# American Indian Perspectives on *Thanksgiving*

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

EDUCATION OFFICE

**We are all thankful to our Mother, the Earth, for she gives us all that we need for life.**

***— Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address***

# American Indian Perspectives on Thanksgiving

## **FOR TEACHERS** GRADES 4–8

**Each November** educators across the country teach their students about the First Thanksgiving, a quintessentially American holiday. They try to give students an accurate picture of what happened in Plymouth in 1621 and explain how that event fits into American history. Unfortunately, many teaching materials give an incomplete, if not inaccurate, portrayal of the first Thanksgiving, particularly of the event's Native American participants.

Most texts and supplementary materials portray Native Americans at the gathering as supporting players. They are depicted as nameless, faceless, generic "Indians" who merely shared a meal with the intrepid Pilgrims. The real story is much deeper, richer, and more nuanced. The Indians in attendance, the Wampanoag, played a lead role in this historic encounter, and they had been essential to the survival of the colonists during the newcomers' first year. The Wampanoag were a people with a sophisticated society who had occupied the region for thousands of years. They had their own government, their own religious and philosophical beliefs, their own knowledge system, and their own culture. They were also a people for whom giving thanks was a part of daily life.

Like the Wampanoag, thousands of Native American nations and communities across the continent had their own histories and cultures. Native peoples were and continue to be an integral part of the American story. It is our hope that this poster will encourage you to teach about Thanksgiving in a new way—one that recognizes the country's original people and gives real meaning to November as American Indian Heritage Month. We thought that the agricultural practices and traditional foods of Native people would be a good starting point, since the ubiquitous Thanksgiving feast of turkey, cranberry sauce, and mashed potatoes would not exist if not for the knowledge and ingenuity of the Native peoples of the Americas.

Tohono O'odham elder Danny Lopez and Isabell Johnson (daughter of TOCA farm manager Noland Johnson) bless the first squash plant of the season.
*Courtesy of Tohono O'odham Community Action*

The First Thanksgiving 1621
*J. L. G. Ferris. Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

In this poster, we take a look at just a few Native communities through the prism of three main themes that are central to understanding both American Indians and the deeper meaning of the Thanksgiving holiday. The themes are:

- **Environment:** traditional knowledge about and understandings of the natural world.
- **Community:** the role that group identity plays in Native cultures.
- **Encounters:** how interactions between cultures have affected those cultures.

It is within these fundamental areas that we begin to see the **innovations and contributions** of American Indian peoples to the world at large. The combination of community systems and an understanding of the natural world enabled Native cultures to adapt and change over time—as all cultures do—both before and after encounters with newcomers. By acknowledging this, it is possible to bring a new perspective to the Thanksgiving holiday.

This poster is a resource for teachers to use as a jumping-off point for more in-depth discussion. Discussion and other classroom ideas are included in each section. Before you jump into the content of this poster, we recommend that you introduce your students to the "real Thanksgiving story" found in "Harvest Ceremony: The Myth of Thanksgiving," which can be downloaded from www.nmai.si.edu/education/thanksgiving. There you will also find an image gallery and other resources to supplement this poster.

# **Environment:** Understanding the Natural World

**The Wampanoag people** have long lived in the area around Cape Cod, in present-day Massachusetts. When the English decided to establish a colony there in the 1600s, the Wampanoag already had a deep understanding of their environment. They maintained a reciprocal relationship with the world around them. As successful hunters, farmers, and fishermen who shared their foods and techniques, they helped the colonists survive in a strange new place. Wherever Europeans set foot in the Western Hemisphere, they encountered Native peoples who had similar longstanding relationships with the natural world. With extensive knowledge of their local environments, Native peoples developed philosophies about those places based on deeply rooted traditions.

The ability to live in harmony with the natural world begins with knowing how nature functions. After many generations of observation and experience, Native peoples were intimately familiar with weather patterns, animal behaviors, and cycles of plant life, water supply, and the seasons. They studied the stars, named the constellations, and knew when solstices and equinoxes occurred. This kind of knowledge enabled Native peoples to flourish and to hunt, gather, or cultivate the foods they needed, even in the harshest environments.

