

Elmina B. Sewall
FOUNDATION



Wabanaki REACH
Truth • Healing • Change

Wabanaki Partner Gathering

September 22, 2023

Post Event Summary



Sewall Partner Gathering 2023

The Elmina B. Sewall Foundation and Wabanaki REACH co hosted the Second Annual Wabanaki Partner Gathering on Friday, September 22, 2023. The gathering was held in Penobscot Territory where participants were able to share a meal and nurture connections.

Purpose

The purpose of this gathering was to bring together Wabanaki organizations that are funding partners with the Sewall Foundation to discuss the important themes, perspectives, projects and issues within each prospective community. In addition to learning about each organization there was an emphasis on community building, relationship building and collaboration.

In the morning Wabanaki led organizations convened to build community, learn about each other and share what they are currently working on. Thirteen organizations gathered and were able to get to know each other better through sharing more about current relevant activities. This time together builds trust for new relationships and strengthens old ones.

In the afternoon, Foundations from around the state interested in fostering relationships with Native-led organizations joined the convening to share a meal and to learn about important themes within Wabanaki communities. Sharing a meal is considered ceremony to indigenous people and the act can bring people together for the creation of trusted relationships, bonding and celebrating abundance.

Knowledge Sharing Circle

With over 20 people representing 13 organizations, there were some major themes that emerged.

Many of the organizations work with non-Native people all over Maine and incorporate these relationships into programming. In working with non-native people we are able to challenge white-supremacy and the dominant culture paradigm. These strong connections benefit everyone in Maine.

The connection of Wabanaki people to the land is undeniable as shown in the many Wabanaki place names throughout the state. Since Indigenous peoples around the world are stewards to this land, the environment, conservation and restoration are big themes among many organizations.

Along the theme of environmental defense is the movement to restore the decision making power of land over to Indigenous people. Groups and individuals have been working on restoring these rights. Many of these same groups are also working on topics related to the land such as Traditional food and medicine, Food Sovereignty, and food security. Hunting, fishing, gathering and growing food and medicine and the practices that go along with them need to be remembered and passed to the next generation. Reclamation and reestablishment of these practices that are part of Wabanaki culture are intricately connected to the land.

A number of these nonprofits are led by Wabanaki women. Prior to colonization, our ancestors recognized matriarchal ways. These ways acknowledged women, especially mothers in leadership roles in all aspects of life, language and in culture. Bringing back this understanding of respecting



women and regarding them as protectors and custodians of cultural values is essential to Wabanaki self-determination.

Including the importance of women and their relationship to the whole, is the importance of elder and youth relationships. The elders in our communities hold knowledge and traditions that are in danger of being lost. Youth in our communities benefit immensely from working with elders to learn, spend time and absorb the stories and skills they can pass on. These bonds are special and create special protective factors to our Wabanaki youth. To spend time with an elder, you know that they care about your place in the community and recognize your role in the future.

Finally, Many of the individuals present were involved in ongoing collaboration or worked with more than one nonprofit either as an advisor or board member. Working cooperatively and supporting one another is a value that is upheld in the Wabanaki world view.

World Cafe: Themed discussion in groups with two break-outs - Funders and Wabanaki-led organizations

The World Café method is designed to create a safe, welcoming environment in which to intentionally connect multiple ideas and perspectives on a topic by engaging participants in several rounds of small-group conversation. We used this model to create five themed tables with two 20 minute sessions. After 20 minutes participants were invited to find another theme in which they resonated. The themes were picked from the report, *Listening to Community Priorities in Wabanakiq*. The listening sessions were conducted by Sewall in 2021 with 35 individuals representing 15 organizations of the 5 Wabanaki communities. The major themes were collectively helping each other to thrive, Indigenous leadership and resourcing across communities, culture and community building, and sovereignty, self-governance and self-determination. The last theme, Food Sovereignty was picked as a way to highlight research being done by Anthony Sutton, Assistant Professor of Native American Studies and Food Systems at the University of Maine, Orono.

Similar to the themes that many nonprofits touched upon in the knowledge sharing circle, the conversations that arose out of our themed group discussions had a great deal in common.

Indigenous Leadership and Resourcing Across Communities

Exploring ideas of Indigenous leadership participants talked about the many ways of leading and teaching that are valued in Wabanaki culture and communities. For example, women play an important and central role in Indigenous leadership and their leadership is understood through the lens of rematriation and an ongoing process of understanding and learning.

