

## NATIVE AMERICAN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE IN WISCONSIN

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**POSTER** with maps and photos (11.9 MB). *Text follows:*

### NATIONAL OVERVIEW

Across Native America, a new "food movement" is growing and distributing traditional indigenous foods, in order to reintroduce them to tribal members' diets, and in the process strengthen tribal cultures, improve tribal members' nutrition, and develop sustainable agricultural economies on American Indian lands. Tribal sustainable agriculture is reintroducing traditional foods to counteract the current tribal epidemic of diabetes, and the poor nutrition resulting from the U.S. white flour and sugar diet. A "[Native Food Summit](#)" was held in Milwaukee in September 2004 to coalesce the [Native Agriculture and Food Systems Initiative](#). (see Native FARM [resource manual](#)) Its aims are to increase tribal "food security" through community food system projects, and development of agricultural business enterprises (as promoted by groups such as the [Intertribal Agriculture Council](#). The Summit built connections around culture, food, diet and health, and showcased successful food system projects in Indian Country. The Oneida Nation, the Ho-Chunk Nation, and the Bad River Ojibwe Nation in Wisconsin participated in the Native Food Summit. Projects developed by these Native nations represent the growing relationship between tribal sustainable agriculture, American Indian history and culture, tribal economic development, and a healthier tribal diet. The [White Earth Land Recovery Project](#) in Minnesota serves as a model for a Native community-based sustainable food systems.

This poster examines [Oneida](#) and [Ho-Chunk](#) agricultural projects, as part of a faculty/student collaborative research project to produce two chapters for the new book [Renewing Rural Wisconsin](#), published in 2007 by the [Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy](#), and distributed by the University of Wisconsin Press.

## OVERVIEW OF ONEIDA AND HO-CHUNK HISTORY

The [Oneida](#) are a part of the Iroquois Confederacy (Haudenosaunee), centered in present-day New York state. Oneida original territory consisted of up to 6 million acres in 1600 (see map on poster). During the Revolutionary War, the Oneida sided with the Americans against the British and other Iroquois nations. Yet after their victory, the Americans acquired virtually all Oneida land in the 1785 and 1788 treaties. Many Oneida escaped land pressure from American settlers by migrating west into Ontario and Wisconsin in the 1820s. Other Oneida stayed behind in New York, where they continue to live on a reservation today. The Wisconsin Oneida Reservation was established west of Green Bay in the 1838 Treaty.

When the [Ho-Chunk](#) were first encountered by Europeans, their territory extended from Green Bay to the Mississippi River and north-central Illinois. After they were pressured to cede the last of their ancestral lands in 1837, they were forcibly removed west of the Mississippi River--first to Iowa, then to Minnesota and South Dakota, with many tribal members dying on the way. By 1865, they finally arrived in Nebraska (where some continue to live on the Winnebago Reservation today). At the same time, many Ho-Chunk either hid out in Wisconsin's pine woods, or walked or canoed back to their homeland. They established scattered private homesteads in the 1870s (see map on poster), received federal recognition as the Wisconsin Winnebago Tribe in 1962, and changed their official name to the Ho-Chunk Nation ("People of the Big Voice") in 1994.

## ONEIDA NATION WHITE FLINT CORN

*"Corn is the kernel of the culture."*

--Dr. Carol Cornelius, Oneida Cultural Heritage Department manager

The Oneida people have not only grown the white flint variety of corn since before European contact, but have relied on it as their Tsyunhehkwa ("Life Sustenance"). The Oneida brought the white corn with them in their migration from New York State in the 1820s, and replanted it along with their culture in Wisconsin soil. Traditionally, white flint corn was grown by many Oneida families, and was seen as central to the survival of the tribe and the community.

Corn was part of an integrated agricultural system called the "Three Sisters," consisting of growing corn, beans, and squash together in the same mound, in a practice that scientists today call "intertillage." The tall corn provided a structure for the beans to grow upon. The beans, along

with the nutrients they provided, fixed the nitrogen in the soil, making more nitrogen available for the corn to consume. The squash spread out into the spaces between the mounds, and covered the ground to suppress the weeds and keep moisture in the soil. The Oneida still grow the Three Sisters today, using both traditional and modern methods, as one example of a national Indigenous trend to reintroduce Native foods back into tribal food systems as healthy alternatives.

