

# Keeping Native American Communities Connected to the Land: Women as Change Agents

By Diana Doan-Crider, Janie Simms Hipp, Lisa Lone Fight, Valerie Small, and Virginia Yazzie Ashley

## On the Ground

- Native women are the fastest growing demographic among Native farmers and ranchers and have the ability, creativity, and cultural wealth to transform and restore the relationship to the land.
- However, these women must be empowered in a western agricultural world that is male dominated.
- Tribal self-sustainability will require changes in policies for land tenure and inclusion of women.
- Native women will need to keep abreast of local and national land issues that affect our resources and that increase their knowledge and skills.
- Education will give Native women and our youth the freedom to choose what is best for the future.

**Keywords:** Chickasaw Nation, Crow (Apsáalooke) Nation, Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara Nation, Navajo Nation, fractionated, indigenized, land tenure policy, tribal college.

## Manteniendo a las comunidades Nativas Estadounidenses conectadas con la tierra: las mujeres como agentes de cambio

### Perspectiva desde el campo:

- Las mujeres nativas representan el sector demográfico de más rápido crecimiento entre los y las granjeros y rancheros y tienen la capacidad, creatividad y riqueza cultural para transformar y restablecer la relación con la tierra.
- Sin embargo, estas mujeres deben estar empoderadas en un mundo agrícola occidental dominado por los hombres.
- La autosustentabilidad tribal requerirá cambios en las políticas de tenencia de la tierra y la inclusión de las mujeres.
- Las mujeres nativas necesitarán mantenerse al día en cuanto a las cuestiones locales y nacionales de la tierra que afectan nuestros recursos y que incrementan su conocimiento y habilidades.
- La educación dará a las mujeres nativas y nuestra juventud la libertad de elegir qué es lo mejor para el futuro.

This compilation of essays from Native American women represents a further dissection of an existing and complex dilemma: the long-term sustainability of tribal rangelands. In a previous publication,<sup>1</sup> we discussed challenges for managing tribal rangelands in general, which include historical separation from the land, complex governmental and tribal regulation, resulting land tenure patterns, and educational needs. These essays further discuss causes and effects on Native women, but also high-

light the important role of women in streamlining processes to ensure rangeland sustainability on tribal lands. In fact, their role is likely a critical factor of its success.

### Diana Doan-Crider: Invest in Native Women Because They Are Experts at Overcoming Obstacles

I am honored to present the perspectives of several indigenous women who serve as leaders and mentors in their tribal



**Figure 1.** “Picking Buffalo Berries (Mary Little Nest and Helen Goes Ahead); Crow Reservation, Montana.” Dr Joseph K. Dixon, courtesy of the Mathers Museum.

and professional communities. This topic emerges from the complexities of tribal rangeland management as discussed in McCuen et al. 2011,<sup>1</sup> but it shifts the focus to the challenges that women find in male-dominated cultures and professions. In the past, Native women always held decisive roles in the use of natural resources—roles that varied even among tribes because of differences in matriarchal or patriarchal customs. However, those roles began to change several centuries ago with European colonization, resulting in shifts in mobility, food production, work responsibilities, and general leadership (see Fig. 1 of Crow women harvesting native plants). These societies continue to evolve today as food sources and economies change.<sup>2</sup>

Although Native Americans are still connected both physically and spiritually to the land, maintaining that relationship given the historical separation from their homelands, reservation fractionation, and the resulting land tenure issues has been challenging. Tribes now struggle to maintain some autonomy from the federal government, while still attempting to provide the most fundamental needs such as sustainable natural resources, healthy food, and jobs for their people.

Tribes, and specifically women, are confronted with taking care of their families despite geographical isolation from thriving economies, proper medical care, and healthy food. Although more Native women are entering into natural resource professions, many must leave their homes and families in order to secure employment because most positions are with the federal government. The 55 million acres of once highly productive Indian rangelands are in troubled condition, and their oversight is understaffed.<sup>1</sup> Combined with the challenges of preserving cultural integrity and native languages while trying to coexist in a westernized world, the goal of self-sustainability seems elusive.

