National Congress of American Indians

NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

TRIBAL GOVERNANCE INNOVATION SPOTLIGHT

Food Sovereignty
SAN CARLOS APACHE TRIBE

WHAT'S INSIDE

Seeking to reconnect the Western Apache people to the natural world and the physical, cultural, and spiritual sustenance it provides, the San Carlos Apache Tribe has spent the past three decades exhaustively documenting the diversity, expanse, and nutritional benefits of the pre-reservation Apache diet. Through its Traditional Western Apache Diet Project and the various informational and educational resources the Project shares across the reservation and beyond, the Tribe is training and guiding tribal members to embrace their traditional foodways as an irreplaceable pathway to individual, family, and community wellness and prosperity.

An NCAI Case Study

> Our traditional foods are critical to understanding the fundamental importance of life. They boost your mind, your body, your spirit, and your outlook on life. You become rich in the values we teach as Apache.
>
> — Louie Lorenzo, Jr., Substance Abuse Prevention Coordinator, San Carlos Wellness Center[1]

The San Carlos Apache Tribe is one of four federally recognized tribal nations in Arizona that descend in whole or part from the Western Apaches, a closely related network of 20 Apache bands that had long presided over a substantial portion of the state's eastern half before the arrival of white settlers in the mid-19th century.[2]

Prior to their confinement on reservations following the Civil War, Western Apaches adeptly supported themselves through their adaptive management of a versatile seasonal subsistence system rooted in an intimate understanding of and respect for the natural world. At precise points during the seasonal calendar, they strategically engaged in wild plant food gathering, hunting, small-scale agriculture, and to a lesser degree livestock raiding in optimal combinations, doing so with the people's physical wellbeing and the natural world's ecological wellbeing equally in mind.[3]

Jordan Lewis and Orien Longknife use sotol stalks to harvest saguaro cactus fruit, a traditional food staple harvested by Apaches in late spring. (Photo: Traditional Western Apache Diet Project)