For example, among the linguistically and culturally diverse tribes collectively known as "Pueblos" that live in New Mexico and Arizona, farmers have grown corn and other crops for centuries. Their knowledge of the soils, seasonal rain patterns, and plant characteristics has enabled them to successfully farm in this dry, often harsh environment. Pueblo farmers ingeniously harnessed the available moisture and developed hardy seed varieties, growing enough food to sustain their communities and to trade with others.

**"We are thankful for the clouds, rain, and snow that feed the springs, rivers, and our people."**

***—John Garcia (Santa Clara Pueblo), 2002***

Many Native Americans believe that as long as humans are respectful caretakers of the natural world, it will provide for us. In this kind of interconnected relationship, the plants and animals are also seen to recognize their own roles and responsibilities. For example, the Inupiaq people of Alaska are traditional whale hunters. A single whale can feed an entire village for many months, so the taking of a whale is a significant event. Many villagers are involved in preparations for a hunt. The whalers are physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually trained from a young age for the work of hunting. By living this kind of life, they show their respect for the whale. In return, they believe the whale comes to the hunter to be killed, giving up its life for the well-being of the community. The people then hold ceremonies, songs, dances, and feasts to thank the whale for its sacrifice. This is a reciprocal cycle that has been repeated generation after generation.

**"The Inupiaq people and the bowhead whale are connected. One can't survive without the other."**

***—John Nusunginya (Inupiaq), 2003***

Traditionally, being a responsible caretaker in this type of mutual relationship has meant respecting nature's gifts by taking only what is necessary and making good use of everything that is harvested. This helps ensure that natural resources, including foods, will be sustainable for the future. In this way of thinking, the Diné, or Navajo, believe that people should live in a state of balance or beauty within the universe. This state of balance is called *hozho* in the Diné language.

Picuris Pueblo, New Mexico, where the average annual rainfall is about 14 inches.
*Photo by Adam Clark Vroman, 1899. Courtesy of the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution*

**"We are taught that when we gather herbs or food, we should only acquire what is needed from the plant. To do otherwise would be wasteful. . . . Our greed would jeopardize the future of the plants because some plants must remain to flower and go to seed. We would also compromise our own future because we may eliminate what we need for our ceremonies, as well as food for the following year."**

***—Lawrence Shorty (Navajo), 1999***

Native communities throughout the Americas have numerous practices that connect them to the places where they live. They acknowledge the environment and its gifts of food with many kinds of ceremonies, songs, prayers, and dances. Such cultural expressions help people to maintain the reciprocal relationship with the land. For example, the Hupa tribe of northern California conducts a special ceremony every two years called the White Deer Skin Dance that renews the natural world and brings everything into balance.

**"Our White Deer Skin Dance brings harmony back to us. We dance so that the deer and fish will always be there."**

***—Mervin George, Sr. (Hupa), 2003***

Hupa White Deer Dancers, ca. 1895.
*Photo by A. W. Ericson*

Giving daily thanks for nature's gifts has always been an important way of living for traditional Native peoples. The six nations of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora), who live in New York State and parts of southeastern Canada, express their thanks in a recitation known as The Thanksgiving Address. Sometimes referred to as "the words that come before all else," this address is spoken at community gatherings, ceremonies, and even at some schools to start the day. The words express thanks for fellow human beings, Mother Earth, the moon, stars, sun, water, air, winds, animals, and more. Here is an excerpt that offers thanks for the food plants:

**"With one mind, we turn to honor and thank all the Food Plants we harvest from the garden. Since the beginning of time, the grains, vegetables, beans, and berries have helped the people survive. Many other living things draw strength from them, too. We gather all the Plant Foods together as one and send them a greeting of thanks."**

***—Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address***

Ultimately, American Indian peoples' connection to place is about more than simply caring for the environment. That connection has been maintained through generations of observation, in which people developed environmental knowledge and philosophies. People took actions to ensure the long-term sustainability of their communities and the environment, with which they shared a reciprocal relationship. Today, Native knowledge can be a key to understanding and solving some of our world's most pressing problems. In their efforts to support sustainability for all humans, environmentalists are acknowledging the benefits of some traditional indigenous ways of knowing.

