



**The HoChunk
Harvest Project:
Restoring Sustainable
Food Sovereignty**

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THE HOCHUNK HARVEST PROJECT: RESTORING SUSTAINABLE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

The HoChunk people of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska traditionally enjoyed a close connection with their environment, which has gradually become fractured due to increased urbanisation. The community has become reliant upon external producers for nearly all of its food requirements, and the health of its members is suffering as a result. In an effort to reconnect people with the land, a project coordinated by former Tribal Council member, **Vincent Bass**, and **Brian Mathers** of the HoChunk Community Development Corporation, aims to maximise the use of local resources to produce healthy, sustainable, culturally-appropriate food. Their ultimate goal is to achieve food sovereignty for the Winnebago Tribe.



A Food System Out of Balance

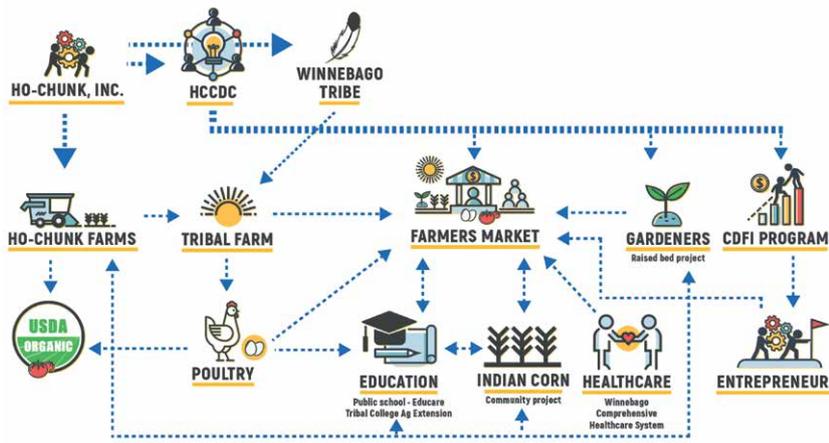
The HoChunk are a Native-American people whose historic territory includes parts of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois. Today, HoChunk people are enrolled in two federally recognised tribes – the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin and the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska. The Nebraska Tribe’s reservation in Thurston County, in north-east Nebraska, is home to 2893

residents, two-thirds of whom are Native American. The reservation is entirely rural, and its four-year average poverty rate is 28.9% – more than double Nebraska’s state-wide average.

As a geographically isolated and disproportionately low-income tribal community, the Winnebago Tribe’s food system is challenged by many factors. The residents living on the reservation have no full-service grocery store in

the community – the nearest is located eighteen miles away in the Sioux City metropolitan area. Many low-income households have transport barriers, and so rely on Winnebago’s two convenience stores for their food supply. These are expensive shopping options and have hardly any fresh produce for sale. The community runs meal programmes for low-income people; however, these are unable to integrate fresh or locally grown foods into their menus because of the dearth of nearby growers with established local commercial delivery pipelines.

As well as being hunters and gatherers, historically the HoChunk people of the Winnebago tribe were also food growers – eating food when it was in season and living a healthy life in harmony with their surroundings. With increasing urbanisation and changing lifestyles, this connection to the land has been eroded, and very few households on the reservation have been engaged in



Interrelationships between the project components, the groups that are part of it, and community elements

gardening or growing. In fact, nearly 100% of food consumed by reservation residents is grown off-reservation. This reliance on external suppliers threatens the Tribe's food sovereignty, their right to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and the ability to define their own food and agriculture systems.

These factors are also having a cumulative detrimental effect on the health of the Winnebago tribal population, who suffer disproportionately from a number of serious conditions related to nutrition, including obesity, hypertension and diabetes. One third of children under four years old in Winnebago's Women, Infants and Children program are already clinically obese, with an additional 16% being overweight. Nearly three-quarters of adults are an unhealthy weight (72%) and more than half of hospital admissions are for patients with diabetes.

There is a general recognition within the community that the current fractured food system is out of balance, and in 2015 the Winnebago Tribal Council initiated community planning and organisation around food sovereignty, forming the Winnebago Food Security Task Force. Consequently, the HoChunk Harvest Community Food Project was born, administered by the non-profit

HoChunk Community Development Corporation (HCCDC), along with a broad coalition of local stakeholders. The project is led by former Tribal Council member, Vincent Bass, and HCCDC's Executive Director, Brian Mathers, and aims to implement key components of the Task Force's comprehensive food sovereignty plan.

'Our vision is that members of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska are able to meet their own food and nutrition needs,' says Bass. 'We're looking for ways that we can maximise tribal land, water and human resources, to produce local food that is healthy, sustainable, culturally meaningful, and widely available to all residents of the reservation.'

Utilising Local Resources to Meet Community Needs

Food security is complex and multifaceted, and the HoChunk Harvest Project group recognised that meaningful progress on a number of levels, including local food production, community education and economic development, would need to occur in tandem for the project to be successful. 'For this reason, we set up a number of integrated initiatives,' says Mathers. 'Our approach has been supported and enhanced by the collaborative relationships of the many community partners involved.'

The interrelationships between the project components, the groups and organisations that are part of it, and the elements of the community that are impacted by the project, are clearly illustrated by the local food systems diagram featured in this article, produced by the food sovereignty team.