It is no short of a miracle that white flint corn is still grown today in Wisconsin, given the formidable historical obstacles presented to the Oneida. The Oneida, or On<sup>^</sup>yote<sup>?</sup>a.ka ("People of the Standing Stone") are originally from New York State, where they were one nation within the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, or Haudenosaunee. Within their village palisades, the Iroquois grew white corn in complex agricultural beds. After the Revolutionary War, American land settlement pressured the Oneida to search for more secure land to the west (see map on poster). In 1823, some Oneida migrated to land they purchased west of Green Bay, where their 65,430-acre reservation was established in 1838.

The Indian Allotment Act of 1887 divided Native reservations into privately held parcels, which left the lands vulnerable to confiscations, foreclosures, and fraudulent acquisitions by non-Indians. The fertile lands of the Oneida Reservation, adjacent to a growing urban area, were particularly vulnerable. The tribally held lands dwindled to only a few hundred acres by 1924. A decade later, the Indian Reorganization Act established a federally recognized tribal government and stopped the loss of tribal lands. In 1937, 1,270 acres of land were placed in trust for the Oneida, yet during the Depression (and through the 1950s), farming jobs were scarce. Tribal members were forced to rely on a government commodities diet of white flour, sugar, and lard that led to a high rate of diabetes.

The federal government's next attempt to assimilate Native Americans was to relocate them to cities, often far from home. It was only in the 1970s-1980s that the Oneida and other tribes began to exercise some self-determination over their education, health care, community development, and the sovereign regulation of their own lands. After Congress in 1988 recognized tribal gaming rights (in states that already practiced gaming), the Oneida built a successful casino that jumpstarted their economic and cultural programs. The tribal land base within the reservation increased to about 4,600 acres by the 1990s, and the tribe built a new school. Yet urban sprawl and the pollution from Fox River Valley paper mills still encroached on Oneida farming lands.

During the past two centuries of Migration, Allotment, Depression, Relocation and pollution, the white flint corn has remained with the Oneida people, grown by families on their farms and garden plots. As part of the new resurgence of economic and cultural development, the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin has established a new farm dedicated to production, processing and distribution of white flint corn and other traditional products.

### **Agricultural Process**

The traditional Oneida farm is called [Tsyunhehkwa](#) ("Life Sustenance," or more literally "It provides life for us"). In the Oneida language, the name is pronounced *Joon hey-kwa*, The

Tsyunhehkwa program is part of the Oneida Community Integrated Food Systems (OCIFS), and consists of three divisions, covering production, processing and distribution.

**The Production Division** is termed Agricultural and Community Services, or Shakoh<sup>^</sup>ta?slu.níhe? ("He prepares the fields for them"). The Division includes education and outreach services, garden workshops and a traditional husking bee, a solar greenhouse, seed bank and seed saving circle. It offers organic vegetables and berries, community seeds and plants, Heirloom Iroquoian white flint corn, custom-raised grass-fed beef, pastured poultry and free-range eggs. The Division involves Oneida families and youth in every aspect of white flint corn production. Anyone may participate in the preparation of the seed, the green corn harvest, and the Husking Bee held after the Fall harvest in October. The Husking Bee is critical to the selection of seed for the next year's crop. After husking, the white flint corn is braided, hung and dried (see photo on poster). Throughout the year, volunteers shell the corn by hand, and store the kernels in bins.

**The Processing Division** is based in the Community Cannery, or Tsi?tkutekhwa.y<sup>^</sup>hé ("Where they put the food away"). The Division includes food canning and Indigenous food workshops, and food preservation assistance. The white corn is cooked with hardwood ash to break down the hard outer shell, and is then canned or dehydrated. The corn, canned either with or without meat, is traditionally used to make nutritious corn soup. The dehydrated corn is either sold or ground to make corn flour. Cannery products include canned white corn soup, corn flour, dehydrated corn, and Kan<sup>^</sup>stóhale (traditional corn bread). Kan<sup>^</sup>stóhale has a short shelf life, so it is baked about four times a week. The Community Cannery (see photo on poster) is a significant attribute in Oneida food systems not only by processing white flint corn, but by offering the facility to community members to do their home garden canning, and buy common Spring starter plants.

**The Distribution Division** is termed Retail and Community Services, or Lutunhetsla?nikulale? ("They look after all living things"). The Division (see photo on poster) offers "Herbal Harmony" tea blends and bulk herbs, traditional medicinal herbs, white corn soup, raw and dehydrated white corn, corn flour and bread, wild rice, and other items. It provides workshops and materials on preventative health and traditional foods or herbs.

