A CASE STUDY OF INDIGENOUS ARTS ECOSYSTEMS

First Peoples Fund
INTRODUCTION

THE INDIGENOUS ARTS ECOLOGY

First Peoples Fund (FPF) is guided by the conviction that culture bearers and artists are the threads that sustain the cultural fabric of a community. They have key roles in reclaiming and revitalizing art and culture to strengthen Indigenous communities through teaching, healing and creating holistic, shared wealth. Artists and culture bearers are vital in nurturing culturally informed, locally-led community development that enhances tribal economies, guides cultural healing, creates positive narratives and contributes to the rich fabric of a vibrant community.

The conviction has guided FPF since its founding and influenced the creation of its mission:

First Peoples Fund honors and supports the Collective Spirit® of Native culture bearers and artists in order to encourage and sustain the collective creation of a vibrant Indigenous Arts Ecology.

The Collective Spirit® is that which manifests self-awareness and a sense of responsibility to sustain the cultural fabric of a community. Collective Spirit® moves each one of us to stand up and make a difference, to pass on ancestral knowledge and simply extend a hand of generosity.

The Indigenous Arts Ecology is a relationship-based, collective system of arts ecosystems. The Ecology is inclusive of environments, spirit, people and lifeways. Indigenous Arts Ecosystems are the local or regional communities of individuals, formal and informal networks, resources, cultural infrastructure, organizations and business that interact as a system and provide support to Indigenous artists and culture bearers. These ecosystems are led by artists and culture bearers whose art and lives embody the values, traditions and aspirations of their communities.

The NAPD Participant Photographing Her Work Photo by Roxanne Best (Colville Confederated Tribes)
First Peoples Fund’s work has been guided by Indigenous values of Wisdom, Humility, Respect, Fortitude and Generosity. These values led us to adopt three core principles that contribute to how we work. Knowing our history and ourselves, Honoring our ancestors and relations, and Sharing our stories and knowledge. Together, these values and principles guide the strategies we use to build Collective Spirit and the Indigenous Arts Ecology. These strategies include:

- Assessment and Learning through training and technical assistance.
- Adaptive Approaches and Longterm Relationships.
- Connecting and Influencing with stories and knowledge.

These strategies are implemented to create change at three levels—Individuals, Communities, and Systemwide. Our work within these levels has grown as FPF has grown.

For a number of years, FPF’s work to grow strong Indigenous arts ecosystems (communities) and contribute to the Indigenous Arts Ecology was focused on providing individual support to artists and culture bearers and artists through fellowships and awards. Since its founding, FPF has invested more than $3.5 million in 381 fellowships and awards to 317 culture bearers and artists through these programs. FPF has also paid $1.2 million to artists through honoraria, fees and other payments — investing a total of nearly $4.7 million in culture bearers and artists.

As it continued to evolve, FPF began partnering with nonprofit intermediaries as identified in our ecosystem research and the communities where FPF began to see networks of artists and culture bearers as identified in our ecosystem research and the communities, including economic drivers. This report found that Native arts organizations play a central role in the make-up of the Native arts and culture ecosystem. It also found that these same communities often lack the resources or infrastructure to support these individuals in their art and arts businesses. Due to these findings, the FPF leadership realized it needed to invest in communities — in growing and supporting the community assets that would provide artists with the support they need for continued success.

In 2014, FPF launched the Indigenous Arts Ecology grant program (originally called Native Arts Economy Building). In 2018, we released a report on the pilot period of this program called Investing in the Artists and Culture Bearers, and a report exploring the progress made during the first three years and laid out a course of action for the grant program moving forward.

