

one tribe's land to the next, covering more than 240 miles over 12 days, and eating nothing but traditional foods offered by the communities to spread awareness of the importance of retaining native diets.⁴⁸

As an organization that works to restore and strengthen agricultural traditions, the Tohono O'odham Community Action (TOCA) is dedicated to creating sustainable and culturally vital food systems that revitalize the cultural traditions of the Tohono O'odham Nation. Beginning with a community garden in 1996, TOCA now cultivates a farm of native O'odham foods and pays tribal members living wages to maintain this farm and gather other wild foods for community usage. Working with other organizations, TOCA invites artists, chefs, farmers, storytellers, and traditional performers from across North America to their native foods expos to preserve and rejuvenate Tohono O'odham and indigenous cultural traditions.⁴⁹ TOCA is inspiring people to embrace healthier lifestyles, reduce their chances of developing diabetes, and maintain self-sufficiency and culture.

Other Native American tribes and organizations that institute food sovereignty strategies and strive to regain control of their food systems through food production are: the InterTribal Bison Cooperative (57 tribes from 18 states), the Tohono O'odham Community Action (Tohono O'odham Nation), the Natwani Coalition (Hopi), the Indigenous PremaCulture of DeAtzlan and Traditional Native American Farmers Association (Akimel O'odham and Pee Posh), the Red Willow Center (Pueblo of Taos), Land Grant Office at Diné College (Navajo), and the Oneida Integrated Food Systems and Tsyunhehkwa Farm (Oneida). These organizations and programs implement farm to school or farm to cafeteria programs, which is when food grown from local farms and gardens are brought to schools to feed children. Since school

⁴⁸ Ibid., 202.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

cafeterias offer contracts with food distribution companies that provide “heat and serve” foods that are heavily processed and lack nutritional value, the farm to school program provides locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables to cafeterias instead.⁵⁰ The programs also provide school curriculum on healthy eating and agriculture and opportunities for students to assist at the farms and gardens. Many of these tribes and organizations have expanded their programs so they can distribute locally grown foods to communal gatherings and farmer’s markets. These programs show that Native Americans can successfully implement food sovereignty initiatives on their reservations, as long as they continue to work collectively and commit to change from a food sovereignty perspective. Native Americans know the answers to their rising health problems, they just need to continue to distance themselves from federal government programs and focus on strengthening their tribal leadership and sustainability.

The American Indian Healthy Eating Project, in partnership with seven Native American tribes in North Carolina, created “Tools for Healthy Tribes.” This policy toolkit provides technical assistance and tools on areas identified with the most potential to promote tribally led interventions within the participating tribes to improve access to healthy, affordable foods.⁵¹ Highlighting tribally owned community gardens and farmer’s markets, healthy powwow food options, healthy tribal stores and vending initiatives, and healthy family food activities, this toolkit encourages other tribes to develop and implement these initiatives to foster change in their communities. In addition, this toolkit is colorful with many pictures, making it appealing to read and easy to understand. Everything from how to access for food insecurity to how to start a

⁵⁰ Emily Dwyer, “Farm to Cafeteria Initiatives: Connections with the Tribal Food Sovereignty Movement.” National Farm to School Network: Urban and Environmental Policy Institute, Occidental College. April 2010. www.farmtoschool.org/files/publications_447.pdf.

⁵¹ Sheila Fleischhacker, Randi R. Byrd, Gowri Ramachandran, Maihan Vu, Amy Ries, Ronny A. Bell, and Kelly R. Evenson. “Tools for Healthy Tribes: Improving Access to Healthy Foods in Indian Country.” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 43, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): S124.

garden is included in this toolkit. This toolkit also includes guidance on how to write a grant proposal, which is an important component because without funding, food sovereignty projects often cannot be launched or survive.

The First Nations Development Institute, with assistance from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, produced a report, “Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool,” that provides tools to help Native American communities identify obstacles and opportunities in the areas of health, economic development, and cultural revitalization to develop successful native food sovereignty. This report describes what food sovereignty means on Native American land, while analyzing the historical injustices that lead to the economic, environmental, food, and health problems. By identifying food sovereignty as a critical part of community, land, and revitalization, this report urges tribes to create profiles of their community so they can better understand the opportunities available.⁵² Included in the report are the specific instructions on how to assess food sovereignty efforts, as well as a full set of survey questions and exercises to analyze the holistic view of food sovereignty. In addition to providing tools on how to access food sovereignty on Native American land, the First Nations Development Institute offers the Native American Food System Initiative (NAFSI) grant to tribes and Native communities who demonstrate a commitment to building sustainable food systems and improving the health and nutrition of Native children and families. In 2012, First Nations presented 29 Native organizations with 31 grants totaling \$905,000.⁵³ AARP Foundation, the Christensen Fund, CHS Foundation, U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of Advocacy and Outreach, U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural

⁵² Alicia Bell-Sheetter, “Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool: Native American and Food Systems Initiative.” *First Nations Development Institute*. Fredericksburg, VA: First Nations Development Institute, 2004. Accessed October 13, 2012: 37

⁵³ First Nations Development Institute: Native American Foods & Health, First Nations Develop Institute, last modified 2013, <http://www.firstnations.org/program-nativeamericanfoodsandhealth>.

Development, Walmart Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation support funding for the NAFSI grants.

