

Exploring the Impacts of a Nonprofit Seed Bank on Indigenous Communities in the Southwestern United States



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INTRODUCTION

Over sixty percent of the food the entire world eats today was originated from and developed by Indigenous people of the Americas (Rogers, 2011). Nevertheless, Native seed and food loss is a challenge for thousands of Indigenous People in the United States. With the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, there has been evidence that food insecurity is more prevalent in low-income areas, but less information on how it has affected Native seed and foods. I propose that further research is needed into the organizations that are providing Native seed for Indigenous peoples. My project focuses on the nonprofit seed bank Native Seeds/SEARCH and their work surrounding Indigenous seed sovereignty. This study could allow for input in what Indigenous people want to see incorporated into future programs. Evaluations of their impacts of cultural food restoration in Indigenous communities could reap great value for future sustainable seed projects for vulnerable groups.



N'Dee Bikiyaa Farm worker with giant sunflower variety

NATIVE SEEDS/SEARCH

"The nonprofit mission of Native Seeds/SEARCH is to conserve and promote arid-adapted crop diversity to nourish a changing world. We work within the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico to strengthen regional food security" (Seedhead News Issue 124).

Native Seeds/SEARCH (Southwest Endangered Aridlands Resource Clearing House) provides seed preservation, propagation, and distribution and stewardship, the creation and maintaining of seed history through seed diaries, and the return of seeds to their original owners who request them. The organization runs nonprofit programs, including the Seed Stewardship/Rematriation Program, Native American Seed Request, Bulk Seed Exchange, Seed Backup and Community Seed Grants.

METHODS

Field research for this project will be conducted between November 2nd, 2020, and January 1st of 2021 in Tucson, Arizona. My research method is qualitative. I will be using ethnography, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, Participatory Action Research, and a decolonizing methodology.



Glass containers of seed varieties

Participant Observation

I will be participating in and observing activities at Native Seeds/SEARCH (NS/S) between November 2020 and January 2021. I will be working with the seed collection, in the seed lab, in the demonstration garden, with the Community Seed Grants coordinator, and with the Conservation Manager. I will also observe at the retail store.

Semi-Structured Interviews

These interviews will be conducted face-to-face with about 12-20 individuals, including board members and staff, volunteers, and Indigenous community members that work with NS/S.

Participatory Action Research

Native Seeds/SEARCH works to challenge inequality in seed and food sovereignty for Indigenous peoples of the Southwest United States by restructuring power relations and working to reduce health inequities.

Decolonizing Methodology

I hope to negotiate a partnership with the nonprofit and with the Indigenous communities that use the services of NS/S, to find a mutually beneficial way to use the data I have collected. By allowing for the decolonization of data, the community will be who determines what information is gathered, and how it is interpreted (Secaira, 2019).



A Native Seeds founder and Tarahumara farmers

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How has Native Seeds/SEARCH learned from and respected the contributions of Indigenous People concerning projects on Native seed?
2. How does Indigenous participation in Native Seeds/SEARCH programs work toward building food sovereignty for Indigenous communities?
3. What are the measurable outcomes of Native Seeds/SEARCH's Native seed action plans as viewed by both the organization and its Indigenous participants?



Bulk seed exchange participant farmers and crops

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Native Seeds/SEARCH was founded by Gary Paul Nabhan, Karen Reichardt, Barney Burns, and Mahina Drees as a spin off to a successful Meals for Millions garden project.

I have information on some of the Indigenous communities that have worked with Native Seeds/SEARCH from online platforms, print materials and the newsletter The SeedHead News.

The seed bank organization has worked with over fifty Indigenous communities and tribes. It also focuses on collecting and passing on oral traditions about the seeds, such as recipes, cultivation practices, and stories.



Po'onomp Devils Claw seed

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS CONTINUED

- **Seed Stewardship Program** is promoted through ex-situ and in-situ approaches, a combination of keeping seed in cold storage conditions where they are viable to germinate at a later time. Secondly, stewardship works through an ongoing relationship between people and plants in the present.
- **Seed Backup Program** is a "black box" initiative that allows the seed bank to be a security backup repository for regional seed collections. This program also is tied to the rematriation of seed to their original owners.
- **Stewardship/Rematriation Program** also takes religiously or culturally significant Native seed out of general rotation, making them only available to tribal members and people of Indigenous heritage.
- **Native American Seed Request Program** is a way for Indigenous individuals or families to get free or half-price seed packets of any type of seed offered through the program.
- **The Community Seed Grant Program** offers grants to organizations working on educational, food security and community development programs.



Blue Speckled Tepary Bean variety

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