

Lesson 2.1: Native Foods for Today's World

LESSON INTRODUCTION

Time Frame: 1 class period

Materials:

- Native Foods KWL [Worksheet](#)
- [IndigiKitchen TED talk](#)
- [KCET Episode - Decolonizing the Diet](#)
- Native Foods for Today's World film [notetaker](#)
- Acorn Bites [Article](#)

In this lesson students are introduced to **traditional Native foods** in California and learn about **food sovereignty**. Students explore contemporary examples of California Native foods that range in style, method, and degree of tradition. Students learn that Native foods are diverse, tasty, and healthy.

Teacher Background:

Native or Indigenous foods in North America can vary dramatically depending on their geographic region. California Natives have traditionally enjoyed an abundance of food options as a result of the wide **biodiversity** of the land. The practice of **Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)**, methods for tending the landscape that have been developed over thousands of years by Native people, specifically aims to ensure ample food production across California's varied landscapes.

As settlers seized land from Native peoples, regulations were put in place that banned the use of many TEK practices, such as cultural burning, traditional salmon fishing, and hunting. These practices were instead replaced with the construction of dams, the development of protected wildlands on which maintenance and "interference" by humans was severely limited, deforestation, and mining, which polluted waterways once relied upon for food. Traditional methods for obtaining cultural foods became difficult to practice.

In addition to these environmental regulatory shifts, federal policy aimed at assimilation discouraged and forbade traditional Tribal practices, often leading to

changes in diet that accompanied the placement of Native peoples onto reservations. On reservations, Native communities found themselves with little to no infrastructure, no economic prospects, and on top of that, reservations were generally located in areas that were difficult to farm. Because Natives had few, if any, food sources, the US government began to issue food rations, usually consisting of flour, coffee, tea, and beef. This massive shift in the types of foods consumed by Natives has led to enormous health disparities. Diseases most common in Indian Country are diabetes, coronary health disease, and obesity. Many reservation residents still depend on these rations today.

Across the United States, Tribal communities are reinvigorating their traditional foodways as a way of supporting food sovereignty. Because of the negative impact of Western food on Native health, communities are working to reintroduce traditional foods and food production methods into their communities. In many cases, this traditional knowledge was never truly lost. Some methods of supporting food sovereignty are: developing community health centers that grow and distribute healthy Indigenous foods to Native families, community gathering and hunting trips, using traditional trapping and fishing methods on traditional waterways, and envisioning Native foods through a modern lens in Native-owned restaurants and businesses.

As the general public becomes more aware of the foods indigenous to the places they live, multiple understandings are strengthened. First, it becomes obvious that Westernized, processed foods can be poisonous to the body, and are incredibly detrimental to Native peoples and people who have little access to affordable healthy foods. Westernized, **processed foods** should be consumed in limited quantities. Second, supporting indigenous foods means supporting the ecosystem in a way that avoids overconsumption. When advocating for the consumption of **local**, indigenous foods, communities must consider how that food is being cultivated and collected, and how humans are ensuring the health of the food web in order to promote new growth the following season. Lastly, **traditional foods** in Native communities are cultivated and consumed using culturally specific methods and ideologies, ones that are integrally connected to story, song, and ceremony. Non-Natives should take time to consider these things when thinking about how to incorporate traditional foods into their own diets so as to be respectful to Native communities who rely on these foods and avoid appropriating cultural traditions.

Food and the Local Ecosystem:

Traditional Ecological Knowledge is based on the understanding that all organisms within an ecosystem are in relation to one another. The health of one organism is intimately connected to the health of another. In this way, understanding the Native traditional diet means building an awareness of how nurturing a healthy ecosystem is a

part of human health. By using fire to support oak tree health, for example, Natives also support the health of insect, bird, squirrel, deer, grass, and mushroom communities, and ensure a bountiful acorn crop for Native peoples. Supporting the health and biodiversity of Native grasses supports deer, insects, reptiles, flowers, rabbit, elk, human, and many other plant and animal communities. All of these organisms rely on one another in some way. The need for nutritional, reliable food sources necessitates a deep understanding of how every organism in one's local ecosystem are related.

Consuming local Native foods extends beyond meeting nutritional needs; traditional foods bring with them cultural histories and practices that are often passed down through **oral tradition**. Stories warn of the importance of maintaining spiritual balance with the natural world in hopes of receiving productive harvests. Gathering, storing, and cooking baskets made from the reeds and shoots of well-maintained plants highlight the many different plants that take part in the entire process of growing, preparing, and eating food. Eating is not just about filling one's stomach or curbing hunger. How we grow and gather food, how we store and prepare it, and finally, how we eat it, all contribute to the community's spiritual, physical, mental, environmental, and emotional health.

[Traditional Foods of the Pomo People:](#)

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|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Blackberries | Roots/Tubers |
| Elderberries | Mushrooms |
| Manzanita Berries | Grains |
| Rose Hips | Seeds/Flowers/Grasses (Pinole) |
| Vegetables | Protein Mussels/Clams/Abalone |
| Red Clover/Wildflowers | Venison/Elk/Rabbit |
| Miner's Lettuce/Dandelion | Salmon/Fish |
| Seaweed/Kelp | Acorns |
| Cattails | Hazelnuts/Nuts |
| | Quail/Birds/Eggs |

ENGAGE

Lead students through the following writing prompt:

Quick Write: Every family has its own traditions around food. Describe one of your favorite foods from your family's culture. When do you eat this food? Why? Do you know why these foods are important to your family?