Chapter 2

The Navajo Nation: A Food Desert

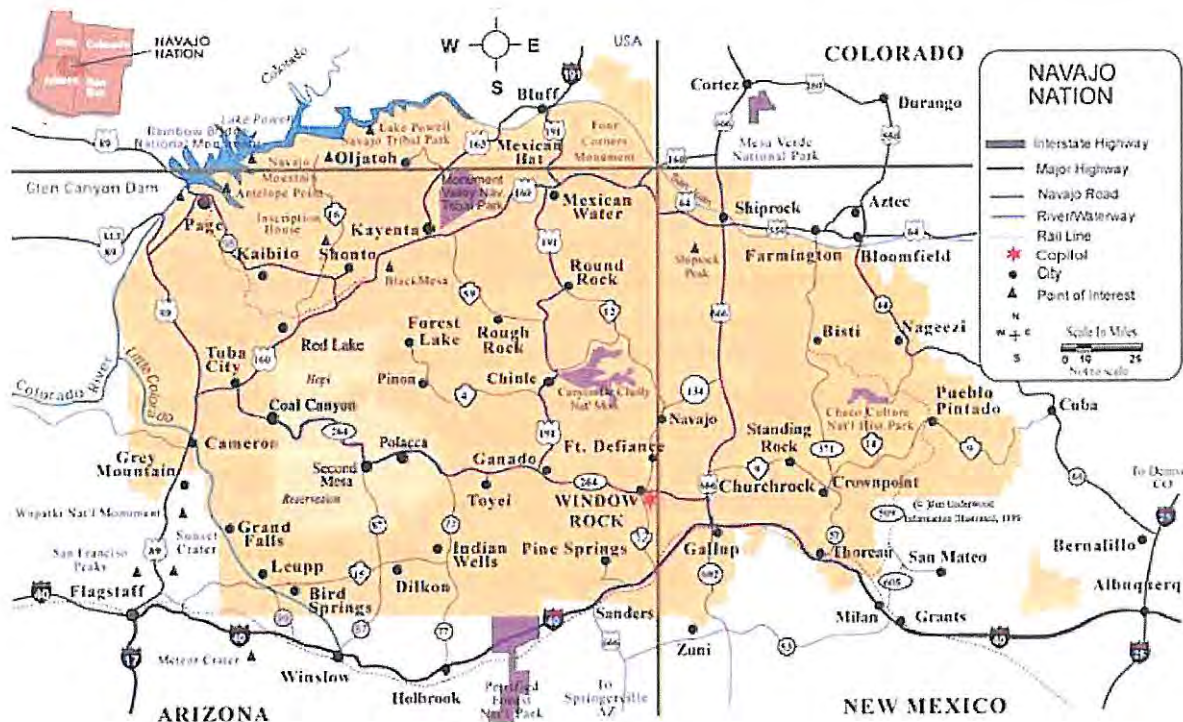
As the largest reservation in the United States, the Navajo Nation has an estimated land base of 27,000 square miles occupying northeastern Arizona, extending into the southeastern portion of Utah, and northwestern New Mexico. The number of enrolled members of the Navajo Nation is 332,000, with about 288,000 members living on the Navajo Nation.⁵⁴ According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the per capita income of the Navajo Nation is \$7, 269, about \$14,000 less than the national per capita income.⁵⁵ The median household income is \$20,005, compared to the national median household income of \$41,994. The number of individuals below the poverty level is 42.90% (nationally it is 12.38%) and the number of families below poverty level is 40.10%.⁵⁶ The median age of the Navajo population is 24 and the unemployment is 42%. The Navajo Nation's major annual revenue comes from mining, taxes, and tourism. The key industries and employers on the Navajo Nation include the following sectors: agriculture, service, manufacturing, government, and tourism. The Navajo Nation also receives revenue from its own Navajo Tax, which includes taxes from Possessory Interest, Business Activity, Oil & Gas Severance, Tobacco, Hotel Occupancy, Fuel Excise, and Sale Tax. As a government operating inside a larger government, the Navajo Nation strives to maintain a sovereign nation in the United States of America.

⁵⁴ Profile America: Facts for Features: American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month: November 2012, U.S. Census Bureau News, U.S. Department of Commerce, last modified 25 October 2012, http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/cb12-ff22.html.

⁵⁵ Most recent data from the 2010 Census is not available yet for the Navajo Nation.

⁵⁶ Navajo Nation Economic Development: An Overview of the Navajo Nation Demographics, The Navajo Nation Economic Development, <http://www.navajobusiness.com/fastFacts/demographics.htm>.

Map 1: Map of the Navajo Nation



www.navajoapparel.com

Navajo Nation Government

Like most Native American tribes, the organizational structure of the Navajo government system was forced upon the Navajo people by the United States government during the early 1900s. In 1989, the Navajo Tribal Council established three branches of government to form what is now the Navajo Nation government. The Navajo Nation is composed of five agencies (Ft. Defiance, Chinle, Crownpoint/Eastern Agency, Shiprock, and Tuba City/Western), which are similar to counties. Window Rock, Arizona is the capital of the Navajo Nation and serves as the key location for all the major tribal offices. The President and Vice President, Ben Shelly and Rex Lee Jim, head the Executive Branch. The Chief Justice of the Navajo Nation, Herb Yazzie, who was appointed by the President and confirmed by the Navajo Nation Council, heads the Judicial Branch. The Legislative Branch is comprised of 24 council delegates, who serve four-

year terms and represent the 110 chapters across the Navajo Reservation. The Navajo Nation Speaker, Johnny Naize, presides over the council and was elected by the council members. The Navajo Nation Council meets at least four times a year to discuss issues pertaining to their chapters and to pass new legislation. Navajo Nation Chapters are geographically subdivided populations of tribal members and each chapter is centered near a population center. These chapters serve as the local governing body for the Navajo people and allow the tribal members to vote on local economic development issues, such as home and business site leases, and to also vote for their council delegate. The Growth Center Strategy enables the Navajo Nation to measure the economic development growth and expansion of its people, so the tribe can provide better employment opportunities, expand the economic base, and generate more revenue.⁵⁷

The Navajo Nation court system is the largest established tribal legal system in the United States. The Navajo Nation Supreme Court applies foundational Navajo doctrine to modern legal issues to maintain the Navajo *Hózhó* (harmony) and *K'é* (a life-skill which teaches peace, harmony, serenity, and balance). It is the goal of the Navajo Nation government and leaders to preserve the traditional values and retain the Diné language. The Fundamental Laws of the Diné (*Diné Bi Beenahaz'aanii*) embodies a Traditional Law (*Diyin bitsaadee beehaz'aanii*), Customary Law (*Diyin Diné'e bitsaadee beehaz'aanii*), Natural Law (*Nahasdzaan doo Yadilihil bitsaadee beehaz'aanii*), and Common Law (*Diyin Nohookaa Diné bi beehaz'aanii*).⁵⁸ The Fundamental Laws allow the Diné people to maintain a balance with the natural world. It also provides guiding principles for the Navajo to administer policies for the

⁵⁷ Navajo Nation Division of Economic Development, Navajo Nation, DED, last modified 2004, <http://navajobusiness.com/index.htm>.