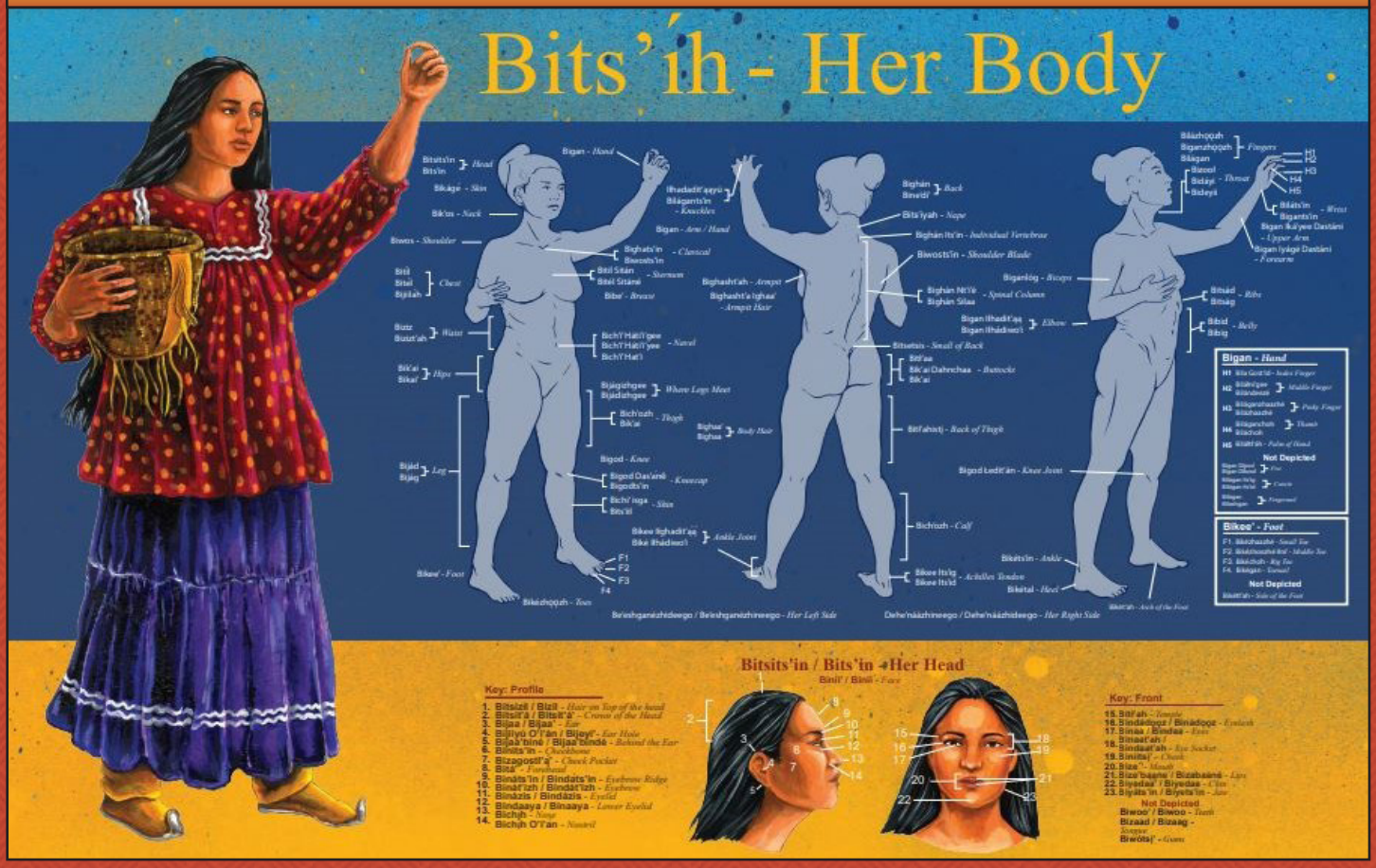
As part of this highly diversified and nutritious diet, Western Apaches consumed over 200 edible wild plant species, more than a dozen varieties of corn and squash, and nearly 50 species of mammals and birds – procuring them where and when each was most abundant.[4] Traditional staples included agave, Emory oak acorns, saguaro cactus fruit, piñon nuts, wild seeds and tubers, corn, and a wide variety of small game such as *gloscho* (desert woodrat).[5] Every member of the community, "no matter their age, gender or standing, had a vital role to play in this socio-ecological cycle."[6] Ably carrying out these roles required extensive training, great stamina, and extraordinary cardiovascular fitness; children, for example, were raised to harvest corn and wild foods and hunt small game, gaining an intimate understanding of all Apache foods by age 10.[7] Meanwhile, leaders were selected and followed by the people based on their proven ability to plan and direct the community's various activities throughout the year.[8] Guided by the edict *dową godiłzí* ("respect everything"), the Western Apaches' mutually nourishing relationship with the natural world is what made them "*Innee* (in Apache, 'the people'), who they know themselves to be."[9]

Apaches and the Natural World: Forced Separation

However, the Western Apaches' finely-tuned food system could not withstand the unrelenting advance of the American frontier beginning in the 1850s. In just two decades, encroachment by white settlers and attacks by the U.S. Army and civilian militias made it impossible for Western Apache groups to sustain their self-sufficient way of life. Incoming settlers and relentless military scouting prevented them from accessing the specific landscapes they had long relied on for nourishment from crops, game, and wild plant foods. This forced them to rely ever more heavily on livestock raiding for their survival, which triggered increasing violence with the region's new inhabitants. The U.S. government, eager to insulate settlers from further hostilities with Apaches and open up choice Apache lands for development, decided to confine Apache groups on reservations comprising a small fraction of their expansive ancestral territories.