## Ideas for the classroom

Discuss with your students the examples provided of Native peoples' connection to the world through their traditional knowledge and understanding of the environment.

- **For younger students:** Use the excerpt from The Thanksgiving Address and the four other quotes to discuss with students the importance of place to Native peoples. Have them talk about how a reciprocal relationship is maintained by regular expressions of gratitude and practices that show respect for the natural world. Do these philosophies relate to the students' own lives in any way? What about the wider world?
- **For older students:** Have students listen to two stories from National Public Radio—"Drought Threatens Navajo's Crops, Culture" and "Tale of Two Alaskan Villages." These can be found at www.nmai.si.edu/education/thanksgiving. Use these examples to engage students in a discussion about how people's connections to the places where they live are relevant to their broader worldviews. In what ways do the struggles of the people in those stories relate to the content presented in this section of the poster? How do environmental changes affect the interconnected relationship between people and place?

Some of the food plants that the Haudenosaunee give thanks for are corn, beans, and squash.
*Courtesy of Seed Savers Exchange*

# **Community:** Group Identity in Culture

**When the English established** their colony at Plymouth, they encountered a group of people who lived in a communal way. The Wampanoag defined themselves by their environment and were bound into a strong community by a shared knowledge of their forested, coastal home, their cultural practices, and their language. This same sense of community is integral to Native cultures throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Native communities traditionally place a high value on social relationships. The needs of community were met through the efforts of all, and all were expected to contribute. Communities that hunted bison included all members in the task. Communities that farmed had roles for men, women, and children. The skills needed to be part of the communal effort were passed down from generation to generation through example, storytelling, ceremony, and song. Native people understood that many people working together could accomplish much more than individuals, and their cultures reflected this understanding. Because everyone was seen as a relative, everyone was responsible for everyone else.

According to many Native philosophies, humans were not the only members of the community. The animals and plants were treated not as resources to be exploited, but as family members to be cared for. This relationship to nature is expressed in many of the ceremonies, songs, dances, works of art, and stories that honor and thank game animals, crops, fish, berries, and roots. These cultural practices and celebrations not only recognize the importance of the environment, but also reinforce the distinct identity of the group, which is necessary for the group to thrive.

**"These foods and the plants that surround us go way beyond just simply being plants. They become part of the community."**

***—Angelo Joaquin, Jr. (Tohono O'odham), 2003***

The Yakama, who live in central Washington State, are no exception. They are surrounded by mountains, forests, and high treeless plateaus that once teemed with deer, elk, roots, berries, and herbs. The land and its gifts are integral to the common identity of the Yakama people. They have a special relationship with the salmon that regularly migrate up the Columbia River and its tributaries to spawn. As they are for many Native communities in the Northwest, salmon are central to the Yakamas' cosmology. Yakamas call themselves "salmon people," and for them salmon are a source of spiritual strength as well as physical nourishment. Yakama art, ceremony, and traditional stories link salmon and humans. The Yakama continue to celebrate a First Salmon Ceremony each spring to welcome the salmon as they return to the rivers. This not only expresses reverence for and gratitude toward the fish, but also passes on traditional knowledge to the entire community about how to care for the salmon so that they will always return.

Today, because of overharvesting and the effects of the Columbia River's many hydroelectric dams, fewer and fewer salmon complete their upstream journeys, and salmon populations have dramatically declined. The people are involved in efforts to restore the salmon and, with them, the Yakama community and culture.

Salmon were once plentiful at Celilo Falls on the Columbia River, but the falls were flooded by the construction of The Dalles Dam in 1957. Today, Yakama fishermen cannot harvest salmon from this traditional fishing location. NMAI

**"Salmon is a way of life for the tribal people, especially the Yakama people. . . the Creator warned us that, as long as we took care of those resources, they would take care of us. But if anything happened to that salmon, and it or any of the other resources disappeared, then we too would disappear as a people."**

***—Carol Craig (Yakama), 2003***

Animals play a role in the cultures of many other Native people. The Lakota people, three distinct groups that historically lived in what is now South Dakota, North Dakota, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Montana, believe that the Earth is to be shared with their animal relatives, especially the bison, or buffalo. Because the bison provided nearly everything the Lakota needed, they believed that the bison was connected to the creation of life. Ceremonies and daily life revolved around honoring the bison.