By the end of 2013, FPF published its first major research report, Establishing a Creative Economy: Art as an Economic Engine in Native Communities. This report gave numbers to the reality that FPF always recognized — artists and culture bearers are critical drivers in their communities, including economic drivers. This report found that Native arts organizations play a central role in the make-up of the Native arts and culture ecosystem. In addition to the focus on six main resources that artists need, the 2018 report recognizes — artists and culture bearers are critical drivers in their communities. This report gave numbers to the reality that FPF always knew — artists and culture bearers are critical drivers in their communities, including economic drivers. This report found that Native arts organizations play a central role in the make-up of the Native arts and culture ecosystem. In addition to the focus on six main resources that artists need, the 2018 report also identified three areas of focus that would guide FPF’s continued work with communities. These three “next steps” were an investment in developing and honoring Longterm Relationships, tightening Networks, and using Data for collective work. This case study is a follow up on the work and outcomes in two communities — Chyenne River Sioux Reservation with Four Bands Community Fund and the Baring Stiel Region with Kawerak, Inc.
LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

During the pilot phase, First Peoples Fund had grant partnerships with eleven partners. Six of the partners were Native financial institutions and five were Native arts supporting organizations. In 2017, after the end of the pilot, a cohort of four grantees selected from the pilot continued on as grant partners. In 2018 a second cohort was launched which included three partners from the pilot phase, including Four Bands Community Fund and Kawerak, Inc. In addition to continuing the grant partnerships with seven previous communities, we also granted to six additional communities starting in 2018 and 2019. In most cases, we built these grant partnerships with communities we had existing relationships with through our NAPD program.

The Indigenous Arts Ecology grant not only provides financial support, but technical assistance through an assigned site manager for each partnership. The site managers act as consultants to the sites providing tailored technical assistance to the needs of each community as well as giving recommendations and guidance in working within the local Indigenous arts ecosystem while keeping Native artists and culture bearers at the center of the work. Site managers have expertise in managing the six resources, working with Native artists and understanding the Indigenous Arts Ecology.

Since the beginning of First Peoples Fund’s relationships with Four Bands Community Fund and Kawerak, Inc. Native Artist Professional Development trainings have been instrumental in deepening the work in each community. There have been 11 trainings reaching 85 artists on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation since 2009 and 9 trainings reaching 71 artists in the Bering Strait region since 2015.

NEXT STEPS

TIGHTENING NETWORKS

In order to help create and tighten networks within the IAE grant cohorts, FPF began hosting an annual convening of grantee partners starting in 2017. That year we brought together the four partners of the cohort (community organization staff and community artists) in Juneau, AK. This convening provided intimate workshops and spaces to share about topics such as starting artist collectives, running a local art market, and more. We repeated this convening in 2018 (for the four new partners in that year) in Phoenix, Arizona. This convening was timed to allow the participants to also experience the annual Heard Museum Art Market, a large national juried art market.

In 2019 we expanded the convening to include all 12 grant partners along with community artists as well as the 2019 cohort of FPF fellows. We again gathered in Phoenix, Arizona at the time of the annual Heard Market. This was the first gathering of its kind in First Peoples Fund history that brought together organizational/community partners and individual artist fellows. The theme then focused on the Indigenous Arts Ecology through the cross pollination of the partners, community artists, and First Peoples Fund Fellows.

Quotes from Satisfaction Survey of 2019 Convening:
“As an IAE partner, it was good to hear directly from artists and what they bring in regard to what works and what does not or some of the barriers they have to face.”

“I enjoyed the mix of voice and perspective, and also areas of effort not always considered "art", but that are in a way expressions of a collective identity. I think more focus on passion-driven groups will produce impactful relationships and collaboration.”

“When I was a young girl, I didn’t notice too many artists. Today more young people are getting involved in ART, EXPRESSING THEMSELVES. I SEE IT IN MY GRANDCHILDREN AND I ENCOURAGE THEM. THIS IS WHO WE ARE AS LAKOTA PEOPLE, WE‘RE ARTISTS, IT’S WITHIN US.” —Cheryl Red Bear (Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe)
DATA FOR COLLECTIVE WORK

Data for knowledge building and decision-making is an important element to the work of First Peoples Fund and the Indigenous Arts Ecology. To help inform FPF’s work as well as the local work in communities, we use various sources of data and information. One strategy we use to collect data is to ask community grant partners to provide information about their work and the art ecosystem through grant applications and reports. This information is used by FPF to better support partnerships with the resources they need and to also network and share other resources that might be available.

