



## Perspective

# **Responsibilities and reflections: Indigenous food, culture, and relationships**

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## Abstract

Understanding Indigenous food systems requires positioning ourselves in our own understanding of Indigenous food, culture, and place. The resurgence of Indigenous culture occurring around food, and the protection and revitalization of Indigenous food systems must be documented with a commitment to Indigenous values, worldviews and perspectives. This commentary offers insight into how we can do so.

**Keywords:** Indigenous food; Indigenous culture; Indigenous relationships; traditional knowledge; storytelling

## My story

A few years ago, I practiced casting at the beach with a friend and accidentally caught a fish, unaware there were hooks on my line. When my line dipped into the water, I assumed it was yet another snag, but as I started reeling in I realized there was a fish on my line. The fish had hooked hard, and was thrashing as we struggled to get its slippery body off of the line. Panic struck, I held my head in my hands as my friend released the fish back into the water. It slid back into the water, but slowly floated on its back towards the shore. My friend waded into the water, taking the fish into his hands and turning it right side up, again and again, as it continued to

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struggle. It took a few tries of coaxing that little Walleye back into the water, and all of the time I held my breath.

*Tansi.* It is our practice to offer ourselves first, because it is our truth: it is what we know best. I have told you a small story to describe who I am and how I think, but it is missing key pieces.

The name my parents gave me is Tabitha. I am a mixed ancestry Cree Iskwe, with family in the Interlake Region of Manitoba, specifically Fisher River Cree and Peguis First Nations. I am also Icelandic and Irish. My families met through fishing in Lake Winnipeg and the surrounding rivers, the Fisher River, and the Icelandic River. I feel a close connection to the lake. My ancestors were fishermen—fisher people—and the waters are part of my homeland. I am an active harvester, a student, and a teacher. I work in and around Indigenous food cultures, land, and relationships, often referred to as Indigenous food sovereignty.

I consider myself to be both a student of university and a student of my culture. The land is, perhaps, my most important teacher. As a student I am constantly learning, and the more I learn, the less I know. An Elder once shared with me a presentation he gave to an elementary school class. After listening to the Elder speak, a young boy raised his hand and asked the Elder how he knew so much. The Elder asked the young boy to head outside and bring in a small cup of sand. Upon receiving the sand, the Elder reached into the cup and held out one grain of sand. He said, “this is how much I know.” I love this lesson. It reminds me to be humble, honest, and true. Here, then, is what I know: a tiny particulate of one grain of sand.

It’s personal, the work I do. It is about me and my people and my ancestors and the children and the unborn and the land that holds us together. I fear the threats that face Lake Winnipeg, my home waters, the land where I go to meet family and friends. It is a place that holds my family’s history, and it tells me how I got here. I can hear the thrum of water as waves rise up from the lake, the sheer of wind as it moves across water. I feel the movement of a thousand years on the shores of Lake Winnipeg deep into my bones. It is a moody lake, calm, but stormy. It is a metaphor for the history of my peoples.

As we venture into the world of Indigenous food—the colonial history and traumas, the ceremonies and beauty, the destruction to the land and every other thread to this spider web of conversation—we must acknowledge that we, too, only know a tiny particulate of sand. Of course, there is potential for learning. But it must come from our people. It must come from the harvesters, the Elders, the wisdom keepers, healers, helpers, and activists. It must be led by, for, and with Indigenous peoples. It is important to acknowledge what we know and what we don’t know, and that we are learning. We are extending across boundaries, academic and otherwise, to bring together stories and voices from the land. Those stories hold so much for us to learn from. Stories, in my culture, are some of our greatest teachers.

Long ago, I received an important teaching from a Grandfather: for everything you take from the land, you give first. This teaching meant so much to me as a young woman. It felt intuitive, thoughtful and most importantly, right. It allowed me to consider the myriad ways we view the land, and the bounty that comes from it. Though I had studied science and the

environment in my undergrad years, it was focused on learning how to consume less, recycle more, and to be careful and considerate to promote sustainable development. It wasn't until I turned to my traditional teachers that I discovered a new land ethic: reciprocity.

We all have a relationship to the land. It may not be considered on a daily basis; but when you reflect how you are able to go about your day, you realize the land is the center of all of your needs. The relationships that need to be cultivated should include gratitude. The land, the sun, the sky, moon, and stars, and everything connected within and around that, are what gives us life.

Life deserves respect. It deserves a moment of your time, a moment of your heart, to say “thank you”. The relationships that need to be cultivated must include looking inward, offering outward: kindness, respect, honour. When we think of the gift of clean water, or the life of an animal—life that has been given to us so that we may thrive—how do we not step back and reconsider our relationship to food and the world around us?

In my teaching, I offer tobacco to the land to acknowledge this moment. I sing, or pray, or protest. I write letters to government, and bring news of activism into the classrooms I teach. These are my offerings to the land and to my people. What are yours?

On the day I accidentally caught a fish, I felt so many things. Mostly I felt that this wasn't right. I hadn't offered my tobacco. I hadn't said “hello”. I hadn't said “thank you, I am grateful for your life”. I had a freezer full of fish at home, had shared it with others, received more in return; but I wasn't in need. I hadn't upheld my responsibility to the land, to my ancestors, to creation.

Every day my understanding of Indigenous food sovereignty changes, deepens, and grows. The more time I spend on the land, the more I see connections between the past, present, and future of Indigenous food systems. As I listen to stories and share in conversations, those threads of a spider web tug, and my heart moves along with it. This is both hard work, and heart work. It means looking back and stepping forward, a scary but satisfying proposition for anyone, but especially for those whose pasts are wrought with grief and trauma. For those whose people have been scarred and starved because of food—because of a need and desire to not be hungry, to stand up for the land, to practice a way of life that is inherent to who we are—this work means putting your heart on the line every day.

It is a blessing to be here, in this movement, in this moment where we are having these conversations and talking about the work that we do. I am grateful that there are entire dialogues, books, conferences, and journals dedicated to having conversations around Indigenous food, land, and culture. There are so many stories that need to be told and heard. We need to work at listening with our hearts and our minds, and to be fully present for these moments. I believe in clean water, soil, food, and air. They are connected. You cannot have one without the other. I believe in my people. I believe that our people are paving the way, fighting the good fight towards making other people accountable to our collective need for clean water, soil, food, and air; but there is much work to do. Access to clean water, soil, food and air is our need and our right. We have a right to practice our culture. Moreover, we have a responsibility to practice our culture. We have a responsibility to protect the land. When we harvest, we do so as a

responsibility. When we stand up for the loss of traditional lands, for the contamination of water, for the high rates of diabetes and cancer that are tied to our food systems, we do so because we have made a deal with creation. For every gift given, we offer back. We ensure the future of our food systems through careful and sustainable practices; through harmony with our surroundings. We have been born into that responsibility. It is part of who we are.

Indigenous food sovereignty represents a movement, one where we are re-defining our food systems and revitalizing our culture, one that is political and dynamic and hard. There is no more hiding our traditional food. No more hiding the stories of communities that do not have access to fresh, safe water or fresh, safe food. There will be no more hiding, period. This movement, and the people that surround them are not going to go away. We are here. And there is a small army of land-based folks—grandmothers, grandfathers, activists and knowledge keepers—who will ensure that. We will, and are, coming together: for the future and the past and the present. I feel honoured to be part of a group that is committed to such a worthy cause. Indeed, it's the only way I can think of to move forward.