⁵⁸ James W. Zion, "Transcript of the Fundamental Laws of the Diné," NativeWeb, http://www.nativeweb.org/pages/legal/navajo_law.html.

betterment of the Navajo people as a whole. The Navajo Nation government strives to meet a balance with traditional Navajo values and the government structure already in place.

Early Navajo History of Food

The Diné believe that food is a gift from the Holy People (*Diyin Diné 'é*).⁵⁹ According to the Diné emergence story, *Diné Bahane*, the Holy People bestowed their blessings through rain and vegetation. They provided livestock to the Diné, along with prayers and songs, so the Diné could care for the animals. First Woman (*Áłtsé asdzáá*) gathered food from the land and learned to prepare it and First Man (*Áłtsé hastiin*) helped raise the livestock. Corn was planted by First Woman and was considered the foundation of Diné philosophy, because corn is used as food, medicine, and prayer. The Diné use corn pollen as a way to connect to the Holy People through prayer each day. In addition to corn, the Diné believed that abusing the plants and animals was the equivalent to abusing the Holy People; it was a horrible thing to do and it could make someone very sick. The Diné believe that preparing food is sacred because food comes from a living plant or animal, so it holds inner life. To eat food is to connect to the earth. Early traditional foods of the Navajo, that were either cropped or gathered, include: corn (including blue corn), squash, roots, parsley, wild onion, wild spinach, rhubarb, blue corn, pinon nuts, goat milk, sheep and goat meat, wild turkey, squirrel, prairie dog, rabbit, watermelon, peaches, cantaloupe, wild berries, yucca fruit, bean, wild potatoes, cedar berries, tobacco, and sumac.

Kit Carson's Scorched Earth Campaign

The Navajo Long Walk in 1864 is the key historical event that changed the Navajo's traditional livelihood. Thousands of Navajos were captured and forced by the United States Army to leave their homeland, Diné Bikéyah, and travel more than 450 miles on foot to a

⁵⁹ This section is based on personal knowledge of Diné philosophy and an interview with Diné historian, Avery Denny, 14 March 2013.

reservation in Bosque Redondo, New Mexico. Many died along the way from cold, starvation, or murder. Kit Carson used a scorched earth campaign, a military strategy that involved destroying anything that might be useful to the enemy, to invade Navajo lands, including Canyon de Chelly, a canyon in Arizona where many Navajo lived. Carson burned Navajo fields, livestock, and homes, destroying their food stock and shelters throughout their land. Since these invasions took place during the harsh winter seasons, the Navajos had no choice but to surrender to Carson. When the Navajos were captured from Canyon de Chelly, Carson ordered complete destruction of Navajo properties and burned more than five thousand of the Navajos peach trees. “The [Navajos] could forgive the Rope Thrower [Carson] for fighting them as a soldier, for making prisoners of them, even for destroying their food supplies, but the one act they never forgave him for was cutting down their beloved peach trees.”⁶⁰

While at the Bosque Redondo (referred to the Diné as *Hweedi*), the Navajo were provided with food supplies from the Army, but all of these foods were foreign to the Navajo. Coffee, bacon, sugar, and flour, foods condemned as unfit for soldiers to eat were given to the Navajo.⁶¹ Since these rations did not adequately feed the thousands of Navajo, they began planting crops, but each year these crops failed. It was during this time that the Navajo created “frybread,” (commonly mistaken as a “traditional food” of Native Americans) using flour and lard from the government rations. After two years, the United States and the Navajo leaders established the Treaty of Bosque Redondo on June 1, 1868. The treaty arranged for a reservation to be created on the Navajo’s original homeland, allowing the Navajo to return home, within their four sacred mountains. The Navajo returned to home to find ruined crops and destroyed homes. Thousands of Navajos died during the Long Walk and during their incarceration at

⁶⁰ Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Watson, 1970), 27.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

Bosque Redondo, and when they finally returned home, they found their land destroyed. The Navajos that managed to avoid capture by the Army served an important role in the revitalization of the Navajo economy and food sources after the Treaty of 1868.⁶² These years had a powerful effect on Diné identity, culture, livelihood, agriculture and food systems.

Reservation Life

After the Long Walk, the Diné survived by replenishing their crops and livestock, utilizing federal government commodities, and exchanging their goods at nearby trading posts, but federal policies once again caused the destruction of the food systems. Navajos would travel on horseback or by wagon to trading posts to sell their rugs, jewelry, crafts, and good goods, in exchange of commodity foods. The Navajo also received food, limited to sugar, flour, dry milk, lard, peanut butter, dried beans, rice, cereal, cheese, and canned products, from the federal food assistance programs, which further shifted their diets. Navajos even continued to expand their livestock, but in the 1930s, Secretary of the Interior John Collier ordered a massive livestock reduction program on the Navajo reservation known as the Navajo Livestock Reduction. Navajo were ordered to reduce their livestock as a way to alleviate the impact of drought and overgrazing. Although the program was considered voluntary, if Diné opposed it, they were either sent to jail or the federal government would come and slaughter their livestock for them.⁶³ From 1933-1935, the reduction program resulted in about 16-27% loss of Navajo livestock and caused the Navajo to lose control of their livestock industries.

Indian Boarding Schools, especially those off the reservation, greatly impacted the Navajo and is another cause for the depletion of traditional Navajo food systems. Like other

⁶² Peter Iverson, *Diné: A History of the Navajos* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 56.

⁶³ W. LaDuke, S. Alexander, B. Bodonyi, N. Marker, Honor the Earth (Organization), and White Earth Land Recovery Project (Minn.). *Food Is Medicine: Recovering Traditional Foods to Heal the People* (Honor the Earth, 2004), 5.