To address the recent cultural and social shift away from the land, and to get families growing again, one of the initiatives introduced was a Raised Bed Home Gardening project. 'We've targeted low-income households, elderly individuals and families with children,' explains Bass. 'We've provided them with a raised bed structure, topsoil, hand tools, seedlings and seeds – everything they need to start growing their own produce at home.'

To increase the likelihood of continued gardening, project partners HoChunk Farms and Little Priest Tribal College provide help and instruction for first-time gardeners. In addition, participants are linked with a nutritionist from the Tribe's Health Department, who provides seminars and cooking classes to demonstrate how to prepare the produce grown. An annual Harvest Festival is conducted to celebrate harvest and generate further community interest. So far, the initiative has engaged nearly 200 new households in growing their own food.

One of the most visible outcomes of the HoChunk Harvest Project has been the construction of a 'Village Market' structure in HoChunk Village – adjacent to the major traffic thoroughfare in the county. More than 300 people – primarily low-income and elderly Native Americans – live within walking distance of the new building. The Village Market has space for thirty vendor booths and also houses the tribal college's agricultural extension office. A weekly farmers' market is now held during the growing season, where growers are asked to donate unsold produce at the end of the market day for local senior meals and children's feeding programs.



In terms of further increasing the tribe's ability to develop business opportunities and reduce reliance on external suppliers, one project partner, HoChunk Community Capital Inc, is working with new food and agriculture-related business start-ups to develop business plans, solidify credit scores, explore market niches and launch businesses. Alongside delivering one-on-one assistance, HoChunk Community Capital coordinates business training and seminars from other partners including Little Priest Tribal College and Briar Cliff University. The organisation has also made \$50,000 in start-up capital available to small agricultural businesses that are ready to launch or expand.

Through this process, the HoChunk Harvest Project has started to connect fledgling local growers with the resources they need to explore the feasibility of replacing low-wage work with sustainable small businesses, or supplementing household incomes through sale of produce or value-added food products.

A Healthier Future

The initiatives run as part of the HoChunk Harvest Project represent a holistic approach to increasing local food production and improving community health. The Project provides opportunities to increase use of available land to address food needs, engages more tribal members in growing their own food and integrating it into healthier diets, and creates entrepreneurial and economic development opportunities.

Mathers is keen to point out that the HoChunk Harvest Project is just the beginning. 'We're merely planting the seeds for prolonged and sustainable growth,' he says. 'These initiatives are all part of the Tribal Council's long-term vision of building the community's self-reliance.' Indeed, all of the elements of the Harvest Project are designed to have a useful and lasting legacy.

The raised gardening beds will last long beyond the project lifespan, the Village Market is a permanent installation and long-term asset, and the business models that have been



developed will keep people employed on the reservation and provide opportunities for future generations. With increased availability of healthy, locally produced food, Mathers also hopes that the community will start seeing the positive impacts on their health, and consequentially, reduced pressure on healthcare services.

Projects running alongside the HoChunk Harvest Project will further support the community's goal of food sovereignty. Another aim of the original Task Force was to establish genetically pure varieties of the Tribe's traditional corn and build up a sustainable supply for this and other food plants important for nutrition and ceremonial use. The Tribe and HoChunk Farms have also been working with St. Louis Zoo's Centre for Native Pollinator Conservation to source heirloom corn, beans and squash seeds. In 2017, they planted a five-acre parcel in Winnebago with 'Johnson County White' corn, and also donated seed to neighbouring tribes. The harvested corn was used in corn soup for senior citizens, as well as at memorials and funerals.

Other initiatives are also underway, including increasing habitat to support pollinators, and converting tribal land currently leased for corn, soybean and livestock feed production to organic food production for local consumption. The Little Priest Tribal College has also been awarded Tribal College Extension Program funding through the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, to expand efforts to increase agriculture, health and natural resources literacy for all residents of the Winnebago Indian reservation.

'We're already seeing the benefits of increasing our community's connection with the land,' says Bass. 'It's rewarding to see the positive impact that our collaborative effort has had on the health, wellbeing and identity of the community, as well as the environment in which we live. These are useful first steps to but there's still work to be done. We must continue to build on our achievements so far and work towards our long-term aim of establishing food sovereignty for the Winnebago tribe, with all of its associated benefits.'



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Brian Mathers has more than 20 years' experience managing service programs for high-need communities. He is currently Executive Director of the HoChunk Community Development Corporation (HCCDC) – a non-profit community development agency focused on improving economic opportunities and quality of life for tribal communities. During his previous tenure as Executive Director of the Lincoln (Nebraska) Action Program, he administered two successful multi-year USDA-funded Community Food Projects. Mathers has also held the position of President/CEO at the Center for Siouxland – a non-profit human service agency, as well as working for several years as Director of Research Development at the University of South Dakota. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Speech from Buena Vista University, Storm Lake, Iowa.

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Vincent Bass is a Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska elder who has served his community in various tribal governance and enterprise capacities over the past three decades. In addition to serving thirteen years as a Winnebago Tribal Council member, Mr Bass has worked to develop and sustain tribal enterprise initiatives focused on gaming and product distribution. Mr Bass's leadership on the Tribal Council was a key factor in the Tribe's pursuit of food sovereignty. He has an Associates Degree in Building Construction from Northeast Nebraska Technical College.

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