

Strength Within

The Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk People once hunter-gatherer tribes, never knew diseases such as diabetes and obesity because they were always active and relied upon the local environment for their nutritional needs. It was an arduous task just to prepare to gather or hunt, and the food still had to be prepared. Sugar was naturally occurring in various plants. Nowadays, my people are plagued with ailments largely due to a changed diet.

With the effects of colonization where tribes were forced to give up their usual food sources and accept government handouts, many people have no idea what it would mean to get up every morning and find something good to eat. As a result, the people as a whole have become unhealthy. We have gotten physically larger and are poisoning ourselves with sugar and processed food (Norgaard).

A lot of the resources we once depended on have been disturbed by logging, mining, or over-harvesting after white contact. Once abundant plants and animals have been brought nearly to extinction, but despite this a lot remains. We simply need to use it or lose it. Persistence is needed to get back the intimate knowledge of our former food sources so that we can harness their benefits.

A story told by Emma Lewis in 1901 in Hoopa, describes some of the different foods that the people used to eat and the ways in which they were obtained. This story is titled "Yima:n Tiwinyay Releases Salmon into the World." In this interview, some of the foods that are included in the Hupa diet she describes are: salmon, eels, venison, and surf fish. These items are all held sacred to the people because they were given by the Immortal Being himself with instructions on how to obtain and care for them (Lewis).

One of the most important staple food products was the acorn. An article by Andre Cramblit states that acorns made up "up to 50 percent of total food intake." In addition he, contends that

“...acorns have higher levels of healthful tannin compounds than other nuts...These same compounds are found in wine, cocoa and other foods with health benefits.” In another of his articles titled “Acorns” he describes the many different types of acorns and their preparations.

For instance, the Tan Oak acorn was one of the healthiest foods but had a lengthy preparation time. These acorns were gathered, then dried and cracked, soaked, and finally cooked with hot rocks from the fire (Cramblit). I myself have helped in every step of the preparation to make acorn soup with various members of my family. This is a process that is not known to most of the people my age, but it is one that should be since it was a very important part of the culture and it was repeated daily for survival. I myself would like to teach others, mainly women and girls, how to cook acorns in the way that I was taught. I feel this would help to provide some balance in the diets of the people because it would help to show them that there are other more traditional options for a diet if the time were to be taken to perform the acts necessary to get the food.

The local tribes are great fishermen. Some still are able to make their own fishing supplies. One type of tool was a dip-net for fishing in the riffles—a highly strenuous task reserved only for the strongest. All of these efforts worked exercise right into one’s day. All of the tools had to be made and all pieces and parts had to be gathered from our local mountains to make them. People had to maintain fitness in order to survive and everyone able bodied helped out. This is missing from today’s lifestyle where one has only to reach into a freezer.

The natural native diet is one that is loaded with nutrients with little or no setbacks to health. Recent studies have shown that some of the foods are proven to help in fighting/curing diseases such as cancer and diabetes. Contrasted to food today, which is highly processed and artificially pumped up with vitamins, so that we are not aware of exactly what we are eating. Consequently, we lose the respect that we once had for our food. Because it is loaded with artery clogging substances, it

eventually gives rise to heart problems and heart disease. I would like to help raise awareness of the “poisons” we are putting in our bodies by first making sure that my own family is enlightened. Eventually, I will teach what should be eaten possibly pursuing a job as a nutritionist so that I can help all of those I contact. Education should start in the home, and dinner should once again become a healthy family event.

Another good place to start raising awareness is at the ceremonies here that take place every two years. Part of the daily ceremonial routine is to serve traditional food to the community, like acorn soup, salmon, and venison. Lately, the rest of the foods served carry little or no nutritional value. One way to truly enlighten the community and their eating habits would be to eliminate the unhealthy foods and replace them with native foods or healthy alternatives.

According to an internet article titled *Diabetes: Statistics*, “nearly 9 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives have diabetes... These groups are 2.8 times more likely to develop diabetes than non-Hispanic whites.” The article also stated that approximately half of American Indian adults have diabetes, with rates varying among different tribes. Type two diabetes occurrences are increasing among American Indian and Alaska Native children and adolescents (Diabetes). The message is clear, we have to change our eating habits or my generation will not out-live our parents.

There is evidence that shows we were healthier than we are now. If we as a people can slowly shift our lives into the patterns and routines our ancestors practiced, our tribes could become much stronger both physically and mentally (Norgaard). We could learn from our ancestors’ health regimes and gain the necessary strength to beat this new enemy that lies within.

The struggles we face today are opposite yet alike to those faced in the past. We still struggle to find food yet we are drowning in too much food. The struggle is an internal one; a struggle of will power. If we can learn to contain our impulses, choosing the healthier ways of life available and

choosing traditional foods, we can obtain an all together better lifestyle. We just need to listen to our ancestors.

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