Native American tribes, Navajo youth were forced to leave their families and attend boarding schools on and off the reservation, starting in the late nineteenth century. At these “industrial” boarding schools, Navajos were not allowed to speak their Diné language and they were taught vocational skills.⁶⁴ Instead of learning how to raise livestock, plant crops, prepare food, and survive using traditional methods from their parents and relatives, Navajo youth were forced to assimilate to the European-American culture. Navajo youth’s dietary patterns were changed dramatically while at boarding schools because the youth were served food similar to government commodities. Dairy products were also a huge food group at boarding schools and students were forced to consume it often. Over 74 percent of Native Americans are currently lactose intolerant, so forcing Native American children to consume dairy caused a great deal of illness among students.⁶⁵ The youth’s nutrition was not considered a priority by the boarding schools.⁶⁶ Over time, these boarding school meals became the norm to the Navajo youth. Upon returning to their communities as young adults, these Navajos were not comfortable eating traditional foods. Influencing their parents and their future families to abandon their traditional foods and prepare these “Western” foods, the Navajo traditional and nutritional lifeway moved further away with each generation.

Lacking Food Access

Although several years have passed since the devastating Long Walk, the Navajo continue to struggle with food security across their reservation. According to the United States Department of Agriculture Food Desert Locator, the entire Navajo reservation is considered a

⁶⁴ Peter Iverson, *Diné: A History of the Navajos* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 85.

⁶⁵ Jean Keller, “When Native Foods Were Left Behind: Boarding School Nutrition and the Sherman Institute, 1902-1922,” *News From Native California* 15 no. 3 (2002),

http://www.heydaybooks.com/news/issues/articles/15.3.Sherman_Institute.html.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

food desert.⁶⁷ This means that the majority of Navajos living on the Navajo Nation live far from a large grocery store, and they are often forced to obtain food from gas stations or convenience stores, where food is expensive and nutritionally insufficient. The few well-stocked grocery stores are located on the Navajo Nation, but these grocery stores are often limited, especially with fresh produce, depending on how close the stores are located to larger towns and cities off the reservation. Bashas' Supermarkets, with approximately seven Bashas' grocery stores across on the Navajo Nation, is the main grocery store provider on the Navajo Nation. Only four other shopping centers exist, which are tied to Navajo Nation Shopping Centers Inc. These grocery stores are located in the major towns of the Navajo Nation (see *Map 2* below), but due to the size of the Navajo Nation, 11 stores is very limiting. If Navajos want to shop for bulk, which is often the case because of their distance from a grocery store, they leave the reservation to go to border towns, including: Flagstaff, AZ; Farmington, NM; and Gallup, NM. According to the Navajo Nation Department of Economic Development, approximately 70% of the money generated on the Navajo reservation is currently spent off the reservation and in border towns. If Navajos do not live in one of the major towns of the Navajo Nation or near a border town, they are forced to drive large distances between communities, usually on rugged, unpaved roads, which causes major complications during the harsh winter seasons. Some Navajo families have to drive hundreds of miles to the nearest grocery store, which adds additional expenses (including gas and vehicle maintenance) to their already low income (\$7,269 per capita income). Navajo residents, who do not have access to a vehicle, have to rely on relatives or friends for a ride.

Due to the difficulties of reaching a grocery store, Navajos tend to rely on convenience stores, fast food restaurants, or federal food assistance programs for food. Navajo Nation

⁶⁷ Economic Research Service: Food Desert Locator, United States Department of Agriculture, Last updated: July 2012, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-desert-locator.aspx>.

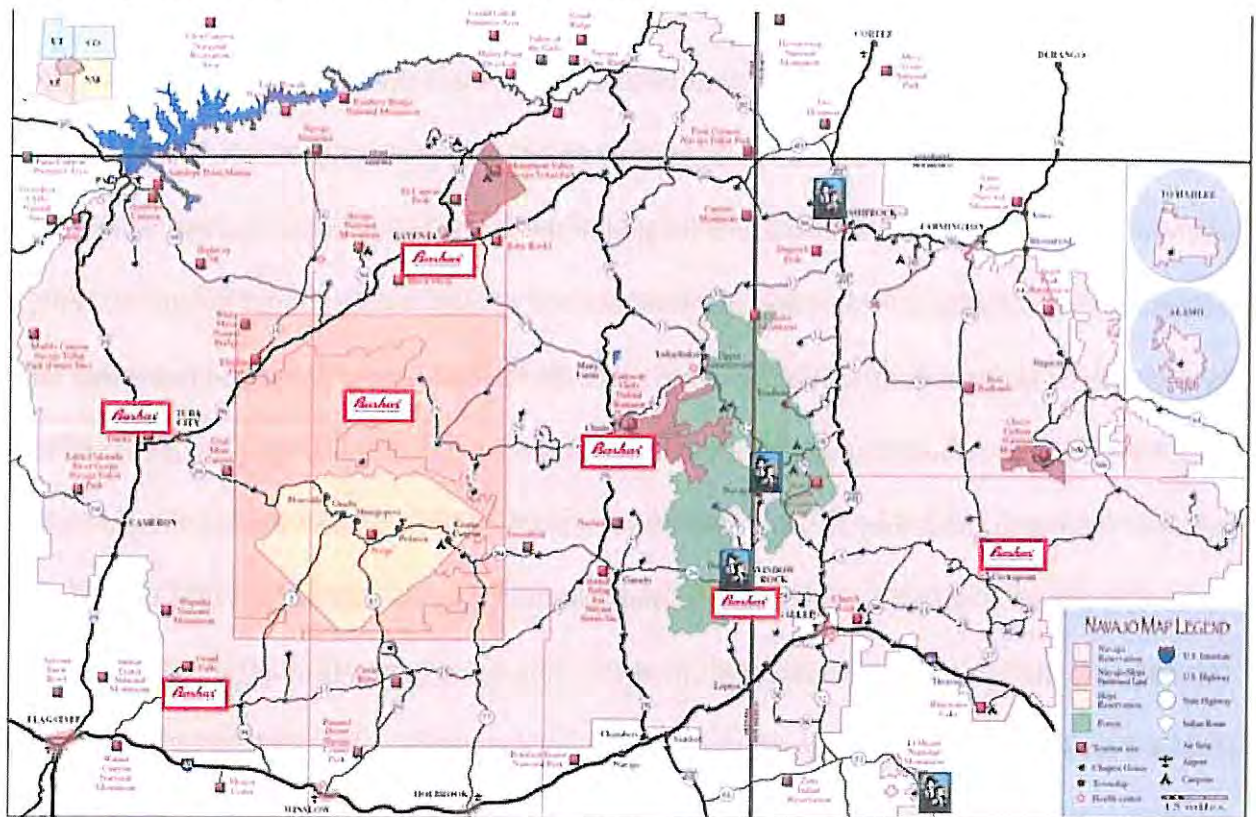
Division of Economic Development reports that there are approximately 75 convenience stores throughout the Navajo Nation (see *Appendix*).⁶⁸ These convenience stores have replaced trading posts through the years and only stock limited amounts of fresh produce; often times the only fruits and vegetables offered are either frozen or canned.⁶⁹ To grab quick meals, Navajo residents will visit the various fast food restaurants located in the major towns of the Navajo Nation. With the number of convenience stores and fast food outlets, usually within shorter distances, Navajos then tend to consume more fried foods, caloric soft drinks, and highly processed foods that add to their risk of diet-related diseases. For the low-income Navajo families who cannot afford to purchase their own food, they receive food through the federal Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, aka Food Stamps), and the Special Supplement Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The SNAP and WIC programs require grocery store access, but the FDPIR program distributes food from administering agencies. The Navajo Nation food distribution warehouses are located in Window Rock, AZ; Tuba City, AZ; Ft. Defiance, AZ; Leupp, AZ; Teec Nos Pos, AZ; Mexican Springs, NM; Kirtland, NM; and Crownpoint, NM.⁷⁰ Although these food assistance programs provide food to disadvantaged families, the foods from FDPIR are all dried and canned (see *Appendix*), questioning the nutritional value, and food stamp and WIC recipients receive limited monthly balances. Some families rely solely on food assistance programs and at times, they do not receive enough food to feed their entire family.