The San Carlos Apache reservation essentially became a concentration camp for Apache groups the U.S. considered hostile. Through military and civilian authorities, the federal government instituted a stifling reservation program to stamp out Apaches' pre-reservation ways and hasten their assimilation into mainstream American society by micromanaging every aspect of Apache life. Apaches were systematically restricted to the reservation's boundaries, and in certain instances confined to its growing number of clustered settlements.[10] To track their location and movements, the federal government assigned tag numbers to all Apaches in place of their names and divided them into groups each headed by a chief.[11] The program also facilitated the administration

FIGURE 1: Female Anatomy Poster (Courtesy: Traditional Western Apache Diet Project)



of government rations, meant to displace the Apaches' pre-reservation seasonal subsistence system as their main food supply. Prevented from procuring their traditional sources of sustenance at their ancestral farms, gathering spots, and hunting grounds, Apaches had no choice but to wait in weekly and then monthly lines for distributions of imported, often nutritionally-deficient rations, which quickly became the basis of the new Apache diet.[12]

Western Apaches' jarring transformation from loyal stewards to immobilized tenants of the land sparked a precipitous decline in the health of the natural world around them. Non-Native farmers, ranchers, and miners rapidly exploited off-reservation ecosystems for their rich soil, plentiful water and grasses, and mineral deposits, exhausting many beyond repair in short order. Meanwhile, at San Carlos, the federal government's gross mismanagement of the reservation's natural resources – notably its sanction of massive cattle overgrazing by non-Native ranchers – caused unprecedented erosion and flooding that quickly decimated the reservation's once bountiful agricultural lands and wild plant and game species.[13] By 1890, the reservation could no longer support the people solely by traditional means.[14]

Severed from their traditional diet, Apaches at San Carlos were left to consume an imposed diet dominated by processed foods high in saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, and added sugars.[15] After nearly 150 years of this state of affairs, today they suffer from obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases at rates considered extremely high even for Indian Country – the result of living a mostly sedentary, indoor life in the middle of a food desert, and consuming a diet largely devoid of the traditional foods such as fruits, vegetables, and lean meats that "once kept Apaches healthy and strong."[16] In addition to these ailments, Apaches' detachment from the natural world, its resources, and the cultural values and lifeways it sustains has fostered a deep sense of powerlessness, "loss of self-esteem, and therefore self-sufficiency within the community."[17]

"Gravity pulling us back to our traditional ways"[18]

Seeking to reconnect the Western Apache people to the natural world and the physical, cultural, and spiritual sustenance it provides, the Tribe established its all-volunteer Elders Cultural Advisory Council (ECAC) in the early 1990s to oversee its cultural preservation activities.[19] Supported by the Tribe's Forest Resources Program, ECAC led the development of two long-term research projects to collect and maintain for current and future generations the traditional knowledge that Apache elders possess about the natural world and their ancestral Apache territory.[20] Through more than two decades of extensive fieldwork, these projects have produced several books to educate tribal members

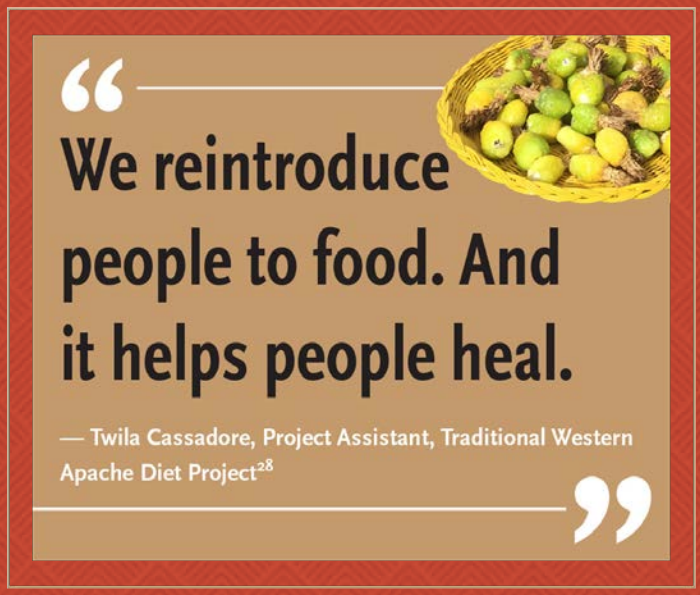
about the uses and benefits of natural world resources, and mapped the location and cultural significance of more than 1,300 places throughout traditional Western Apache territory.[20]