This is, however, only one part of a much larger story. My experience in working directly with the First Nations has al-

lowed me a deeper and richer perspective. There are leaders—many of them women—who don’t even blink at the challenges. They have easily convinced me that not only are they becoming unified and empowered, but they are also becoming some of the world’s most innovative thinkers. Why? Because they are experts at overcoming ... even against all odds.

The American Indian Higher Education Consortium now lists 37 tribal colleges and universities in their membership,<sup>3</sup> all of which are now land-grant universities.<sup>4</sup> While collaborations with larger universities are increasing, there is still a critical need for outside institutions to understand indigenous cultural needs and complexities and readily adapt programs, particularly at the graduate level, to prepare Native students to solve problems at the community level, not just for the outside US job market. This includes traditional uses of natural resources, tribal politics, land tenure challenges, and sustainable employment needs.

Unfortunately, recent budget cuts due to sequestration are having serious impacts on tribal colleges that are trying to move forward. Outside institutions should work to create opportunities to bridge with tribal colleges through capacity building, online training, short courses, and experiential learning opportunities.

Native women have the drive, ability, creativity, and cultural wealth necessary to transform, reform, and restore their relationship to the land. All that is needed are opportunities and support to help them achieve even greater victories against impossible odds. It is important to realize that as programs are “indigenized,” they are made far richer, more effective, and relevant for all.<sup>5</sup>

### **Janie Simms Hipp (Chickasaw): Educate Our Youth and Trust Them to Make Wise Choices**

Women, not just Native women, are the fastest growing demographic in agriculture; Native women are the fastest growing demographic among Native farmers and ranchers.<sup>6</sup> In the midst of these trends, women are challenged with choices that impact our actions today, and for our future. Of those choices, do we step outside of our comfort zone to participate fully, seeking to become voices of leadership? Or do we focus on raising the next generation of responsible adults to make sure that our own family’s land-based businesses are successful and thriving? As Native women, each of us must decide what difference we want to make *now* and what path we are securing for the future. I am reminded of a very recent brouhaha over Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg’s book about “leaning in.”<sup>7</sup> If we don’t lean in now, when will we? And if we don’t lean in at all, who will?

So what about the future? This generation is more electronically connected to the rest of the world than any other.<sup>8</sup> Even if they are physically, emotionally, and culturally bound to a reservation and a people, they are not intellectually bound because they can easily step across cultural boundaries with today’s modern tools. But how do they sort out the “good stuff” from the bad? Some of our young people will stay at

home and carry on traditions. But some will leave their homeland and communities behind. Our new challenge is to help them explore the outside world and perhaps bring the “good stuff” back home to help strengthen our tribal communities.

Evolution is not an enemy to our traditional values. The new generation may now be able to do traditional things in entirely new ways, and we must honor our youth by helping them achieve their desires and hopes. While some of them may focus on the traditional ways, some may go on to serve as tribal, state, and national leaders; some will farm and ranch; some will build innovative and adaptive local/regional food systems; some will manage the lands and conserve our soils and waters for the next generations; and some will be in the classroom or in the laboratory. Our past ties to the land have always been about feeding and sustaining our people, and that is still the strength of our future. The biggest challenge we have right now is to become unified in making decisions that are best for our youth as a whole. If we can overcome our differences about tradition vs. “westernized” educational approaches,<sup>5</sup> then we can move forward. Education outside of the community should not be feared. If we can resist the thought that our young people won’t return home, then we can give them the freedom and support they need to become our next generation of leaders.

Young people need to be exposed to all of the options and opportunities available to them, because *Indian Country* needs all those options and opportunities. There are ways to expose our children to these opportunities, but also to keep them rooted in their culture. They need to be exposed to the intellectual and spiritual, emotional and social, practical and esoteric; all of these facets will provide them with the group of skills they need to become the problems solvers of the future—for our communities. Let them make those choices. In my opinion, our most important gift to our Native youth is the opportunity of education *at all levels*. Education will give them the freedom to choose what will work and what will not work for them in their efforts to create, build, and problem-solve in our communities. And they will likely do more to bring unity to the tribes and work at the intertribal level than we ever imagined. We must give our youth the same thing we demand from the US government: Self-determination and Trust. And as Native women we need to “lean in” to give them the courage, freedom, and confidence they will need. We have work to do.