⁶⁸ Navajo Nation Division of Economic Development (2013). Gas Stations on Navajo [Excel spreadsheet]. Retrieved from Department Manager, Anthony Perry. April 2013.

⁶⁹ Kevin A. Lombard, Susan Forster-Cox, Dan Smeal, and Mick K O'Neill, "Diabetes on the Navajo Nation: What Role Can Gardening and Agriculture Extension Play to Reduce It?" *Rural and Remote Health* 6, no. 4 (December 2006): 4.

⁷⁰ United States Department of Agriculture, USDA Food and Nutrition Services: Food Distribution Programs-FDPIR/ITO and State Agency Contacts, last modified January 2, 2013, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/contacts/fdpiir-contacts.htm>.

Map 2: Map of Grocery Store Locations on the Navajo Nation
Grocery Store Locations on the Navajo Nation



Key:  Navajo Nation Shopping Centers Inc. (4):
 Arizona: Window Rock
 New Mexico: Shiprock Navajo, Pinehill

 Basha's' Grocery Stores (7):
 Arizona: Tuba City, Dilkon, Chinle, Pinon, Kayenta, Window Rock
 New Mexico: Crownpoint

Besides the lack of grocery stores, Navajo Nation residents deal with other difficult factors that contribute to their food access problem. Many residents on the Navajo Nation do not have electricity or running water. According to a survey conducted by the Energy Information Administration in 2000, an estimated 36.8 percent of the 29,375 occupied housing units on the Navajo Nation do not have electricity.⁷¹ This makes it difficult to refrigerate foods, causing more Navajos to rely on non-perishable foods. About 16,000 families live without electricity and many more homes and families do not have access to basic infrastructure, such as water, wastewater,

⁷¹ G. Bain, C. Ballentine, A. DeSouzza, L. Majure, D.H. Smith, J. Turek, *Economic and social development stemming from the electrification of the housing stock on the Navajo Nation*, Flagstaff, AZ: College of Business Administration, Northern Arizona University, 2002.

plumbing, natural gas services, landlines, and Internet.⁷² Families who do not have access to running water have to haul water to their homes almost on a daily basis. Water can be obtained two ways: one is to obtain water from a nearby Navajo Tribal Utility Authority (NTUA) administered water point at a chapter (Navajo Nation has 110 chapters) and the second is to obtain water from a livestock watering well.⁷³ The Navajo Nation does not test these wells for pathogens and contaminants, so some of these water wells may be unsafe for families. The Navajo Aquifer is the sole water source on the Navajo Nation, but much of this water has been depleted by the coal industry.

Limited food access and the lack of infrastructure have caused Navajos to experience high rates of diet related diseases, including diabetes. A report by Navajo Nation Division of Health shows that diabetes counts for 35.9 % of all deaths on the Navajo Nation, compared to 13.5% of the United States rate.⁷⁴ The number of reported cases of type-2 diabetes of the Navajo increased from one person out of 6000 in 1937 to about 22% of the population aged 20 years and older in 1997.⁷⁵ The prevalence of diabetes in the number of Navajo children, adolescents, and young adults (<15-24 years) increased by 46%, from 6.4 per 1000 to 9.3 per 1000 between 1990 and 1998.⁷⁶ In fact, adolescents between 15-19 years saw an increase in diabetes rates of 106%

⁷² Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, Navajo Tribal Utility Authority website, last modified 2012, <http://www.ntua.com/>.

⁷³ Arvin Trujillo, "Water Quality Issues on the Navajo Nation," *Water Quality for the 21st Century*, October 2006, New Mexico Water Resource Institute, <http://wri.nmsu.edu/publish/watcon/proc51/trujillo.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Navajo Division of Health Senior Public Information Officer, George Joe, "Health Care in the Navajo Nation: Fact Sheet 2004," Navajo Division of Health Report (2004). Available from: http://www.tribalconnections.org/health_news/secondary_features/GeorgeFactSheet.pdf

⁷⁵ Will, Julie C., Karen F. Strauss, James M. Mendlein, Carol Ballew, Linda L. White, and Douglas G. Peter. "Diabetes Mellitus Among Navajo Indians: Findings from the Navajo Health and Nutrition Survey." *The Journal of Nutrition* 127, no. 10 (October 1, 1997): 2106S–2113S.

⁷⁶ Acton, Kelly J., Nilka Ríos Burrows, Kelly Moore, Linda Querec, Linda S. Geiss, and Michael M. Engelgau. "Trends in Diabetes Prevalence Among American Indian and Alaska Native Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults." *American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 9 (September 2002): 1485–1490.

between 1990 and 2001.⁷⁷ These statistics show that the Navajo Nation has a severe diabetes epidemic, demonstrating the need for immediate and effective diabetes intervention and preservation.