**"Many, many generations ago, our relatives, the Pte-O-ya-te [Buffalo People] came up from Wind Cave in the Black Hills, the heart of Un-ci Ma-ka [Grandmother Earth], and prepared the way for our existence. From that time forward, they gave of themselves for our survival, as long as we respected their gift. They taught us how to live in an honorable and respectful way by example and through the teachings of the White Buffalo Calf Woman. She brought the sacred *canupa* [pipe] to remind us of our responsibilities and also provided us with the knowledge of the sacred rites that are necessary to discipline ourselves."**

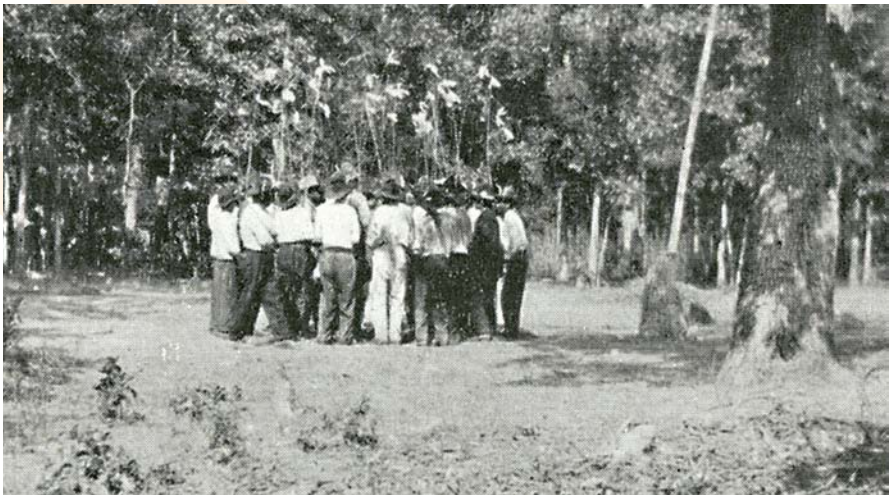
***—Chief Arvol Looking Horse (Lakota), 2008***

Pte-O-ya-te, the Buffalo People, or Buffalo Nation, 1917. The Lakota considered bison to be relatives, who provided humans with food, clothing, shelter, tools, medicine, and many other necessities.
*Photo by J. E. Haynes. Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

The traditional culture of the Lakota was changed by the westward expansion of the United States and the decimation of the bison. The people could no longer engage in the communal work of hunting and preparing the different parts of the animal for food and other uses. Because they have a rich ceremonial and community life that has formed over thousands of years, the Lakota have been able to continue as a unified people. Lakota stories, prayers, songs, dances, and celebrations still honor the bison.

Many other Native groups have ceremonies and cultural practices that honor the foods and natural resources found in their environments and that serve to maintain group identity. For example, the Muscogee of Oklahoma observe what is known as the Green Corn Ceremony (POSKITA) each summer to celebrate the new corn crop. The ceremony has survived despite the tribe's displacement in the 1830s from their original homelands in present-day Georgia, Alabama, and Florida. Although the relocation caused some changes in the Muscogees' cultural activities, the Green Corn Ceremony renews a sense of community each year.

Native communities have been able to survive and even thrive despite outside influences through traditional ceremonies and gatherings such as the Green Corn Ceremony. Communal preparation and sharing of traditional foods are a part of many of these events. They bind the community together and provide opportunities to pass down traditions and knowledge, just as a shared Thanksgiving meal does. Today, most American Indian people shop in grocery stores, but knowledge of and reverence for traditional foods still thrive and are becoming increasingly important to tribal efforts to improve diet and health, and to restore a sense of community.