Another strategy for data collection we used during our 2018 convening of the IAE grantees, was a joint asset mapping exercise. This process included FPF staff, consultants and the grantee partners (including staff and community artists from Kovarik, Inc and Four Bands). The exercise focused on identifying the assets within each community that currently support artists through providing access to the six resources (markets, credit & capital, networks, supplies, training & knowledge, and creative space). Through the work and the discussion that followed, IAE grant partners were able to identify assets in the community that could be woven together for a stronger Indigenous arts ecosystem as well as gaps in resources that could be a focus during their grant years.

Artist surveys are also an important part of data that helps inform both FPF and IAE community organizations. On a regular basis FPF collects artist surveys, with the help of our grantee partners. This data is analyzed by FPF and IAE community organizations. On a regular basis FPF collects artist surveys, with the help of our grantee partners.

FOUR BANDS COMMUNITY FUND

Established in 2000, Four Bands Community Fund (FBCF) is a nonprofit organization that has emerged as a leader in the Native American community and economic development movement. They are a leading organization on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation as well as in the state of South Dakota in the areas of small business development, business lending, financial literacy, and youth entrepreneurship. FBCF’s programs and services translate the traditional Lakota values of self-sufficiency, wise resource management, and a spirit of entrepreneurship into practical applications for today’s modern economy.

Four Bands’ purpose is to create opportunities for individuals, businesses, and communities who are committed to financial independence and entrepreneurship. Their mission is to create economic opportunity by helping people build strong and sustainable small businesses and increase their financial capacity to create assets and wealth.

Long Term Relationships

Since 2014, First Peoples Fund has granted Four Bands a total of $55,000. However, we began our partnership in 2009 through an NAPD training and since then there have been 11 NAPD trainings, reaching 85 artists in the community that Four Bands Community Fund serves. Six individuals have received the train-freelance so that they can teach the Native Artist Professional Development training in the community.

(Our relationships) are deeper because I’m actually working directly with them to try to figure out how they can pay their bills and to try to find the right way to make their life operate compared to a regular business and some of the struggles they go through trying to get their art done. —Mark Slupick (Four Bands Director of Business Development Services)

We’ve also supported seven fellows with nine awards since 2007 in Eagle Butte/Cheyenne River Community which strengthens our relationship in that community and the network of artists.

- Antone Lebeau (Cheyenne River) 2007 ABL Fellow - Gettysburg, SD
- Bonnie Lebeau (Cheyenne River) 2010 ABL Fellow - Sioux Falls, SD
- Todd Bordeaux (Cheyenne River) 2012 ABL Fellow - White River, SD
- Dawn Lebeau (Cheyenne River) 2014 ABL Fellow - Eagle Butte, SD
- Brenda Albers (Cheyenne River) 2015 ABL Fellow, 2016 CC Fellow - Pierre, SD
- Daniel Frost (Cheyenne River) 2016 ABL Fellow - Eagle Butte, SD
- Talon Ducheneaux (Cheyenne River/Crow Creek) 2019 CC Fellow - Pierre, SD

It has also been important that Four Bands has and continues to build long-term relationships within their community. While they had many strong local partnerships, they have increased their relationships with artists greatly. This has become especially evident with the creation of a self organized artists group. When artists first called out the lack of networking that artists felt in their community, Four Bands tried to lead the formation of an artist networking group. Despite these efforts the group never seemed to engage support from artists. However, with the long term support and focus on relationship building from Four Bands (space, training and goal-setting, and other resources) community artists have now organized their own group, Walpa Waste Artists Group. This group was primarily concerned with creating a space for selling and marketing within the community and has now began incorporating access to other resources as they’ve attracted community artists to join the group. This is an amazing example of what happens with an investment into long-term relationship building with artists.

Data

With support from First Peoples Fund, Four Bands Community Fund conducted a market study of Cheyenne River artists in 2015 to provide a baseline of understanding and data to help guide the community and organization’s strategies for supporting artists. 37 artists responded to the survey. This found that a majority of artists were emerging and an even larger number weren’t selling their art yet. Of those selling their art, most sold in local markets via word-of-mouth. 82% of artists sold art to supplement their income, 65% of the respondents reported an annual income of $25,000 or less. In the majority of the identified the identified several primary challenges regarding growing their art business. 72% of respondents said there is lack of time. 68% of respondents said lack of knowledge or lack of funds to dedicate to marketing was a challenge. 69% identified a lack of funds in general and 55% had troubles in accessing supplies.