Only a few studies exist that examine how the Navajo people would benefit with more gardening and farming across the Navajo Nation. In the study titled “Diabetes on the Navajo nation: what role can gardening and agriculture extension play,” New Mexico University researchers look at the prevention strategies for diabetes and offer suggestions on how to include home and community gardening in those prevention methods. By cultivating and consuming several types of corn, beans, squash, melons, vegetables like wild spinach and beeweed, chili, berries from wild sumac, and prickly pear cactus fruit (the traditional Navajo foods), the Navajo would adopt a healthier diet and reduce their development of obesity.⁷⁸ “Many, if not all of these [foods] could be introduced, or reintroduced, to Navajo [through] home and community gardening,” the researches state.⁷⁹ Since water is needed for garden and farming, yet is scarce across the Navajo Nation, a report suggests that tribe members should invest in KB-Drip systems (an elevated water holding tank that provides enough gravity to operate flow) for irrigation.⁸⁰ Another study, “Linking farmers to community stores to increase consumption of local produce: a case study of the Navajo Nation,” focuses on linking four local Navajo farmers to community stores to increase consumption of fresh produce. Researchers interviewed several farmers across the Navajo Nation to gauge interest and understand the plausibility of a Farm to Table program.

⁷⁷ Cunningham-Sabo, L D, S M Davis, K M Koehler, M L Fugate, J A DiTucci, and B J Skipper. “Food Preferences, Practices, and Cancer-related Food and Nutrition Knowledge of Southwestern American Indian Youth.” *Cancer* 78, no. 7 Suppl (October 1, 1996): 1617–1622.

⁷⁸ Kevin A. Lombard, Susan Forster-Cox, Dan Smeal, and Mick K O’Neill, “Diabetes on the Navajo Nation: What Role Can Gardening and Agriculture Extension Play to Reduce It?” *Rural and Remote Health* 6, no. 4 (December 2006): 4

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

According to the study, Navajo farmers understand the burden of the rising obesity and diabetes rates and most would be interested in a Farm to Table program, as long as the resources and support were available.⁸¹ The interest to use traditional agricultural methods to reduce the diabetes epidemic continues to grow on the Navajo Nation.

Why Food Sovereignty?

As one of the 566 federal recognized tribes in the United States, the Navajo Nation, like other recognized tribes, establishes a government-to-government relationship between the federal government and tribe, making it a domestic dependent nation. Since the Navajo Nation is sovereign, they have the authority to be self-governed, meaning they determine their own governance structures, pass laws, and enforce laws through their own police departments and tribal court systems. Being sovereignty allows the Navajo tribe to protect their unique culture and maintain their own leadership. Although tribes are sovereign, they still receive and rely on federal funding, because they are still apart of the United States as a whole. The goal of all tribal nations is to ensure the success and well-being of tribal communities, while preserving culture, and that should include food sovereignty. The Navajo Nation cannot be fully sovereign without addressing all issues across the reservation, including food access issues. Preserving traditional diets and agriculture techniques is not at the forefront of the Navajo Nation’s agenda, but it should be because it addresses social justice issues, cultural preservation, economic development, and most importantly, health. Making sure Navajo people have access to safe, culturally appropriate, and nutritionally adequate foods is part of being a self-reliant nation. It should be the Navajo Nation’s responsibility to sure that their people have access to food to ensure their overall well-being.

⁸¹ Ashley Setala, Joel Gittelsohn. “Linking Farmers to Community Stores to Increase Consumption of Local Produce: A Case Study of the Navajo Nation.” *Public Health Nutrition* 14, no. 9 (2011): 1662.

Contextual Background on Food Sovereignty on the Navajo Nation

The idea of food sovereignty on the Navajo Nation is not a new one, as several organizations are currently conducting food sovereignty projects and programs. In an effort to establish a more formal food sovereignty strategy, the Western Navajo Food Policy Council attempted to instate a food and agricultural systems policy for the entire Navajo Nation in 2011. However, the food policy proposal did not receive official approval from the Navajo Nation Executive Office. The Western Navajo Food Policy Council continue to work on improving the Navajo Nation's food system, as they wait for the Navajo Nation Executive Office's support.

Western Navajo Food Policy Council

Developing Innovations in Navajo Education Inc. (Diné Inc.), a federally funded non-profit organization that assists with agricultural support and technological training to help the Navajo Nation return to a more traditional means of living, began the Navajo Nations Traditional Agricultural Outreach (NNTAO) in 1997.⁸² NNTAO works to provide disadvantaged Navajo farmers and ranchers with agricultural outreach and support services throughout the southwestern portion of the Navajo Nation. In August 2010, Diné Inc and NNTAO formed the Western Navajo Food Policy Council (WNFPC), a volunteer group of grassroots individuals from the western part of the Navajo Nation who assembled to address food security issues in their community. The mission of WNFPC is to “provide a forum to advocate among food system providers, distributors, and key stakeholders, and to encourage them to make available cultural, affordable, accessible, and nutritious foods to the people of the Navajo Nation.”⁸³ The purpose of the council is to explore and discuss what the community needs, what is important to the people,

⁸² This section is based on interviews with Western Navajo Food Policy Council members Jamescita Peshlakai and Evelina Y-Maho, Flagstaff, AZ, 10 January 2013.

