



Tribal Carbon Removal, Food Sovereignty Have Many Links

By Mark Fogarty

A well-known Native food sovereignty advocate sees many parallels between her award-winning business and tribal efforts to remove carbon from the atmosphere or catch it before it is released into the air.

That's why Dana Thompson, co-owner and chief operating officer of The Sioux Chef and a highly-lauded Native restaurant, Owamni in Minneapolis, spoke at the recent National Tribal and Indigenous Climate Change meeting held in St. Paul by the Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals (ITEP).

Thompson, who also is executive director of nonprofit North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems (NATIFS), spoke of the power of Indigenous foods to promote healing and ease trauma at the ITEP meeting.

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Afterwards, she answered a few questions as to what brought her to a Tribal carbon event and the similarities she sees between that industry and her own.

"I spoke at the climate event because the work we do has everything to do with how Indigenous peoples lived sustainably for millenia," said Thompson, who is descended from the Sisseton-Wahpeton and Mdewakanton Dakota Tribes.

Treatment of the soil is especially important in food sovereignty and in carbon renewal, as soil is a key carbon dump and the source of traditional foods that embrace healing.

"The trauma of living in a country that has so little regard for something we all rely on is frightening at best, and debilitating at worst," said Thompson, and it is no stretch to connect that with the trauma fossil fuels have caused the earth and the attempt of tribal carbon experts to heal the damage.



Dana Thompson

Photo Credit: Nancy Bundt

A lineal descendant of the Wahpeton-Sisseton and Mdewakanton Dakota Tribes and lifetime Minnesota native, Dana Thompson has worked for nearly a decade within the food sovereignty movement. As co-owner and chief operating officer of The Sioux Chef, she manages all business development strategies for the company. She has traveled extensively throughout tribal communities, engaging in critical ways to improve food access and implementing strategies to do the most possible good as a social entrepreneur. In 2018, Dana jointly founded the nonprofit NATIFS (North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems) for which she is senior director of health and wellness initiatives. Through this entity, she focuses her expertise on addressing and treating ancestral trauma through decolonized perspectives of honoring and leveraging Indigenous wisdom.

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Credit: Nancy Bundt

Thompson sees key correspondences between different kinds of environmental activists, like those working in the food and carbon areas.

“Surrounding ourselves with likeminded people, building that connection of culture, is something that does actually heal us. Working together on these types of environmental initiatives builds community, and in the same breath builds the soil back to where it needs to be.” she feels.

Responding to a question about the connection between Native practices in food sovereignty and agriculture and the deep knowledge of local environments that makes tribes predisposed to leading carbon removal efforts, she says “There is a clear connection between the Native philosophy of how we steward the land. Regenerative agriculture is just one way that we can fight to protect our natural resources.”

Other healing practices include “Using every part of the animal, reducing waste that can create greenhouse gasses, to understanding permacultural designs

that feed nitrogen to the soil, thus capturing carbon, to escaping the US reliance on monocultural practices which have raped our soil to the point of a massive environmental crisis.”

Resiliency is another factor that is essential both to Native food sovereignty and Tribal carbon removal.

“The trauma of our earth reflects directly onto ourselves because we are of the Earth. That being said, Indigenous peoples are defined also by their resiliency. We can pivot if we learn from our ancestors and heed this wisdom as we move forward.”

Entrepreneurship is another connector between the two industries.

“Through NATIFS and many projects we have through The Sioux Chef, we are directing resources into supporting Indigenous entrepreneurs so that we can invest into communities that have a deep understanding of sustainability, environmental practices and green technology,” Thompson says.

“Food is directly linked to the carbon industry when it comes to agriculture, diverting waste, and essentially health,” she points out. In addition, the local sourcing of food cuts down on the need to transport food long distances, adding to the carbon burden.

“Native entrepreneurship will also drive wealth into these marginalized communities. We want to set many of these communities up for success if we can help.”

Thompson co-owns The Sioux Chef with Sean Sherman. The operation has expanded from modest ventures like the Tatanka Truck, a food truck that offered pre-contact foods local to the area.

It has expanded to include Owamni, an acclaimed Native restaurant on the Minneapolis waterfront that recently was named the best new restaurant in America by the James Beard Foundation.

The Sioux Chef website describes Thompson’s venture NATIFS as an effort to “focus her expertise on addressing and treating ancestral trauma through decolonized perspectives of honoring and leveraging Indigenous wisdom.”

