

# RESEARCH CONNECTION

## Cultural resurgence and food sovereignty: Revitalizing traditional practices with the Oneida Nation of the Thames

By Jennifer Mateer, PhD



### Why this research is important

Food sovereignty extends beyond the physical act of growing food; it is tied to cultural identity, spiritual practices, and ecological stewardship. For the Oneida Nation, reclaiming traditional agricultural practices is an act of resistance against colonial legacies that limited their farming activities. It is a step toward rebuilding cultural integrity and environmental harmony.

This research contributes to understanding how Indigenous communities adapt traditional knowledge to modern challenges, offering insights into sustainable food systems, community-based resilience strategies, and decolonizing methodologies. The findings are especially relevant as climate change intensifies threats to food security, with Indigenous communities often disproportionately affected.

### What you need to know

The Oneida Nation of the Thames, part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, is a vibrant Indigenous community in Southern Ontario with a rich history of resilience and self-determination. Traditional agricultural practices and food sovereignty have long been central to Oneida culture, fostering a deep connection to the land. However, colonial policies, land dispossession, and environmental degradation have disrupted these practices, resulting in environmental injustices and food insecurity. This project examines the revitalization of Oneida agricultural traditions as a pathway to cultural resurgence and community resilience. My research emphasizes the collaborative development of sustainable food systems rooted in Oneida knowledge, highlighting the community's capacity to adapt to the health and environmental risks posed by climate change. Data collection has been undertaken in partnership with the Oneida Nation, particularly the Onyota'a:ká Clan Mothers, and includes collaborations with honours students and undergraduate field schools.

### How the research was conducted

This project is community-based and participatory, ensuring that research priorities align with the needs and values of the Oneida Nation. Data was collected through:

- **Archival research:** Examining historical documents to understand Haudenassaune agricultural practices.
- **Community mapping workshops:** Facilitating discussions with community members to identify challenges and co-create solutions.
- **Key informant interviews:** Gathering insights from community leaders, Elders, and youth involved in cultural and agricultural revitalization efforts.

### What the researcher found

1. **Cultural resurgence:** Traditional agricultural practices are intrinsically tied to Oneida identity and spirituality. Revitalizing these practices fosters cultural pride and intergenerational knowledge transfer.
2. **Community resilience:** Collaborative efforts to address food insecurity have empowered the community to adapt to environmental challenges, including climate change, through localized, sustainable solutions.
3. **Barriers to implementation:** Land access, contamination from the nearby Greenlane landfill, and lack of resources remain significant obstacles. However, community-driven initiatives and partnerships are mitigating these challenges.
4. **Broader implications:** Revitalizing traditional practices not only strengthens Oneida cultural integrity but also offers lessons for other communities seeking to address systemic injustices through localized, culturally rooted approaches.

The next phase of this research will deepen the exploration of traditional agriculture by focusing on the revitalization of specific agricultural practices, including seed saving and planting techniques. Upcoming activities include establishing a community-led seed orchard and seed bank, comprehensive mapping of traditional agricultural spaces, and community monitoring of environmental contamination, particularly from nearby landfills. Additionally, a dedicated mapping initiative will document traditional agricultural knowledge, culturally significant landscapes, and areas impacted by environmental

contaminants, further supporting Oneida-led efforts toward environmental justice and resilience.

### How this research can be used

This research offers valuable insights into Indigenous-led community resilience, sustainability, and educational practices:

1. **Community resilience:** Demonstrates strategies for community empowerment and sustainability through traditional agricultural revitalization.
2. **Climate change adaptation:** Highlights how traditional knowledge builds adaptive capacity and resilience against climate risks.
3. **Decolonizing education:** Underscores the necessity of integrating Indigenous knowledge into educational frameworks, fostering respect and understanding.
4. **Policy development:** Informs policies that prioritize Indigenous sovereignty, sustainability, and environmental justice.

### About the researcher

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### Keywords

Community-based research, political ecology, participatory geographies, environmental dispossession, Indigenous repossession

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