### **Lisa Lone Fight (Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara): Integrate Traditional Ways With the New and Support Women’s Empowerment**

My connection to the land is through my people, our traditions, and my profession. I am a Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara from North Dakota. We farmed the “hyper-fertile” bottomlands of the Missouri River from time beyond memory. This “riverine” agriculture was the province of women who raised beans, squash, tobacco, sunflowers, and most importantly—corn. This resulted in our people becoming the



**Figure 2.** Lisa Lone Fight following her grandmothers: Indigenous adaptation and land change in the Mandan Hidatsa and Arikara Nation.

primary agricultural trading and distribution center of the Northern Plains. Our connections to the land were primary, practical, spiritual, and inextricable. This tradition persists even to today, but the twentieth century was one of challenges.

In 1951 the Garrison dam was built on the Missouri River resulting in the formation of Lake Sakakwea. While the lake is beautiful, below it lies 156,000 acres of the richest farmland in North America and what (until 1950) was the home of 90% of our population. I am a remote sensing researcher; I view these changes from satellites (see Fig. 2 for indigenous adaptation and land change in the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation). Many things are revealed to me from a distance—patterns of weather, governmental agricultural policy, fractionated ownership, and the current massive energy development.

The Garrison dam is just one example of the changes we face, along with recent activities associated with energy exploration and extraction. It is important to understand that while we live in a changing economy and landscape, we are not fundamentally a changed people. Women maintain their traditionally powerful place, people are still fed from the land, and our “ways” are handed down to us coherently and intact. In other words we maintain the “seeds” of agricultural abundance, often literally. This summer my daughter and I, along with our immediate and extended family, grew Mandan corn for the first time in a generation from seeds that were 50 years old.

The future of our people is continuous with the past. We need to feed the people; we always have and always will. Our tradition of the empowered role of women must be maintained in the face of a western agricultural world that still sees farming, ranching, and even science as primarily male domains. Aside from issues of land use policy, we need to support those who see the land as the repository of the past, present, and future. As an empowered woman who is connected to the land, I see the agricultural future of my people in my children as I teach them western science, our tradition-

al knowledge, and how to grow corn to help them understand the connections among them.

### Valerie Small (Crow): Land Policies and Gender Discrimination Undermine Sustainability on Indian Lands

My perspective stems from working at a tribal college under a US Department of Agriculture Equity Grant Program to develop a two-year agriculture degree program. The fact that Native women are the fastest growing population within the agricultural sector on reservations is encouraging.<sup>6</sup> These strong young women are helping to empower other women to obtain land for farming and ranching purposes. However, the difficulties begin when obtaining monetary resources to obtain land that is held “in trust” by the federal government. If you ask women who are successful ranchers on the Crow (Apsáalooke) reservation, they will tell you that their primary initial challenges rest with complexities of land tenure and, secondly, cultural issues with regard to gender.

Treaty tribe land issues are complicated due to a multiple ownership pattern created through the Allotment Act or Dawes Act of 1887.<sup>9</sup> Unlike fee patent landowners, who own their land without government oversight, treaty lands are managed through a government trust, either individually or as communal property. This means that the Bureau of Indian Affairs must approve any land use. Heirship rules have resulted in multiple owners, which in some cases can include 243 allottees of the sixth generation for one original allotment, often requiring a majority approval for land use.<sup>10</sup>

Land fractionation continues with each generation, as do costs and requirements for bureaucratic oversight, resulting in frustration and disinterest.<sup>10</sup> Now most of the allotted lands within the Crow reservation are leased by non-Indian farmers and ranchers.<sup>11</sup> Families who own land must decide whether they wish to set aside income received from leases or risk working the land themselves. Land held within the federal trust cannot be used as collateral to obtain loans from local banks or qualify for federal assistance programs, and this limits a family's ability to acquire the resources necessary to develop and improve their land.