TAFV SOPANKA (Feather Dance), 1912. This is one of the dances of the Muscogee POSKITA.
*Photo by John R. Swanton. Courtesy of the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution*

## Ideas for the classroom

Present the information in this section to your students. Discuss how the ideas about community conveyed in these examples relate to previously discussed material on Native peoples' connection to the environment.

- **For younger students:** Have them talk (or write) about what it means for humans and plants and animals to have a reciprocal (or shared) relationship. Include the specific examples of the salmon and buffalo and their roles in Native communities as providers of both physical and cultural sustenance.
- **For older students:** Listen to the National Public Radio story, "A Navajo Student Feels the Tug of Home," which can be found at www.nmai.si.edu/education/thanksgiving. As a group, discuss why it is difficult for the Navajo students to leave their communities to go to college. How will Colleen, the student studying levels of uranium in desert plants, help her community and its environment?

# **Encounters:** Effects on Cultures

**Before the Wampanoags met** the English colonists, they had interacted with other Native people politically, socially, culturally, and economically. They had exchanged goods and materials, as well as foods, food technologies, and techniques for hunting, gathering, and food preparation. So when the Wampanoag came into contact with the English, they already had a long history of dealing with other cultures.

At the first Wampanoag/English encounter in 1620, there was probably curiosity, suspicion, and fear on both sides because of their vastly different cultures, but they learned much from each other. For the English, interaction with the Wampanoags enabled their colony's survival. Although the English were interlopers, the Wampanoags shared their land, food, and knowledge of the environment. Early cooperation and respect between the two groups were short-lived, however, as conflicting perspectives emerged. By 1675 the relationship had degenerated into one of conflict and war. This would be the history of most relationships between Natives and non-Natives for the next two hundred years.

Even so, Native American contributions continued to be essential to the survival of Europeans. If not for the generosity and knowledge of the Native peoples who met the explorers Lewis and Clark during their travels in the Northwest from 1804 to 1806, their expedition probably would have ended in disaster. Ultimately, Native encounters with Europeans resulted in the loss of entire Native communities, traditional ways of life, indigenous knowledge, and access to foods that had sustained Native people for thousands of years. War, genocide, disease, dispossession of lands, and ill-conceived federal policies profoundly affected American Indian communities and their environments. The consequences are still felt today. Overharvesting, pollution, and reduction of wilderness habitats have also had an effect on the ability of Native people to grow, gather, or hunt their traditional foods. As they look for ways to keep their cultures alive and to address modern economic and health issues, many Native communities are taking steps to revive their traditional food practices.

Summer in southern Arizona and northern Mexico brings extreme heat and life-sustaining rains.
*Photo courtesy of Tohono O'odham Community Action*

White and brown tepary beans with traditional Tohono O'odham baskets.
*Photo courtesy of Tohono O'odham Community Action*

For the Tohono O'odham of southern Arizona and northern Mexico, early encounters with Spanish colonizers affected their way of life, but the U.S. government has had a much greater impact. Farming was always tied to the ceremonies, songs, dances, and traditional ways of the Tohono O'odham, or "People of the Desert." In the O'odham language, this integrated way of life is known as the Himdag. During summer monsoons, O'odham farmers used flood waters to irrigate thousands of acres of tepary beans, corn, squash, melons, chiles, and other nutritious foods that are well adapted to the region's short, hot growing season. Until the 1920s, they farmed more than 20,000 acres.

In the second half of the 20th century, the federal government encouraged the O'odham to work away from their communities on large, commercial cotton farms. This industrial way of farming separated people from their customary food sources. Moreover, long-established O'odham water sources for irrigation were diminished by big flood control and land development projects.

As in many Native communities during the past sixty years, processed foods high in sugars began to replace locally grown foods, and a more sedentary lifestyle developed when traditional forms of exercise and work became unnecessary. This change in diet and lifestyle has led to a high incidence of diabetes and other health problems. In response to the health crisis, the O'odham are working to grow and market their traditional foods through an organization called Tohono O'odham Community Action (TOCA). TOCA is dedicated to

promoting better health, perpetuating cultural traditions, and creating economic opportunity through two farms that sell traditional O'odham foods. Returning to these traditional food practices supports the O'odham community and enables them to use their environment as their ancestors did. As diabetes and other health problems affect more and more people worldwide, many could benefit from traditional O'odham and other American Indian foods and diets.