Equipped with the immense educational raw material gleaned from these initiatives, in 2011 the Forest Resources Program created the Traditional Western Apache Diet Project "to study the ancestral diet and the pre-reservation healthcare and support systems of the four Western Apache Tribes of Arizona, and to reintroduce key elements of these systems to [Apache] communities in meaningful and resonant ways."[21] The Project's ultimate goal is to revitalize the Apache people's healthy relationship with their traditional foodways and, "in the process, alleviate some of their current social and economic ills, including substance abuse, suicide, domestic violence, diabetes, obesity, poverty and unemployment."[22]

The Project fuses Apache foods, land, and language through a suite of educational initiatives, including: a year-round Apache experiential language and culture curriculum; a health literacy initiative; traditional food books, recipes, and online posts; a traditional seeds and community gardening project; and a 10-unit traditional Apache parenting curriculum featuring pre-reservation and contemporary health information.[23] Deploying a "learn by doing" approach, the Project educates Apaches – in particular youth – through applied activities that facilitate their direct engagement with the natural world, their understanding of how the natural world nourishes them, and how they must live to access that nourishment.[24] According to Cordella Moses, Curriculum Specialist for the Tribe's Language Preservation Program, "The reason we go out into the field, we know it will stay with them. They need to do it themselves. It sticks to them that way. They remember."[25]

Key to the Project's success is its coordination of all of the key entities across the Tribe tasked with supporting the physical, mental, social, and cultural health of the Apache people. Forest Resources Program staff partner with the Tribe's Wellness Program, Diabetes Prevention Program, Social Services Department, and Language Preservation Office staff, tribal healthcare providers, the San Carlos Unified School District, and other key stakeholders across the community to integrate Project curricula into their work in systematic ways, and they meet regularly to determine how to strengthen and expand the curricula's use.[26] In one of many examples, the Tribe's Wellness Program uses Project materials in its mentorship program curriculum for male Apache youth ages 8 to 18, sharing Project information about traditional Apache plant foods and medicines during youth field trips to the mountains.[27]

The Project's curricular outputs are as prolific as they are diverse. These widely distributed resources include a book and companion audio CDs about Apache trees and shrubs, a book about traditional animal foods, a lunar calendar detailing the harvest schedule of wild foods, several posters depicting the origins of traditional Apache foods, and a set of culturally-appropriate human anatomy and biology posters in the Apache language that are posted in the San Carlos Apache Healthcare Corporation facility and elsewhere across the community.[29] All materials are "produced 100 percent in-house," with their maps, artwork, and infographics produced by local Apache cartographers, artists, and graphic designers.[30]



In addition to these educational resources, Project staff have invested a great deal of time and effort into research – notably a comprehensive reconstruction and nutritional analysis of the traditional Western Apache diet. Synthesizing information from hundreds of interviews with Apache elders and traditional cultural authorities as well as anthropological sources, staff created a database of the nearly 300 different species of food that Apaches traditionally ate – and when and how Apaches consumed them each year.[31]

The Project then worked with a botanist to conduct an exhaustive, software-based analysis of the nutritional content of each food species using existing research data on those species. The findings confirmed through Western science what Project staff and others in the community had always known – the traditional Western Apache diet was far healthier than the imposed diet that most Apaches consume today. Specifically, the analysis determined that Apaches' traditional diet was similar to that "consumed by Olympic runners," far exceeding contemporary U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) standards in key areas.[32] On average, it featured two times the USDA recommended daily intake for protein and fiber and was also high in vitamins B, C, and K as well as calcium, iron, and zinc; meanwhile, it was significantly low in saturated fats, cholesterol, and