⁸³ Western Navajo Food Policy Council (2012), Western Navajo Food Policy Council Bylaws. Retrived from Jamescita Peshlakai. 15 March 2013.

and how the community views food policy, in order to understand what food sovereignty means to that community.⁸⁴ Since their inception, the food council researched and identified the needs of the Navajo people, and with that knowledge, they developed a Navajo Nation Food Policy proposal, which they submitted to the Office of the Navajo Nation President about two years ago. The WNFCP does not receive any funding and all of their members are volunteers and do not receive any compensation. Through their work, the WNFCP hopes to create a healthy nation that recognizes, respects and values the cultural foods of the Navajo people.⁸⁵

Prior to the food council's establishment, interested food policy advocates, including members of Diné Inc and NNTAO, held community meetings and grassroots discussions to identify what concerned community members. From those meetings, the advocates decided to form a food policy council whose primary responsibility would entail gathering community concerns, discussing how to address those concerns, composing by-laws for their council, and forming policy recommendations to give to Navajo Nation policy makers. The food council immediately began meeting with current Navajo Nation President, Ben Shelly, to gain his perspective on the concerns, and, in 2011, the food council presented President Shelly with a general food policy statement titled "Internal Governance: A Document for the Navajo Nation President's Food Policy Council." The preamble states:

The Navajo Nation President's Food Policy Council is an organization composed of groups and individuals working on issues arising from the food and agricultural systems existing in the Navajo Nation. The Policy Council will perform its work and activities in a collaborative manner. It will bring forward to the public eye a discussion of these issues for [a] more comprehensive examination. It intends to educate and inform the public, those directly affected by food and agricultural programs, and public and legislative decision-makers about selected policy issues, openly arrived at by deliberations of its

⁸⁴ Jamescita Peshlakai and Evelina Y-Maho. Interview. Flagstaff, 10 January 2013.

⁸⁵ Western Navajo Food Policy Council (2012), Western Navajo Food Policy Council Bylaws, Retrieved from Jamescita Peshlakai. 15 March 2013

members. It will advocate for these policy issues in a variety of forums and will develop and disseminate viable policy recommendations and alternatives.⁸⁶

This general, all-inclusive proposal served as a value statement that suggested and encouraged policies to enforce a healthier, safer, affordable, and accessible food system across the Navajo Nation. The proposal's core argument was the assertion: "We want healthy food for our people and we want Navajo Nation leaders to support this."⁸⁷

The food council wanted President Shelly to sign it in support, so they could move forward with policy recommendations and strategies. However, upon receiving the proposal, President Shelly did not sign it and instead, he passed it over to his lawyers for them to review. According to Jamescita, President Shelly stated that he feared that such a proposal could hinder the Navajo Nation's relationship with food agencies and tamper federal programs like WIC (Women, Infant, and Children) program and the USDA Food Distribution on Indian Reservation program (FDPIR).⁸⁸ So, President Shelly assigned Navajo Nation Vice-President Rex Lee Jim and Larry Curley, Director of the Navajo Nation Division of Health, to look into the proposal. From there, Larry Curley appointed Office of Environmental Health Director Herman Shorty to the task. During this time, the WNFPC approached the First Lady of the Navajo Nation, Martha Shelly, to ask if she would support this campaign, especially since she works with U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move initiative. The Navajo Nation's First Lady's office declined the collaboration. Since then, the Western Navajo Food Policy Council has not received any responses from the Navajo Nation administration. In April 2012, Navajo Nation Vice President Rex Lee Jim mentioned the Navajo Nation Food Policy in his "State of the Navajo Nation Address" but he has yet to connect with the Food Policy Council.

⁸⁶ Western Navajo Food Policy Council (2012) Internal Governance: A Document for the Navajo Nation President's Food Policy Council. Retrieved from Jamescita Peshlakai on 31 March 2013

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Jamescita Peshlakai and Evelina Y-Maho. Interview. Flagstaff, 10 January 2013.

Two of the Western Navajo Food Policy Council members, Jamescita Peshlakai and Evelina Y-Maho, that joined the council during its formation, continue to work to improve the food system and enhance the health of the Navajo Nation people, despite the lack of support from Navajo administrators. Jamescita, now an Arizona Representative for House District 7, and Evelina, the Health Center Director for Native Americans for Community Action’s (NACA) Family Health and Wellness Center, both want to see systematic change and improvements in the community that will address everything from agricultural to economic development to health and food access.⁸⁹ Community members aware of Jamescita and Evelina’s work frequently contact them asking about the progress of the food policy, “The community is concerned and there is a lot of opportunity for change, yet the individuals that can make this change need to wake up—we have failed as a Nation to really, truly address health issues—we cannot address the health of our people without looking at our food system,” Evelina states.⁹⁰ Willing to do the work, Jamescita, Evelina, and the Food Policy Council just want the Navajo Nation administration to support their proposed Food Policy so they can help with the next steps forward.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 3

Case Studies

The following case studies provide examples of food sovereignty programs that are currently operating in the Western and Ft. Defiance agencies on Navajo Nation. Black Mesa Water Coalition, Navajo Nation Department of Agriculture, Sunrise School for Ecological Living, and the STAR (Service to All Relations) School each have a unique food sovereignty program that focuses on youth and community involvement, while incorporating traditional Diné teachings. Black Mesa Water Coalition, a non-profit grassroots organization, and the Navajo Nation Department of Agriculture, a department under the Navajo tribal government, are both at the early stages of implementing their food sovereignty project. The two schools, Sunrise School for Ecological Living and the STAR School, have each been offering their food sovereignty programs since the inception of their organizations. Each case study presents an overview of the organization's background and goals and describes their food sovereignty projects. The work from these organizations demonstrates that food sovereignty efforts are active and achievable on the Navajo Nation.

3.1 Black Mesa Water Coalition

Formed in 2001 by a group of young inter-tribal, inter-ethnic people concerned with environmental justice issues within the Navajo and Hopi communities and based in Flagstaff, Arizona, Black Mesa Water Coalition (BMWC) protects the integrity of Indigenous Peoples' cultures as it strives to preserve and protect Mother Earth, through green economic development.⁹¹ Dedicated to addressing issues of water depletion, natural resource exploitation, climate change, and health promotion, this non-profit organization relies on their inter-

⁹¹ This section is based on an interview with Black Mesa Water Coalition's Green Economy Coordinator, Robert Nutlouis, Window Rock, AZ, 4 January 2013.

generational support network to collaborate with surrounding communities and organizations to make change. Their primary work is focused on the Black Mesa region, the northwestern part of the Navajo Nation, and the issues that involve the two mines operated by Peabody Coal Company and their industrial use of water. BMWC hopes to convince the Navajo and Hopi nations to end their dependence on the fossil fuel industry and protect their precious land for future generations, through their No Coal and Environmental Justice Program. In addition to this program, the BMWC works to empower youth through their Leadership Development and Movement Building program and develop long-term sustainable “green” economies with their Navajo Green Economy Program.

