



Video: Indigenous food sovereignty

Description:

In this video, Charlotte Coté explains Indigenous food sovereignty and outlines its importance for building and nourishing strong and healthy Indigenous nations and communities. She explores the role of traditional foods in Indigenous Peoples' physical, emotional, and spiritual health. This video introduces chapter 18 of [*Introduction to Determinants of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples' Health in Canada*](#).

The NCCIH has developed a series of eight videos featuring discussions with some of the editors and authors of *Introduction to Determinants of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples' Health in Canada*. The videos offer real-world insight and perspective that illuminate key concepts in the book, but they can also be used as stand-alone learning tools for anyone teaching or promoting Indigenous health and well-being.

Transcript:

Charlotte Coté: (Speaking Nuu-chah-nulth language). My name is luutiismaʔuʕ. It's my Indigenous name. My English name is Charlotte. (Speaking Nuu-chah-nulth language.)

I come from an area known as Tsuma-as. It's on the west coast of Vancouver Island. I am Tseshaht. It's one of the groups that make up the larger Nuu-chah-nulth Nation. And I live in Seattle. I've been teaching at the University of Washington since 2001, and I'm a professor in the American Indian Studies department.

Indigenous food sovereignty really comes from, or it became part of a movement known as food sovereignty, and it was a movement that really challenged the current food regime, the global food regime that focused on food insecurity, looking at ways to address global hunger, global food insecurity. And what the organizations and the people who were behind food sovereignty wanted was to find a way that would bring back the control over food production to those small communities that really lost that ability to be or that lost that voice in the larger global food forums about addressing food security in their smaller communities. What we started seeing was more and more food being produced worldwide, but a continual growth in food insecurity, especially in Indigenous communities.

So food sovereignty, which came out of... It was a definition that arose out of gatherings of small-scale farmers, peasant farmers, Indigenous farmers throughout the world that led to the food sovereignty movement. It addressed the rights of people to produce, to consume, to harvest their own foods, cultural foods, as well as to produce and eat foods that were nutritionally healthy.

Indigenous food sovereignty really takes that concept and applies it to the relationships that we have with our environments, especially with the plants and animals that give themselves to us as food. So Indigenous food sovereignty then moves beyond being a rights-based discourse, that is the right to eat

your food or to produce food, consume food, and moves it into a relationships discourse. The need for Indigenous peoples to create and build and strengthen those relationships that we have to our environments, to the plants, to the animals that give themselves to us as food, as a way to nourish and revitalize health and wellness in our Indigenous communities. And that's really how we're framing the concept of food sovereignty within our Indigenous communities.

There is a role that traditional foods or cultural foods have in Indigenous peoples' physical, emotional, and spiritual health. And this was something that I've addressed in my most recent book, my book titled "A Drum in One Hand, a Sockeye in the Other: Looking at Northwest Coast Indigenous Food Traditions". There are social and cultural and spiritual aspects to our *haʔum*, which in my language, that means food.

The social aspects of that is coming together to gather and harvest foods. If you're going to the supermarket, and that's the only place, the only interaction, or the only connections you have to the foods that you put in your body, you really lose that social impact, that social significance of foods, of coming together with your family, coming together with your elders, coming together with your youth to harvest. And myself, coming from a marine-based foods culture... our food traditions were centered in foods that we got from our waters.

Salmon, for example. Here in the Northwest Coast, salmon is one of the most important foods. And we have a cultural and spiritual connection to those foods. So it's not just about eating salmon. I can go to Safeway and pick up a package of salmon and eat salmon and have a connection to that specific food. But if I'm at home fishing for that salmon, cleaning that salmon, jarring and canning that salmon, and smoking that salmon with my relatives, there's a social component of that, that is missing if you just get your foods from a market, from a supermarket. So Indigenous food sovereignty really centers that, the importance of those social aspects of harvesting foods, of staying connected to your traditional foods.

There's also that spiritual connection. We believe everything that gives itself to us has a spirit. So plants, animals, all of those things that give themselves to us as food, it's the spirit of those plants and animals that we have a relationship with. So the continual harvesting of our traditional foods keeps us in balance. There's a reciprocal balance within that relationship and keeps us connected to those spirits of those plants and animals.

There's also the emotional role, and this is hard to explain to people about what it feels like to me as a *Tseshah̄t luucma*, that is a *Tseshah̄t* person, a *Tseshah̄t* woman, to go home and for the first time eat salmon, sockeye salmon, right out of the water, when the salmon is coming up our river. The emotional connection that I have to that is very different than when I go to a store here in Seattle and get salmon and bring it home and eat it. Because I don't have that same relationship, and I think we really forget that when we think about foods and the importance of foods.

We look at the dietary importance, and it is important. These foods that I'm talking about are foods that provide a lot of nutritional value in our diets, and something that we had lost because of colonization and settler colonialism. We lost those connections to foods that provided those nutrients. So a main aspect of that is reconnecting to those foods as a way to strengthen wellness in our communities. But it's also about strengthening and revitalizing our spiritual and emotional health along with our physical health.

National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health
(NCCIH)
3333 University Way
Prince George, British Columbia
V2N 4Z9 Canada

Tel: (250) 960-5250
Email: nccih@unbc.ca
Web: nccih.ca

Centre de collaboration nationale de la santé
autochtone (CCNSA)
3333 University Way
Prince George, Colombie-Britannique
V2N 4Z9 Canada

Tél : 250 960-5250
Courriel : ccnsa@unbc.ca
Site web : ccnsa.ca

© 2026 The National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH). This publication was funded by the NCCIH and made possible through a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of PHAC.