, 1975–present



See, Think, Wonder



Figure 1: Grinding Sumac Berries for food
(<http://navajopeople.org/blog/navajo-food/>)

Figure 2: Irene Bernalley walks her herd of Navajo-Churro sheep out to grazing land where extreme drought has gripped the Four Corners region near Two Grey Hills, New Mexico. Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times (<https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-05-06/navajo-nation-latest-deaths>)



Figure 3: Navajo corn grower holding blue, turquoise, red, purple, Prussian blue corn
(<https://www.motherearthgardener.com/plant-profiles/blue-corn-and-corn-colors-zmaz15wzsbak>)



Student Handout 2

The Relationship of Sovereignty, Food, & Health

The definition of sovereignty at the basic level is the power to self-govern. While some see sovereignty as something that is given by another power, others, such as Native American tribes, view sovereignty as something that has always been inherent. While sovereignty may seem to be a term just for government, it also means the ability to make decisions about resources, business, beliefs, and other important aspects of life. For example, many indigenous peoples across the globe are returning to what is termed food sovereignty. In the United States, some tribes have tried to maintain traditional systems of finding food such as salmon fishing in the Pacific Northwest or buffalo hunting by the Plains Indians; however, government restrictions and the fight for land rights have disrupted some of these food systems. For other tribes, food sovereignty means returning to the land to provide food rather than rely on processed foods easily bought at the grocery store. Regardless of the source, reclaiming food sovereignty is a matter of cultural heritage, sustainability, and health.

One controversial debate in food sovereignty is that many tribes have adopted traditional foods, such as the very famous frybread which is a staple to a Native diet just like the tortilla is to a Latin diet. Frybread, especially in the form of Indian tacos, can be found at any gathering or local restaurant in many states with higher Native populations. However, this comfort food also brings with it a heated debate over food sovereignty. In simple terms, frybread is made from wheat flour and typically fried in lard or oil. Wheat is an ingredient brought to the United States by way of European settlers; thus, it is not a traditional food source. Further controversy is that the origin of frybread is the historically traumatic story of the Navajo Long Walk, in which the Navajo were forced off their sacred hunting and agricultural lands (now present-day Arizona, northern New Mexico, and some of Utah and Colorado). The U.S. government required them to walk 300 miles to an area of southeast New Mexico to a land that did not offer the type of food source or rich soil that the Navajo were accustomed to. Faced with starvation, Navajo had to eat what animals and plants could be found in the desert land and had no choice but to eat the typically outdated or undercut rations provided by the government. This was typically weevil-infested flour, sugar, coffee, and lard. Mixing some of these ingredients eventually led to the creation of frybread. Eventually, the relocated Navajo were able to return home after this failed government experiment but the damage to their food sources was already done. The full reliance on the land for food shifted to more reliance on commercial foods and the new diet tradition of frybread spread.