When FPF visited Eagle Butte and Four Bands in late 2017, right before the start of the second round of grants, we were able to meet with a group of artists (who are now part of the ‹community) movement). This meeting often serve as a type of informal asset mapping exercise, to help paint a picture of what the arts ecosystem looks like and where there are resources lacking. The meeting confirmed what the 2015 market study showed, many artists were emerging-level and had difficulty accessing markets and supplies in particular. We were able to dig into these concerns more and learn that the access to markets was especially hindered by lack of internet access. Even when internet access wasn’t a problem, selling art online or buying supplies online was difficult if one didn’t have a credit card (artists felt wary setting up PayPal or other payment networks using their bank accounts).
**Kawerak, Inc.**

Kawerak, Inc. is a nonprofit regional consortium of 20 recognized tribes and three Alaska Native cultures (Inupiaq, St. Lawrence Island Yupik, and Central Yup’ik) in the Bering Strait Region. It was formally incorporated in 1973 to provide services throughout the Bering Strait Region. The Bering Strait Region is located in one of the most remote parts of the world. This region extends 230 miles from north to south, covers 570 miles of coastline, and includes an area of more than 26,900 square miles, the equivalent of the size of the state of West Virginia. The region has approximately 9,300 residents, of which approximately 7,000 are Alaska Native.

Kawerak’s organizational mission is to improve the region’s social, economic, educational, cultural and political conditions. Among the many groups within the region, artists have long played a vital role in the local economy. They have contributed to the well-being of individuals, communities, and the region as a whole. Today, community artists have organized themselves, Wakpa Waste Artists Group, under a common goal of accessing new markets and training. Four Bands’ connection to artists is evident by the attendance of artists in a community art market that has been widely successful. In 2019, 50 artists participated and the event yielded 689 attendees. Four Bands keeps their connection to the artists by including them in entrepreneurship training. The group is led by an elder culture bearer, Cheryl Red Bear, who’s primary art form since childhood has been sewing. Four Bands plays a behind-the-scenes supportive role to the artists in the community by providing space and other support to the group as they require it.

Four Bands and local artists have also developed close relationships with other groups in their community. Through their first grant Four Bands helped create a stronger supportive relationship between the tribe’s cultural center and local artists. Other recent developments in the community include the Red Can Graffiti Jam, a summer outlet for youth to express themselves through graffiti in a positive creative space provided by Cheyenne River Youth Project (CRYP) and the Keya Foundation, a local arts organization. The Red Can Graffiti Jam, a summer outlet for youth to express themselves through graffiti in a positive creative space provided by Cheyenne River Youth Project (CRYP) and the Keya Foundation, a local arts organization.

Kawerak, Inc. administers a Lakota Artistry Cooperative that helps Lakota artists participate in the art market and provide professional development opportunities. They were also responsive when they heard feedback from the artists and realigned when something was not working the way they had hoped.

### Tightening Networks

Since 2013 Four Bands Community Fund has sponsored Art in the Park, a community art market that has been widely successful. In 2019, 50 artists participated in the annual event. The four Bands’ keeps their connection to the artists by including them in entrepreneurship training. Four Bands’ connection to artists is evident by the attendance of artists in a community art market that has been widely successful. In 2019, 50 artists participated and the event yielded 689 attendees. Four Bands connection to artists is evident by the attendance of a core group of artists in a photography workshop that was recently held at Four Bands.

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was valuable in order to determine the unique needs of artists in these communities.

This survey found that the majority of respondents were professional or master artists with 26% saying they had practiced their art for up to 10 years and 39% practicing their art for more than 10 years. Only 12% of respondents felt they were an emerging artist (with less than 3 years of experience).

Because travel is difficult and expensive in the region, 2/3rd of the artists surveyed do not travel outside their communities to sell their art. 57% of artists surveyed also said that they sometimes, often, or all the time sold their art at a lower price than normal in order to acquire cash for an emergency.