For native women, becoming empowered to live off of the land can be particularly challenging because of social and cultural taboos, as well as unfamiliarity with the regulatory process. Traditional male agricultural producers may not be as likely to mentor or assist newly entering women into the profession. Current land policy already causes male tribal community members to leave tribal lands and seek opportunities elsewhere. Paving the way for women, particularly those that are not already living or working within their families' ranches, will require educating them on the obstacles that Treaty Tribes must overcome. Only land policy changes, along with following the examples of women who have successfully navigated the process, may help ease the process for other women. Tribal self-sustainability will be feasible only by demanding changes in policies, and by demonstrating that



**Figure 3.** Virginia Yazzie Ashley on Family Ranch, Navajo Nation, Arizona, circa 1982.

women are and can be successful in ranching. Meanwhile, programs to promote women as mentors to empower other women are essential in order to secure a future sustainable food source for the Crow Tribe.

### Virginia Yazzie Ashley (Navajo): Invest in Our Youth and Take Care of the Land—Then the Land Will Take Care of Us

I grew up on a family ranch with my father and eight siblings on the Navajo Indian Reservation (in Fig. 3 of the Yazzie family on their ranch on the Navajo Reservation). Income from raising cattle, sheep, and horses put food on the table for us and a shelter over our head; it covered expenses for our education. Livestock are very important to the Navajo people. Many Navajo ranchers own good quality livestock and practice sound range management the best they can on open rangeland. My husband and I carry on the family ranching tradition in Arizona. The sale from our calf crop and culled cows contributes a little to our income. Our satisfaction comes from raising healthy young calves, lambs, and colts. Most of our lambs are kept for our family food uses; we donate a couple for traditional ceremonies and sell some to other people. With a ranching background, I learned to respect land, water, air, and animals.

I graduated from New Mexico State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Animal Science. Upon my return from school, I learned that my father, just from ranching all his life, knew far more about range and livestock management than I did. So I took on another degree at the University of Arizona in range management. My father is now deceased, but the memory of his encouragement to always better myself remains with me all the time.

Early in my career with the Forest Service I encountered many obstacles. For instance, I had to prove to a male-dominated workforce that I was capable and knowledgeable to do my job well. To date, my education and work experience have

paved the way for me to be the best land manager I can be while working with ranchers on the National Forests and on Indian reservations.

The Navajo Tribe is at a turning point in accepting Navajo women as their leaders; it was not too long ago that Navajo women were not readily recognized as leaders. Now a handful of women have been elected to be on the Tribal Council and as directors with federal agencies and state and tribal offices. There are more and more Native women who are well educated and outspoken and are willing to make changes for the betterment of the Navajo people. In order for Native women to be successful and overcome many challenges, we need to keep abreast of local and national issues that affect our resources, and we need to participate in professional levels of society to increase our knowledge and skills.

Where do we need to go from here to empower our young women? Education, experience, and mobility to me are the answers. Through job and career fairs, we need to inform our college students about the benefits and rewarding jobs in natural resource management. Also, our youngsters need to be encouraged to go off the reservation to gain experience and become independent. I truly believe that if we invest in our youth and take care of the land, then the land will take care of us.

## Conclusion

The essays above highlight five pieces that must fit together, both temporally and spatially, if sustainability is to be reached. First, traditional and cultural values are essential in order to cultivate and preserve their connection to the land. Second, education and science must be integrated with those values in order to enhance innovation and problem solving for the complex challenges ahead. Third, the specific empowerment of women on rangelands is necessary to break former barriers. Fourth, educational and training opportunities to empower tribal members—specifically women—must be creatively sought and implemented. Finally, policy and bureaucratic processes must be streamlined in order to allow for effective rangeland management and to include women as both users and managers of those lands. While some of these pieces may seem daunting to most people, they are essential, and there is no room for backing out if culture and tradition are to be honored, and if tribal rangelands are to be sustainable.

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