Twila Cassadore holds *Saan Bitsits'in*, a wild parsnip traditionally harvested by Western Apaches that is rich in carbohydrates, Vitamin C, and magnesium. (Photo: Traditional Western Apache Diet Project)

sodium.[33] The analysis also found the traditional diet was very filling with little volume, and that Apaches always had ground acorn, agave, and mesquite beans in flour form "on the table" as condiments to supplement their protein and carbohydrate intake.[34] In addition to the traditional diet's nutritional benefits, the considerable physical and social activity involved with obtaining it through gathering, harvesting, and hunting also promoted remarkable overall health in both body and mind.[35] According to the Project, "Our ancestral diet, and living the life that supported that diet, kept us healthy and happy by living according to the natural rhythm and processes of *Nigosdzán* (the Earth)."[36]

Committed to leveraging this database and analysis to foster Apaches' embrace of their traditional foodways, Project staff have created 96 daily menus (eight days per month for all 12 months of an annual subsistence cycle) to make the traditional Apache diet a "credible," realistic option for community members.[37] Featuring detailed recipes, each daily menu focuses on what is available at that specific time of the year – what food species are used, how they are prepared, and the portion sizes necessary to ensure adequate nutrition (and the need to practice portion control). To facilitate community members' use of the menus, Project staff provide guidance to community members about when and where they can harvest menu-based foods, and also tips about how to prepare particular ingredients and recipes.

In addition to increasing Apaches' consumption of traditional, healthy foods, the Project also is producing other emerging benefits. Tribal healthcare professionals, using Project information and data, are now closely examining the relationship between Apaches' forced separation from their traditional foodways, historical and personal trauma, and chronic health issues like diabetes, obesity, and toxic stress that undermines individual and communal resiliency.[38] By all accounts, the Project is also enhancing community members' respect of and care for the natural world. According to Carrie Curley with the Nalwoodi Denzhone Community gardening project, "Once you meet a plant, it becomes your friend. It is exciting to go out and see your friends. There's a whole grocery store out there that I didn't know about. It is time for us to rely on our traditional foods and medicines. We need to stop neglecting them."[39]

Just as important, the Project is reigniting intergenerational relationships and the transfer of knowledge that has sustained Western Apache culture and lifeways since time immemorial. For example, Apache youth who participate in Project-informed programs across the reservation are bringing their newfound knowledge and experiences home, sparking conversations and the sharing of memories and stories about Apache foods, places, clans, and history.[40] As Tribal Language Director Beatrice Lee explains, "We have parents saying, 'I had totally forgotten about this food or plant. Thank you for teaching them and reminding me.'"[41] According to Robert Wilson, graphic designer for the Project, the experience has prompted him to engage more with older family members. "It's opening up memories about things they never talked about previously. It's showing them that it's okay to talk about them," he explains. "My grandma told me, 'There's medicine in the mountains. You just have to look for it.' Now I know what to look for."[42]

TRANSFERRABLE LESSONS AND STRATEGIES

1. **Food Sovereignty for Whole Being Wellness:** Infused throughout all of the Traditional Western Apache Diet Project's activities is the principle of food sovereignty not as the end goal, but as an essential means to a much greater end goal – enabling tribal members to live once again as vibrant, *Apache* human beings. Resurrecting the traditional Apache diet requires that the Apache people reclaim their traditional lifeways, which will reconnect them to the cultural, spiritual, and social power rooted in healthy relationships with the natural world and, in turn, empower them to address and overcome the many grave community challenges they face. According to Botanist Seth Pilsk with the Tribe's Forest Resources Program, "We are using traditional knowledge as a means to solving contemporary problems."[43]

2. **Everywhere Information:** To broaden and deepen the community's ownership and advancement of the Project's information and the traditional Apache way of life it espouses, Project staff and stakeholders work to make Project materials visible and available in all common areas across San Carlos as well as the other Apache reservations. For example, the Project's anatomy and biology posters (see Figure 1) are posted as explanatory visual aids in the exam rooms of the tribal healthcare facility, and the traditional Apache food posters are featured in the classrooms of the history and language teachers at the reservation's schools.[44] Meanwhile, Project posters and calendars are widely distributed to interested tribal members and employees to feature in their homes and offices. For those tribal members who are interested in learning more than the materials provide, Project staff lead multiple field trips each week to "reintroduce people to food that they have never met."[45] They also are working to "train the Apache trainers" – a mixture of committed tribal employees and community members – to train Apache youth, which they view as key to the community absorbing, owning, and applying the Project's information in their daily lives over the long run.[46]