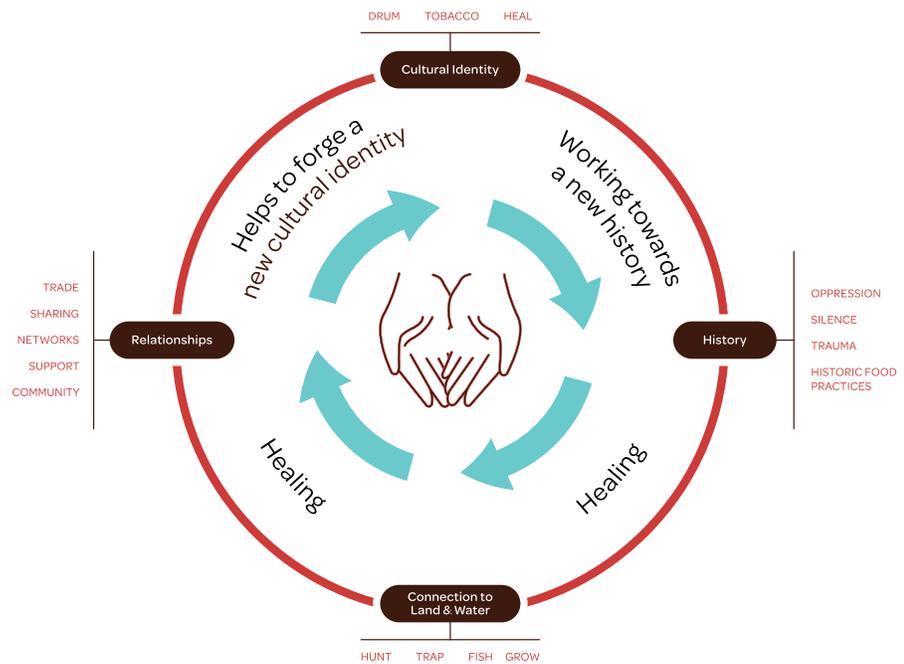


Figure 4: <https://eatingtheworld.net/2016/03/09/navajo-tacos/>



While some see frybread as a symbol of Native resiliency and survival, others see it as a reminder of the devastating effects of colonization and forced relocation. Because of the high fat and carbohydrate content, the bread is sometimes considered as one reason that diabetes and heart disease are higher among Native people. Because of the extreme health issues, there are movements to reclaim the food sovereignty by tribes who want to improve the health of their people and move away from commercial food sources to reliance on their lands and traditional resources. This is also a response to the poor mental health of many Native people who are still suffering the effects of the historical traumas like the Long Walk or forced attendance to strict boarding schools that attempted to eliminate all cultural practices of Native children.

This trauma has also increased the use of alcohol, drugs, or even reliance on prescription medications such as opioids. The hope of a return to food sovereignty is that healthier and more traditional food sources will also improve the overall health of tribal members. Though sovereignty is something inherent, many tribes are working to enact their sovereignty by revitalizing their Native languages, food systems, and cultural practices. A return to food sovereignty is critical to the identity of Native people as individuals and communities. It is a path to healing and thriving for years to come.



Many tribes lost their homelands and no longer had access to the vegetation or soil used to grow and harvest foods and over time lost connections with the land and the tradition of harvest. The concept of food sovereignty allows for Native people to reconnect to their traditional spirituality, their environment, and traditional cultural activities. Food sovereignty also teaches another key cultural value: stewardship. In Pueblo tribes in the Southwest, the spiritual calendar aligns with growing season and hunting season. The crops grown not only provide sustenance, but also they are used in ceremony. For example, corn and its many parts are used in various ways for spiritual purposes. Corn kernels are ground to meal to offer prayers, and corn husks are used to roll Native tobaccos in ceremony. The corn is also eaten in various ways. The land where the crops are grown are blessed and reseeded with crops from the previous year. The water that is used to grow these crops is blessed and comes from the surrounding mountains, which provide various cultural and spiritual components like evergreen branches for ceremony. The animals that inhabit the mountains are hunted for sustenance and ceremony. In this process, there is a reciprocal balance within nature and reclaiming food sovereignty and maintaining these food pathways places Native peoples back into this reciprocal balance with nature, land, and their identity.

References:

- Robin, T. (2019). Our hands at work: Indigenous food sovereignty in Western Canada. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 9(Suppl. 2), 85–99. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2019.09B.007>
- Kopp, J. (1986). Crosscultural Contacts: Changes in the Diet and Nutrition of the Navajo Indians. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 10(4), 1-30.

Reader Response Questions:

How does this article further explain sovereignty? What does food sovereignty mean?

What does this article reveal about the relationship between land and a person's identity? How is this a space of trauma for Native people? How is it an opportunity for healing?

How can food sovereignty help a community or individual avoid becoming dependent on prescription medications such as opioids?



Student Handout 3

Activity Reflection

Directions: Reflect on what you learned and discussed in this activity. Compose a paragraph response on each of the reflection questions below:

How could a community like the one in which you live embrace food sovereignty?
What might that look like?

Does your culture, family, or community have a traditional food or meal? Are there cultural stories behind that food?

What questions do you still have after finishing this activity?