The Tsyunhehkwa farm has reintroduced organically grown foods to the Oneida Reservation to ensure a healthier diet and lifestyle for tribal members, who had long been dependent on unhealthy commodity foods. By doing so, it also seeks to educate tribal members and the wider community about Native traditional food systems, rooted in the ancient past, and updated to the modern age with the use of environmentally sustainable technologies (such as a solar-heated greenhouse). Perhaps most importantly, the traditional farm also reintroduces a cycle of cooperation within the community, with Oneida and their neighbors of all generations working together to harvest, process and distribute the crops. The white flint corn and other food crops provide a cultural connection to tribal ancestors, and a reason to rebuild a sense of community and nationhood.

*[See accurate Oneida font on poster.]*

## HO-CHUNK NATION BISON RESTORATION

*"By allowing co-existence, it provides for other natural animals as well."*

-- Cecil Garvin, "Bison Prairie 1" manager

The Ho-Chunk (formerly Winnebago) have a long history of land removal and reclamation in southern Wisconsin. In a series of three treaties in 1829-37, the tribe lost its entire land base, and most Ho-Chunk were forcibly removed west of the Mississippi River. Others hid out in Wisconsin pine woods, or walked back to their beloved homeland. By the 1870s, they had established scattered private homesteads throughout their treaty-ceded territory. It was not until federal recognition in the 1960s, and gaming successes in the 1990s, that the Ho-Chunk Nation could begin to reclaim or purchase more of its lost lands, and reintroduce sustainable agricultural techniques. In 1993, the Ho-Chunk Nation purchased a 640-acre site north of Muscoda, along the Wisconsin River. The purchase of the site ensures the lasting protection of its plentiful effigy mounds--evidence of an ancient presence of the tribe's forebearers. The "[Bison Prairie 1](#)" site was also dedicated to the reintroduction of bison, which once freely roamed the region.

### **Bison Prairie 1**

The Ho-Chunk Nation is one of 51 member tribes of the [InterTribal Bison Cooperative](#), dedicated to the reintroduction of bison to tribal diets and cultures. Member tribes practice this form of agriculture on many different reservations, on lands were once part of the bison's natural habitat. The reintroduction of bison into the Ho-Chunk diet is an integral part of an overall tribal plan to lower diabetes. Research has shown that bison meat is healthier than beef, because it is lower in fat and richer in iron. People with diabetes need to keep fat intake to a minimum to control sugar and insulin levels. The Ho-Chunk Nation is providing bison meat for its Elderly Nutrition Sites through the Tribal Aging Unit. It is also raising bison on its Whirling Thunder ranch near Tomah.

The "Bison Prairie 1" staff is dedicated to organic methods of raising bison, and to having minimal human contact with the herd (see photo on poster). The bison are not able to roam, but are moved among fields in "intensive rotational grazing." The herd is moved once a week to paddocks that are 15 to 25 acres each. The Ho-Chunk are trying to restore the natural grasses of the Wisconsin River Valley. The grasses have had difficulty overcoming alfalfa, which is of concern because a bison can only handle 10% alfalfa protein. The 640-acre site must be managed well in order to maintain good health in the herds and the crops (see photo on poster). It takes about four acres per animal to maintain a healthy herd. Calving season is from April to June, with a predicted death rate of about one-sixth of newborns. To track the bison, each animal is inserted with a microchip for up-to-date inventory control (see photo on poster). In the yearly roundup, the new animals get their chips inserted, and all the animals are subject to a thorough checkup. The round-up is important for health monitoring, yet is done only once a year due to stress on the animals.

A mature cow will average 1000 to 1200 pounds, a bull averages 1500 to 2000 pounds, and a prize bull will average up to 3000 pounds. Bison reach maturity at 8-10 years, and their average

lifespan is 30-40 years. (Only three-year-old bulls are slaughtered. ) The Ho-Chunk say the bison eat more before a storm, and lay with their head into the wind. They can outrun and outmaneuver a horse, and can also gallop over rough terrain at speeds of 30-35 miles per hour (at a stretch of ten miles in one run).

### **Uses of Bison**

As in past Native cultures, all the parts of the bison are used. The rawhide, hoofs, tendons, horns, beard, teeth, guts, and even bison chips have multiple uses. At present, the herd is providing enough meat to entitle each member five pounds of meat per week. The site provides meat for elderly meal sites, Ho-Chunk community activities, family and culturally related activities, and other programs.

This "Bison Prairie I" site also offers other opportunities for the public and tribal members. It offers guided tours of the ancient effigy mounds on the property. There is also a youth cultural education program that includes building a traditional shelter, canoeing, archery, and other culturally related activities. In the Ho-Chunk Nation, bison raising connects tribal health, economic development and cultural revitalization. It symbolizes the rebirth not only of the bison, but also of the Native culture that once depended upon them.