EXPLORE

Explain to students that Native people all over the country eat in different ways, depending on their local ecosystem. While Natives in Northern California have acorns as a staple food, Natives in the desert areas of California may value cactus and other Indigenous foods to their area. Tribes frequently traded foods with one another across regions, and so many Natives had access to foods that grew outside of their local region. This lesson explores a bit of the history of Native food, how it has changed over time, what the impacts of Western foods has had on Native health, and lastly, how Natives are eating their traditional foods today.

Provide students with the **Native Foods: KWL worksheet**. Explain to students that the next set of lessons explores the relationship between our ecosystem, our food, and our health as people.

The **KWL brainstorm** allows students to reflect on their prior knowledge and begin to build curiosity. Students complete the “**I Know**” and “**I Want to Know**” sections before watching the featured short films in this lesson. You may choose to do a class KWL to hang in the classroom for reference.

Provide students with the **Native Foods for Today's World film notetaker**.

Project the first film (we recommend watching the TED Talk [“Indigikitchen”](#) first, since it emphasizes health). Review the questions with students.

Repeat the process with a second film. We recommend [“KCET: Decolonizing Diet,”](#) as it clearly connects culture, food, and health. Many similar films exist on revitalizing traditional foods, so feel free to substitute either film.

EXPLAIN

Return to the **Native Foods: KWL chart**. Ask students to fill out the “**What I Learned**” section and add to the “**What I Want to Know**” section. You may choose to return to this chart after any of the following lessons to have students add to their knowledge.

Explain to students that Native or Indigenous foods are important for the health and wellness of Native people, but they are also important for non-Native people living in the United States.

This is because when we eat food that is locally indigenous to our towns, we center the health of our local ecosystems in our eating. For example, when we rely on foods that are imported or processed in other places, we may feel less responsible for our local food webs, since we do not rely on them for our food. This can lead to abuse and mistreatment of the ecosystem.

Ask students to consider: **if they relied on berries or acorns for their diet, would they do things to pollute or ruin the environment that berries or oak trees grow in?**

Here, it might be helpful to remind students that oak trees are not only a source of food for Native people, but also a source of food for many other organisms. Even if a person doesn't eat acorns or Native traditional foods, every plant in our ecosystem provides some kind of essential service to the organisms in the ecosystem in which we live. Because of this, even non-Natives benefit from supporting Native food webs.

Learning about what foods are local to your environment is one way to support local Native communities. Another way is to support local efforts to connect Native people with their traditional foods.

ELABORATE

Next, explain to students that they are going to read about youth around their age who are working to connect their community with Native local foods.

In partners, have students read and answer analysis questions for the reading “**Modern Traditions: Youth Acorn Bites Program**”

Once students are finished, return to the **KWL** and fill in more information.

As an extension, you may provide students with the link to the [Indigikitchen youtube channel](#) and ask them to explore some of the featured recipes. Episodes are about a minute long.

EVALUATE

As a class, discuss the following questions:

1. What are some reasons that Native or Indigenous foods are healthy?
2. What is the cultural significance of eating the foods of one's ancestors?
3. What are some of the challenges that Native people have in accessing their traditional foods?
4. What are people your age doing to promote Native foods?

VOCABULARY

Indigenous: Produced, growing, living, or occurring Natively or naturally in a particular region or environment

Food Sovereignty: To achieve independence in terms of the production and provision of food. Communities who achieve food sovereignty grow, distribute, and consume their own food from their own food sources

Reinvigorate: To give new or renewed strength or energy to (something or someone): to invigorate (something or someone) again

Nutrition: Related to eating foods that provide the nutrients needed to live. Nutrients found in food and drink help provide energy to the body

STANDARDS

Common Core:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.1

Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.2

Determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

CA Indian Essential Understandings:

Essential Understanding 2: California Indian identity is individual and the range of Tribal identity from assimilated to traditional is unique to each individual. The diversity of identity means there is no standard or cookie cutter appearance or behavior. There is no generic American Indian, in California, or in the United States.

Essential Understanding 4: California Indian peoples' histories and cultures have been and continue to be impacted by foreign, state, and federal policies. Policies developed during the Mission Period, the Gold Rush Allotment, the Boarding School Period, termination policies, and self-determination policies are integral parts of the history of tribes in California.

Essential Understanding 5: Land and place are unique and inextricably tied to Tribal cultures.

CA Health Standards:

1.1.N Describe the short- and long-term impact of nutritional choices on health.

1.5.N Differentiate between diets that are health-promoting and diets linked to disease.

1.10.N Identify the impact of nutrition on chronic disease.

CA Environmental Principles and Practices:

Principle 5 - Decisions Affecting Resources and Natural Systems are Complex and Involve Many Factors

Concept B. The process of making decisions about resources and natural systems, and how the assessment of social, economic, political, and environmental factors has changed over time.

SOURCES

- Unnatural Causes: [Native Health Video](#)
- KCET [“An Oral History of the Klamath Salmon Wars”](#)
- KCET [“Healing the Body with United Indian Health Services”](#)
- Indigikitchen: [TED Talk](#)
- [Decolonizing the Diet](#)
- Full article [“Indigenous Youth Reboot Acorns to Revive Food Sovereignty”](#)