Home page of the InterTribal Bison Cooperative's website. Bison is tasty and healthy meat.
*Web image courtesy of the InterTribal Bison Cooperative*

All of these examples show how American Indian people work to combat the negative long-term results of encounters with Western philosophies. The effects of these encounters have lasted for centuries. Some encounters were positive and some were negative, but it is important to realize that all went in both directions: elements of American Indian cultures have influenced mainstream society as well, and are an enduring part of American identity.

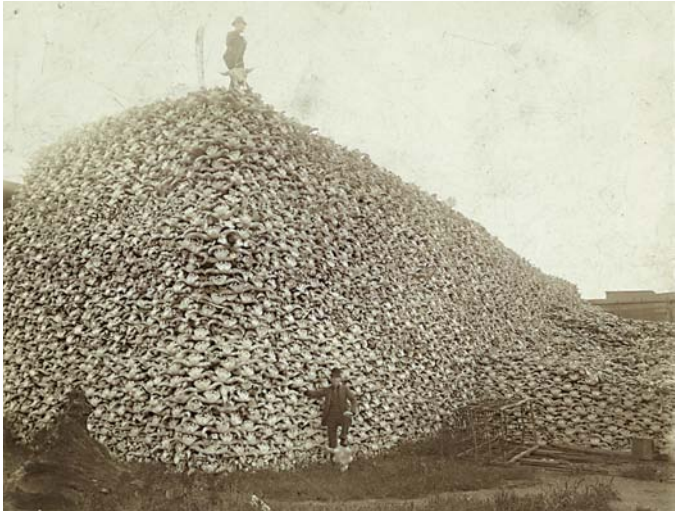
Not all Native communities are as easily able to return to traditional foods because some of those foods have nearly disappeared—an outcome of encounters between different worlds. But renewal efforts abound throughout Indian Country. During the 19th century, the United States government encouraged mass hunting of bison as a tactic in the war against tribes of the Great Plains. Wholesale slaughter of the Buffalo Nation ensued, and carcasses of the animals were left to rot as hunters shot them from railroad cars for pleasure or to collect their hides for sale. It is estimated that as many as 60 million bison were killed in approximately one hundred years. By the late 1800s, they were virtually extinct. As previously discussed, bison are more than just a food source to many American Indian peoples. The Lakota considered bison to be relatives who provided all that was needed to sustain the people—physically, culturally, and spiritually. With the loss of the bison, the Lakota people lost not only a crucial source of food, but also a way of life.

In recent years, many tribes that traditionally depended on the bison have been engaged in efforts to bring back the Buffalo Nation, renew and strengthen American Indian cultures, and reclaim an important part of their traditional diet. The InterTribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC) is a nonprofit tribal organization devoted to reintroducing bison to their former ranges. In its mission statement, the ITBC states, "The destruction of buffalo herds and the associated devastation to the tribes disrupted the self-sufficient lifestyle of Indian people more than all other federal policies to date. To reestablish healthy buffalo populations on tribal lands is to reestablish hope for Indian people. Members of the InterTribal Bison Cooperative understand that reintroduction of the buffalo to tribal lands will help heal the spirit of both the Indian people and the buffalo." The ITBC is made up of fifty-seven member tribes throughout the Great Lakes, Plains, Northwest, and Southwest regions, with a collective herd of more than fifteen thousand bison. Numerous other organizations and businesses are involved in bison ranching, and Americans now consume approximately one million pounds of bison meat every month. Many other Native communities are working to renew and revitalize their original food resources by maintaining a connection with their traditional ways. For example, Indian peoples on the east and west coasts run fish hatcheries with the goal of supporting the fish populations with which they have a traditional relationship.

## Ideas for the classroom

Present the information to students and discuss some of the ways Native people have responded to encounters with European-based cultures.