It was very important to find in the survey that interaction with other artists is very important or somewhat important to nearly 86% of artists. The results of this data led Kawerak to focus its work on building networks among artists in the region and resource partners and to help artists identify and reach new markets.

Tighten networks

Kawerak regularly provides travel and lodging for individuals from several remote villages that it serves so they can participate in professional development, such as NAPD trainings. Trainings are also hosted in different remote communities throughout the region. While the training is of course focused on providing knowledge and skills, these professional development trainings connect artists to both instructors and buyers. This helps artists to develop new markets.

The most successful venture in tightening networks thus far, is the Bering Strait Arts and Crafts Facebook page. The page, created and managed by Kawerak, has over 5,000 members of whom are both artists and buyers. While this Facebook page primarily serves as a platform for artists to sell their work, it is also used to communicate about classes or resources for artists and artists share information, raw materials and more.

“Making art is a form of storytelling and an identity. My art and style is my reputation...Starting to see more of the younger generation picking up arts. There are new methods of marketing, I can pick up my cell phone and sell art now.”—Randall Jones (Alaska Native, Inupiak)

Randall talked about how networking with other artists is beneficial in his region. When he travels for business he offers to take art to sell from other artists, and vice versa.

“I was just a little boy from the village that liked to carve. I didn’t realize that sharing my knowledge and experience would open so many doors and opportunities to travel and help others. From a young age, my grandmother told me I was here to help people. I always find many doors and opportunities to travel and help others. From a young age, my grandmother told me I was here to help people. I always find more ways to offer to take art to sell from other artists, and vice versa.”—Randall Jones (Alaska Native, Inupiak)

The final finding in these case studies was the importance of tightening networks. Through providing opportunities to build relationships or supporting organic artist networks, both organizations were able to build a stronger network for artists. This was important for artist as both communities are rural and artists struggle to access affordable resources. Through strong relationships artists were able to share their resources and connections with each other to strengthen the arts in their communities. In the case of Four Bands, Art in the Park provided an opportunity to not only strengthen the art community, but the community as a whole. A strong network can help to build a stronger network for artists. This was important for artist as both communities are rural and artists struggle to access affordable resources. Through strong relationships artists were able to share their resources and connections with each other to strengthen the arts in their communities. In the case of Four Bands, Art in the Park provided an opportunity to not only strengthen the art community, but the community as a whole. Art in the Park brought people from across the community to participate which increased social connectedness in their community. In the case of Kawerak, Inc., Lydia Apatiki’s curriculum development provides the opportunity for schools and parents to strengthen young peoples’ connection to their cultural traditions.

CONCLUSIONS

There are some key learnings that came out of Four Bands and Kawerak that can be useful for us as we continue our grantmaking and partnership efforts in these and other communities. We also believe these lessons are true and useful for other communities as well. The first is the importance of long term meaningful relationships. We learned that work to build and transform Indigenous Arts Ecologies takes time and resources. We were able to invest into communities that we had long term relationships with and that had deep long term relationships within their own communities. This was important to build a strong network with and around artists to strengthen the community’s ability to interact with and support artists.

We also recognized the importance of data in decision making and growing the Indigenous Arts Ecology. Data was important for two key reasons. The first was an understanding of the impact of investing into organizations like Kawerak and Four Bands in addition to our investments directly into artists. We collected data through interviews and grantee partner reports. This helped us understand if our investments were strengthening these organizations’ ability to support artists in their community and strengthen a network around them. We found that in both cases the organizations were able to improve their support for artists. Additionally, data was important in both cases for Four Bands and Kawerak to make informed decisions of where to be the most effective with their support of artists. They were able to do a baseline survey that informed key gaps they needed to address and where the artists wanted the most support. This allowed them to make effective decisions that quickly started to strengthen the Indigenous Arts Ecology.

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Overall we believe that our Indigenous Arts Ecology grants were an important catalyst to strengthening networks for the support of artists. Artists in turn build social connectedness within communities and lead their communities to Reconnect, Reclaim, and Revitalize their traditions.