Navajo Green Economy Program

The Navajo Green Economy Program aims to protect and preserve the land, water, culture, and future generations through sustainable “green” economic development strategies. In 2009, BMWC collaborated with surrounding environmental groups like the Grand Canyon Trust, DINE Care, Sierra Club, and others to establish the Navajo Green Economy Fund and Commission within the Navajo Nation government, which is still the first green economy legislation passed by any tribal government in the United States.⁹² The purpose of the Navajo Green Economy Program is to provide the Navajo Nation with long-term, sustainable green economic development strategies and agriculture methods that honor the sacred ecological relationships and traditional practices of the Navajo. One of BMWC’s successful green economy campaigns, The Just Transition, recently achieved success this past February. When the Mohave Generating Station, a 1580-megawatt coal-fired power plant in Laughlin, Nevada, shut down in 2005, many Navajos and Hopis lost their jobs. The Just Transition Coalition, comprised of

⁹² Black Mesa Water Coalition: Our Work, Black Mesa Water Coalition, <http://www.blackmesawatercoalition.org/ourwork.html#greenjobs>.

Navajo, Hopi, and environmental justice groups, created a petition and proposal that demanded that the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), which holds jurisdiction over the Mohave Generating Station, fund renewable energy projects for the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Tribe.⁹³ On February 13, 2013, the CPUC voted to use revenues from the sale of sulfur dioxide allowances from the shutdown generating station to fund renewable projects.

Food Sovereignty Project

Another project under the Navajo Green Economy Program is the Food Sovereignty Project, which works to strengthen and revitalize local food systems in the Black Mesa regions by incorporating traditional agriculture strategies. Green Economy Coordinator, Robert Nutlouis, a Diné from Pinon, AZ, heads the Navajo Green Economy Program and oversees the Food Sovereignty Project. The ultimate propose of the project is to increase the knowledge of food security and traditional farming practices among local youth and community members through hands-on learning and to rebuild the traditional Diné food system by supporting and working with local farmers to improve their infrastructure.⁹⁴ Last year, the project began a community food assessment survey that will evaluate the traditional farming practices and current agricultural infrastructures in the Black Mesa regions, specifically in the Pinon and Blue Gap, Arizona communities. BMWC wants to understand how traditional agricultural systems can be enhanced with modern technologies, including permaculture and rainwater catchment. In addition, BMWC is mapping out all current cornfields in the Blue Gap area and visiting the sites to talk to the farmers and take inventory of the current field conditions. BMWC will identify up to 10 farmers to work with by providing fencing material and plowing services and help them with selling their produce at various local farmers markets. Nutlouis and his colleagues also want

⁹³ Christopher McLeod, "Seeking a Just Transition." Earth Island Journal, last modified February 2013, http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/eij/article/seeking_a_just_transition/.

⁹⁴ Robert Nutlouis. Interview. St. Michaels, Arizona, 2 January 2013.

to help the local farmers apply for federal funding through U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which provides funding for eligible agricultural producers to help implement conservation practices or establish conservation easements.⁹⁵ Most Navajo farmers do not know that these permits exist, and if they do know, they find it to be an overwhelming process, but BMWC hopes to help these farmers obtain federal land permits so they can apply for funding.⁹⁶ BMWC is working with Diné Policy Institute to develop culturally appropriate questions to ask the farmers about food security issues, GMOs (genetically modified organisms), and climate change to evaluate people's awareness on the topics. Information gained through this assessment will be the first of its kind on the Navajo Nation and will allow BMWC and the farmers themselves to measure the potential of the current farmlands in the area and look for ways to improve the lands. BMWC plans to finish the assessment by Summer 2013 so they can share the data with Northern Arizona University's Tribal Environmental Profession. NAU will use GPS coordinates to develop a visual map that will help the Black Mesa community form a strategic plan that will outline the next steps to strengthen their local food system.

The Food Sovereignty Project also works on youth leadership and development through their experimental community garden program in the Blue Cap and Pinon communities. This project, called the Black Mesa Youth Permaculture Apprenticeship Program, is part of the BMWC Black Mesa Food Sovereignty Project. Designed to develop and strengthen Black Mesa's regional food systems, this apprenticeship program will provide hands-on training and workshops in the Black Mesa communities. Local youth and community members will learn about permaculture, watershed restoration, traditional Navajo farming techniques, natural earth

⁹⁵ United States Department of Agriculture: Natural Resources Conservation Service, United States Department of Agriculture, last modified 2013, <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/national/home>.

⁹⁶ Robert Nutlouis. Interview. St. Michaels, Arizona, 2 January 2013.

building (bread ovens), and edible landscape by transplanting native plants and fruit trees. Last year, the program worked closely with about 15 youth and five families to gather materials and develop 5-acre heirloom variety community gardens.⁹⁷ BMWC used this project as an opportunity to test experimental watershed management strategies, like rainwater catchment, rock spillways, and brush dams, to learn more about which irrigation systems thrive in the dry climate of Black Mesa. The youth and families planted heirloom variety seeds, mostly corn, squash, and tomatoes, in late spring 2012 and managed the fields during the summer, until harvest time in the fall. Nutlouis notes that, at first, it was difficult to get the youth motivated about gardening during the beginning stages, but once he and his colleagues began teaching the youth about the endurance, resilience, patience, and determination of their ancestors, the youth began to take pride in their garden work.⁹⁸ During harvest, the program invited elders and community members to the garden sites to teach the kids how to prepare traditional foods, how to butcher a sheep, and the medicinal advantages behind traditional foods.⁹⁹ “The heart of our work is to really understand, practice, and build on our traditions and actively encourage youth to understand their connection to the land, so they can enhance and continue the traditions.”¹⁰⁰

Obtaining Support

The BMWC Food Sovereignty Project receives support from indigenous organizations and hopes to obtain more funding this year to maintain their projects for the future. The program ordered some of their seeds from Native Seeds/SEARCH, the non-profit organization based in Tucson, Arizona. In Fall 2012, BMWC received a small grant from Honor the Earth, a Native-led organization established by Winona LaDuke and Indigo Girls Amy Ray and Emily Saliers

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Robert Nutlouis. Interview. St. Michaels, Arizona, 2 January 2013

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.