- **For younger students:** Since we don't often focus on how interactions between American Indians and outsiders affected the food sources of Native people, have students examine in more depth the traditional foods of Native peoples in the area where they live. Have the resources been affected by humans? How? What, if anything, is being done to promote the renewal of those foods? How could this be helpful to all people today?
- **For older students:** Have students listen to the NPR story "Apology to American Indians Moves Forward," which can be found at www.nmai.si.edu/education/thanksgiving. Based on the information you've presented to them from this poster, ask the students about why an apology might be important to American Indian people. Do students think there should be an apology? Have them keep in mind the ways in which interactions between American Indian peoples and the United States government changed Indian peoples' ability to maintain a connection to their traditions and homelands.



A mountain of bison skulls, ca. 1870. By 1893 only a few hundred bison remained in North America. Today there are hundreds of thousands.
*Courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library*

# **Sharing** New Perspectives Year-Round

**The English colonists could** not have imagined how important their first encounter with Native people would be. The Wampanoags—with their intimate understanding of the environment and the high value they placed on social relationships—provided the colonists with the knowledge and skills they needed to survive, enabling them to produce the harvest that they celebrated with that first Thanksgiving feast. Certainly the Plymouth colonists were not the only Europeans or newcomers to rely on the guidance and knowledge of American Indian peoples, whose innovative approaches to coexisting with the land still contribute to the daily lives of all people. Native philosophies have long taken into account the effects of human activities on the natural environment and the dependence of sustainability on human effort. The entire environmental movement is based upon that same philosophy.

In looking at the first Thanksgiving feast from the point of view of its Native participants, it is possible to understand how integral the concept of giving thanks is to Native worldviews. This poster reveals new perspectives on Thanksgiving in two ways. First, it describes a strong reciprocal relationship among the human, plant, and animal communities. Second, it shows that the relationship was disrupted by encounters between American Indian tribes and the Western world. Native people have, however, found innovative approaches to the world around them, and they continue to adapt and change.

## Influences of corn, an early innovation of Native peoples:

- **More corn is produced each year (by weight) worldwide than any other grain.**
- **Corn is grown on every continent except Antarctica.**
- **U.S. farmers planted 87.3 million acres of corn in 2008.**
- **The value of the 2007 U.S. corn crop was $52.3 billion.**
- **More than four thousand products contain corn—from cooking oils, crayons, and baby powder to ethanol, glues, and building materials.**

The contributions and innovations of Native Americans go far beyond food and agriculture, but this poster has focused on food because of its importance to the Thanksgiving holiday. Today, foods developed by American indigenous cultures—from potatoes to tomatoes to chili to chocolate—are fundamental to most of the world's cuisines. Corn is a good example of a Native innovation that has become a worldwide staple. It was first cultivated by Native South American and Mesoamerican farmers about 7,500 years ago. They gradually transformed a wild grass into the versatile food we now know. Through scientific methods of cross-pollination they developed numerous varieties that could survive in a wide range of climates and growing conditions. Many of these types of corn—including popcorn—are still grown today.

By the 1500s, indigenous Andean farmers had developed more than three thousand varieties of potatoes. *Photo courtesy of the International Potato Center, Lima, Peru*

America's first people understood that even plants can work better together than apart. Haudenosaunee and other Native peoples introduced Europeans to techniques of companion planting—growing plants that complement each other in the same plot of ground. Corn, beans, and squash are especially suited to the companion planting technique. Beans climb the tall, strong corn stalks and replenish the soil with nitrogen. The corn's leaves protect the beans from the sun. Squash planted between the corn plants holds moisture in the soil and discourages weed growth and insect infestations. Known by the Haudenosaunee as the Three Sisters, corn, beans, and squash form an important part of many Native peoples' traditional diets.

Non-Native farmers also learned from their interactions with American Indians how to clear their land for crops with controlled burning. They learned about crop rotation from Native farmers who understood that land could be depleted by planting it with the same crops year after year, a concept that was foreign to Europeans. Native people also developed certain methods of storing and preserving food. For example, by the 1500s indigenous Andean people of western South America had developed a method of freeze-drying the potatoes they grew.