3. **Meeting People Where They Are:** Recognizing that many tribal members currently do not have the knowledge, ability, or means to fully integrate traditional Apache foods into their diet through traditional means, Project staff and consultants share healthy, commercially available equivalents for certain wild plant foods or game that tribal members are not in a position to harvest, hunt, or otherwise obtain throughout the year.[47] For example, if tribal members do not have reliable transportation to travel off-reservation to gather a wild plant food that they need to make a particular recipe for one of the Project's daily menus, Project staff provide them with an alternative that has similar nutritional content that they can buy in a local grocery store. Meanwhile, in 2020, staff devised a plan to develop customized, multi-level diet and fitness plans for interested Apache youth and young adults to foster their embrace of traditional Apache foods and foodways.[48]

4. **Reviving Clan and Kinship Systems Through Food:** Through its extensive, ongoing research, the Project has documented the cause-and-effect relationship between Apaches' disconnection from their traditional foodways and the erosion of the kinship and clan systems that sustain Apache culture, identity, and mental and spiritual wellbeing. In response, Project staff are partnering with the Tribe's Language Preservation Program and Enrollment Office to interview Apache elders over the age of 70 to identify the more than 70 clans from which tribal members descend, and to note each member's clan affiliations on their enrollment cards so that every Apache can learn which clans they belong to, and the ancestral places those clans call home. This information will then be integrated into clan-based field trips to engage the natural world, connect with those ancestral places, and learn about and harvest the traditional foods found in those places.[49]

5. **Redefining Prosperity:** For generations following the reservation's establishment, Apaches were shamed into believing that traditional Apache foods were "poor people's food" in an effort to encourage them to embrace Western values and assimilate them into mainstream American society.[50] "If you couldn't buy it, you were poor," says Twila Cassadore. "That's a concept we need to change today. How do we teach our people to be happy?"[51] To revitalize traditional Apache conceptions of what it means to be "rich," the Project takes an assets-based approach, stressing that the key to Apaches' prosperity lies not in material wealth and having the means to purchase one's own sustenance, but rather by living a traditional Apache life and practicing the Apache values that life requires.[52]

