

Through tradition and trade, tribe in rural Kansas works to reclaim its food sovereignty

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Chickens provide fresh eggs for the tribe to sell and to feed its members. Credit: Walter Johnson Jr./American Heart Association

For those who live on the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska's reservation in the rural northeast corner of Kansas, access to healthy

food can be a challenge, to put it mildly.

The closest grocery store is about a half-hour's drive away. The only other nearby options are the casino restaurant in White Cloud and a gas station convenience store.

"You can't really walk somewhere and find an apple," [tribe](#) member Olivia Brien said. "You can't find a healthy option very close. You have to drive, and with that comes the cost of gas. If you don't have a car or you can't drive for whatever reason, you run into some issues."

Improving tribe members' access to [healthy food](#) is one reason the Ioway, also known as the Báxoje, are cultivating food sovereignty—reclaiming their [traditional practices](#) and seeking to build a future of self-sufficiency and sustainability.

For members of the Iowa Tribe, the importance of food sovereignty goes deeper than nutrition access. By focusing their resources on the tribe's growing farm operation and establishing a free trade zone near the Missouri River, the Ioway are working to preserve their culture, exercise self-governance and care for the environment.

"Transitioning from what would have been our traditional diets as Indigenous people on this land and being put towards a modern Western diet, we see a lot of health impacts from that," tribe member and climate resilience planner Brett Ramey said. "We see the physical repercussions of the empty calories and carbohydrates and fats, and all these things that we are eating."

Those repercussions include disproportionately higher rates of nutrition-related chronic diseases such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease. And [federal survey data shows](#) American Indian or Alaska Native high schoolers have the highest rate of obesity in the country.

Eating a healthy diet can be particularly challenging for American Indians because the nation's long history of structural racism has led to societal barriers and a historical lack of investment in their communities.

A [2022 review](#) in the journal *Advances in Nutrition* of more than two dozen studies suggests nearly half of American Indians experience food insecurity. That means an estimated 3.1 million American Indians may have insufficient access to nutritious foods. Nationally, about 13% of all U.S. households experienced food insecurity in 2022, [U.S. Department of Agriculture data](#) shows.

To remedy that, Ioway Farms focuses on large-scale food and feed production. The tribe's farming operation uses regenerative agriculture practices focused on soil health and diversity of produce across 2,400 acres of row crop production and 2,500 acres of pasture. In addition to raising corn and soybean as cash crops, the tribe runs a beef livestock operation and sells pasture-raised steaks.

Ioway Bee Farm, the largest tribal apiary in North America, sells honey for food processing and home consumption. The Ioway are producing sunflowers for oil, which can go into soaps, and they have an industrial hemp license. The tribe also is developing plans for the Ioway Seed Company to provide regeneratively produced cover crops and specialty seeds for food manufacturers and seed companies.

"We're taking over the food system so we can be able to create something and have all of those nutrients that our bodies need," said Tim Rhodd, the tribe's chairperson. "We are developing the model and the foundation to become more food sovereign and produce all the foods that we need for our community and our membership—and future generations to come."

That model includes the construction of a shipping site and the creation

of a free trade zone in nearby Holt County that will allow the tribe to import and export foreign goods without tariffs.

"Years and years ago, tribes traded and bartered. That's what we're doing today," Rhodd said. "In order for us to move ahead, we've got to revert back to our old ways."

The trade zone puts the Ioway in position to work with national food distributors and allows them to re-open long-dormant trade routes.

"We don't simply want to have our resources extracted for someone else's gain," said Missty Slater, the tribe's chief of staff. "We want to be a partner. When we talk about reinvigorating our trade routes, we need partners that are in it with us for mutual benefit, not to make a great story for their shareholders."

At the same time, the Ioway are working to solve the food access problem closer to home.

The tribe provides eggs for sale at its Grandview Oil Gas Station and Convenience Store and delivers them to the site that prepares group and home-delivered meals for older tribal members. There are plans to expand Grandview to accommodate space for a larger grocery store, with coolers for selling the tribe's meat, produce and eggs.

Making fresh food available for sale on tribal land will carry [economic benefits](#), but local sales aren't the main objective for the Grandview market.

"Creating a healthier community is more important than the money," said Cheyenne Colborn, a member of the tribe's executive committee. "The money will come, and it's going to help us prosper as a tribe. But if we can help our people be healthier, then that's the ultimate goal."

For tribe members like Ramey, it's also about regaining access to traditional foods. "For us, those are just the foods that can feed us not only physically—nourishing in all the vitamins and minerals they have—but also connected to our traditions and our stories. That is our nourishment for our heart," he said.

Tribe members also say self-governance and environmental stewardship are motivating factors in the push for food sovereignty. The tribe's move to incorporate regenerative agricultural practices, for example, has led not only to economic opportunity but also to a renewed connection with the land.

"These lands, they will take care of us—both from a spiritual aspect and from a physical aspect," said Brien, the tribe's director of communications. "They will feed us if we treat them correctly. Our Mother Earth will feed us; she will give us everything we need if we treat her correctly. And I think that we have kind of lost that in our country."

In 2022, the tribe earned its certification from Regenified, which sets industry standards for regenerative agriculture practices and allows verified operations to carry its seal.

The USDA funded the tribe's Center for Excellence in Regenerative Native Agriculture project, which educates farmers—Native and non-Native—on how to move from conventional to regenerative methods, as well as providing technical and [financial help](#).

"Water, air and wildlife don't stop at reservation borders," Slater said. "Those are things that don't care about reservation boundaries. We need to build relationships to have a positive impact on those things."

The goal, tribe members said, is for the Ioway to help other farmers find the same connection to the land—and achieve the same industry

standards for environmental stewardship.

"We have to bring everybody together in harmony and in sync with Mother Nature," Rhodd said. "That's what's been instilled in us as Native Americans. ... Mother Nature tells us everything we need to know.

"We just have to slow down and pay attention and work with Mother Nature, instead of against her."

Provided by American Heart Association

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