Sharing agricultural knowledge was one aspect of early American Indian efforts to live side by side with Europeans. As relationships with the newcomers grew into competitions for land and resources, the groups were not always successful in their efforts to coexist. So, the first Thanksgiving was just the beginning of a long history of interactions between American Indians and immigrants. It was not a single event that can easily be re-created. The meal that is ingrained in the American consciousness represents much more than a simple harvest celebration. It was a turning point in history.

## Ideas for the classroom

To summarize everything that students have learned from what you presented to them, have a conversation about how their perceptions or understanding of American Indians and Thanksgiving have changed. What new things have they learned about American Indian relationships with the environment, communities, and encounters with outsiders? What have they learned about the agricultural contributions and innovations of Native peoples? How does the information about Native agricultural innovations give them new perspectives on Thanksgiving?

# Final Thoughts

**As with all our educational materials**, this poster incorporates some fundamental concepts about Native cultures, which have too often been obscured by stereotypes and misconceptions. We have found it helpful to keep the following ideas at the forefront of any discussion of Native topics.

1. American Indians are still here, living modern lives. Even as contemporary people, many American Indians still retain strong connections to their specific traditions.
2. American Indian cultures and languages are intimately tied to the land.
3. Worldviews and perspectives of American Indians may be very different from those of non-Indian students. American Indians' traditional worldviews are often grounded in a recognition of the interrelationship among humans, animals, plants, water, winds, sky, and earth.
4. Indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere are diverse in their languages, cultures, values, and beliefs. There is no such thing as one, single Native American culture.
5. American Indian cultures have always been dynamic—adapting and changing.
6. Many traditional Native values and practices are relevant to issues of worldwide importance today, such as care of the earth.

## RESOURCES

**Images, text, and other materials related to this poster** www.nmai.si.edu/education/thanksgiving

**Other educational materials from the National Museum of the American Indian** www.nmai.si.edu/education

**InterTribal Bison Cooperative** www.itbcbison.com

**Tohono O'odham Community Action** www.tocaonline.org

**National Public Radio** www.npr.org

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**Design:** Groff Creative, Inc.

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On the front cover, clockwise from top left:
- Many varieties of corn have been developed and used by Native peoples throughout the Americas. Courtesy of the United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service
- Children at TOCA farm with squash. Courtesy of Tohono O'odham Community Action
- White and brown tepary beans with traditional Tohono O'odham baskets. Photo courtesy of Tohono O'odham Community Action
- Leonard Two Eagle, manager of the Rosebud Sioux's bison herd. "Shelly" sticks out her tongue for petting, the only sign of domestication that a bison offers. It should be remembered that approaching these animals can be dangerous. Photograph by Matt Ross. Originally published in *Indian Country Today*. Courtesy of the photographer

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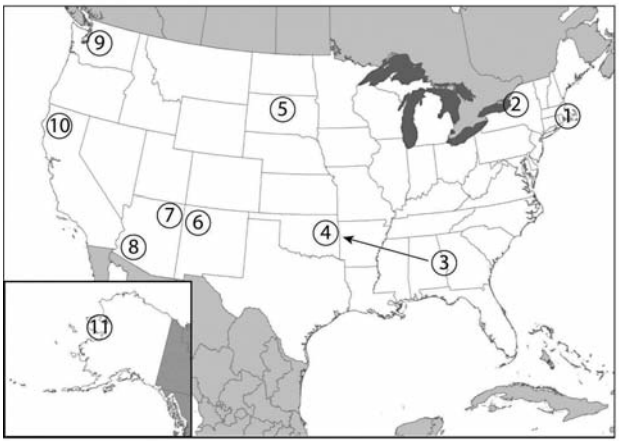
*General Location of American Indian Communities Discussed in This Poster*




Communities, east to west:

1. Wampanoag
2. Haudenosaunee (Iroquois)
3. Muscogee —original homelands
4. Muscogee —after removal
5. Lakota
6. Picuris & Santa Clara
7. Diné (Navajo)
8. Tohono O'odham
9. Yakama
10. Hupa
11. Inupiaq

Phoye Tsay Brascoupe, dog Rascal, Povi Brascoupe, and Clayton Brascoupe pick corn at Four Sisters Farm, Tesuque Pueblo, New Mexico. *Courtesy of Clayton Brascoupe*