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END NOTES

1. Lorenzo, Interview with NCAI, April 23, 2020.
2. For more on pre-reservation Western Apache social organization and the extent of their ancestral territory, see Goodwin 1942 (p. 4) and Record 2008 (pp. 43-50).
3. Pilsk et al. 2007, p. 2. For detailed examinations of the Western Apaches' diversified subsistence system, see generally Goodwin 1942, Buskirk 1986, and Record 2008.
4. Cassadore, "The Traditional Western Apache Diet Project," Oct. 2019.
5. Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, Sept. 2019, slides 19-20.
6. Pilsk et al. 2007, pp. 3-4.
7. Pilsk, Interview with NCAI, Feb. 3-4, 2020. According to one study, prior to the Apache reservations' establishment, "Apache women and men were engaged in activities of great endurance and cardiovascular fitness well into, and often past, their middle age. People commonly lived into their nineties, unless falling victim to violence in their younger years…By all accounts most forms of cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and many other types of now-common chronic diseases were almost non-existent among Apaches before the Reservations." (Clifford et al. 1963).
8. Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, Sept. 2019, slide 23.
9. Pilsk et al. 2007, p. 2; Record 2008, pp. 6-7.
10. According to anthropologist Grenville Goodwin, "no such concentration of [Apache] people existed in pre-reservation times" (1937, p. 15).
11. As Goodwin explains, these "tag-bands...amounted to a consolidation of two or more pre-reservation local groups, and were not always true Apache units" (1937, p. 6).
12. Pilsk et al. 2007, p. 5.
13. Pilsk et al. 2007, p. 6. In the 1930s, the U.S. government further entrenched cattle ranching as the [Tribe's] sole economic engine at the expense of other worthwhile pursuits such as agriculture (Ibid.).
14. Getty 1963, p. 13.
15. Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, Sept. 2019, slide 13.
16. Harvard Project 2000; Pilsk et al. 2007, p. 7. San Carlos has just one grocery store serving a reservation spanning nearly 3,000 square miles (Dieckman 2018). In addition to the lone grocery store, San Carlos has five convenience stores, but most residents "do not live within walking distance of any of these stores. The convenience stores offer almost no, if any, fresh foods, fruits, or vegetables" (Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, "Background," April 2019).
17. Elders Cultural Advisory Council coordinator Jeanette Cassa, 2003 (personal communication with Seth Pilsk, San Carlos, Arizona, 2003).
18. According to Carrie Curley, "I hope people find this gravity pulling us back to our traditional ways. We are working hard to get young people to pick [them] up" (Interview with NCAI, April 23, 2020).
19. At the heart of ECAC's work is an unmistakable mission and message: The health of the San Carlos Apache people and their future as a people depends directly on the health of the natural world and their relationships with it (Pilsk et al. 2007, p. 11).
20. Pilsk, Interview with NCAI, Feb. 3-4, 2020.
21. Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, "Lessons from an Analysis of the Pre-Reservation Nnee/Ndee Diet," June 2017.
22. Hernandez 2014. According to the Project, these foodways traditionally "helped individuals live in a state of Shił Gozhó: the happiness and health that is derived from balance between oneself, one's family and community, and all elements of the natural world (Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, "Lessons from an Analysis of the Pre-Reservation Nnee/Ndee Diet," June 2017).
23. Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, Sept. 2019, slide 25; Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, "Background," April 2019.
24. Pilsk, Interview with NCAI, Feb. 3-4, 2020.
25. Moses, Interview with NCAI, April 10, 2020.
26. Hernandez 2014.
27. Lorenzo, Interview with NCAI, April 23, 2020.
28. Cassadore, "The Traditional Western Apache Diet Project," Oct. 22, 2019.
29. Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, "Background," April 2019.
30. Pilsk, Interview with NCAI, Feb. 3-4, 2020.
31. Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, Sept. 2019, slide 13. Wild plant foods comprised 40 to 60 percent, agricultural plants 25 to 50 percent, and wild meats 20 to 40 percent of Apaches' traditional diet (Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, "Overview of Ancestral Western Apache Diet," 2020).
32. Pilsk, Interview with NCAI, Feb. 3-4, 2020.
33. McCune, Interview with NCAI, March 27, 2020; Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, "Overview of Ancestral Western Apache Diet," 2020.
34. McCune, Interview with NCAI, March 27, 2020.
35. Ibid.
36. Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, "Overview of Ancestral Western Apache Diet," 2020.
37. Pilsk, Interview with NCAI, Feb. 3-4, 2020.
38. Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, "Background," April 2019.
39. Curley, Interview with NCAI, April 23, 2020.
40. Cassadore, Interview with NCAI, Feb. 3-4, 2020.
41. Lee, Interview with NCAI, April 1, 2020.
42. Wilson, Interview with NCAI, March 24, 2020.
43. Hernandez 2014.
44. Pilsk, Interview with NCAI, Feb. 3-4, 2020.
45. Cassadore, "The Traditional Western Apache Diet Project," Oct. 22, 2019.
46. Pilsk, Interview with NCAI, Feb. 3-4, 2020; Cosen, Interview with NCAI, Feb. 4, 2020.
47. McCune, Interview with NCAI, March 27, 2020; Pilsk, Interview with NCAI, Feb. 3-4, 2020.
48. Pilsk, Interview with NCAI, February 3-4, 2020.
49. Ibid.
50. Cassadore, "The Traditional Western Apache Diet Project," Oct. 22, 2019.
51. Ibid.
52. Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, Sept. 2019, slides 30-34.

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COVER PHOTO

San Carlos Apache youth celebrate a successful hunt for *gloscho* (desert woodrat), a highly nutritious staple of the traditional Western Apache diet. (Photo: Traditional Western Apache Diet Project)

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To learn more about the Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, please visit:

www.ncai.org/ptg/scapache

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