Youth and elders are also valued in this role and it is vital to Native future survival, that these relationships are supported and fostered. These voices should not be dismissed since elders lead with the vision of experience and youth lead with "new eyes."

Subsequently the ideas of leadership in Wabanaki communities are understood more dynamically. The first leader or teacher is the earth, animals and nature. The narrow concept of leadership should be let go of and we should hold space for the wholeness of all of us. Our approach to leadership is more collaborative and collective and goes beyond leadership at the Tribal level. There is discomfort among some Wabanaki with the traditional Western model of leadership as a solo leader as well.

They are grounded in the traditional ways of living and recognize that everyone has a gift: “we all have something important that others need.” There is a need to relearn indigenous ways to nurture and reclaim indigenous leadership.

In understanding how Wabanaki communities view leadership, it is also important to realize there are many barriers to overcome. There is an importance of acknowledging generational trauma that affects our communities. However, healing and resilience is passed down from generations as well. Since collective leadership is practiced by some Wabanaki organizations, asking for a solo leader in engagements creates tensions in collaborations and partnerships with non-Native organizations and colleagues tending to identify and deal with “one leader” instead of recognizing this collective approach. In addition, colonial models of leadership, such as “Robert’s Rules,” tend to overshadow indigenous approaches through pressures from funders and other nonnative entities.

Resourcing across Indigenous communities goes beyond grants or money. Equally Important is access to water, to land, to traditional food and medicine. In these natural economies access is key. Likewise it is wrong to assume that small tribal governments will have all the resources needed especially when there is a deficit of resources. As a result, leadership is an important factor in resource allocation and the transfer of wealth from wealth holding entities. These are challenging conversations that need to happen between Indigenous and non-Native groups. This could be seen as a barrier to resources for Native organizations for the reason that indigenous knowledge is not seen as an asset.

Food Sovereignty

As defined by the US Food Sovereignty Alliance, “food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” This is the ideal in which Wabanaki Tribes and organizations strive but there are many barriers that make the practice of “food sovereignty” difficult to achieve.

Barriers

- Low pay for staff and leadership
- Paid time off - no one to cover work
- Climate Change, evolving/adapting practices
- Burnout
- Funding application process is challenging
- Reporting is challenging
- Land acquisition/finding land
- The work is hard
- Equipment needs and purchasing
- Storage Facilities
- Education
- Capacity
- Communities and projects are spread out

Sometimes it seems like there are more questions than answers when it comes to growing food economically, and within Wabanaki ways of knowing and being. Funders and other entities that work with Wabanaki Tribes and organizations have the opportunity to create processes that are easier to navigate and are more relational that can begin with dialogue with grantees. This will give all parties the chance to discuss expectations and barriers. Many foundations and Land Trusts have knowledge of resources and capacity building to support small nonprofits with ideas on how to build infrastructure like healthcare and time-off.



Oftentimes the process of applying and then reporting on a grant can feel extractive in the way that the Indigenous entity is relied upon to provide knowledge and lifeways to a Foundation. While this is constructive for Philanthropies to appreciate these traditions, it can cause harm or feel extractive to organizations that have little capacity to file these reports or to access the data that Foundations require due to lack of infrastructure.

Sovereignty and Self-Governance

Upon contemplating the definition of sovereignty, it is also important to consider what that word means to the people in which it is being applied. The word itself is a Western concept that gives a state the right and authority to govern over itself or another state or the right to govern one's own affairs. Considering this word linguistically it reminded one participant, Darren Ranco, of a story about the Penobscot Chief, James Sappier, when a delegation of tribal leaders and Buddhist monks along with federal government staff came to visit Maine. The monks were quite interested in our language. A discussion arose in connection with what sovereignty means to Wabanaki and how the word sovereignty is represented in the language. In our traditional language a word can be considered animate or inanimate based on its connection to our original instructions. Sovereignty is inanimate and lacks relational context.

There are many questions that arise when thinking about what sovereignty means to Wabanaki people. Many other Native tribes struggle with this same concept. Inherently these concepts are colonial and by extension the systems in which we now govern are Western concepts. Electing leaders that seek power and self-preservation within that system tend to divide and separate us. There is no "separate" in the Wabanaki world view. Traditionally we relied on holistic visions and movements. This has supplanted our traditional clan systems and councils. Now we are compelled to represent our people within these systems.

Some of these systems however are counter to our belief systems such as the idea of property ownership. However we strive to be in right relationship with the land and its inhabitants. "It's about walking in the same footsteps as my ancestors" [Dawn Neptune Adams]. Seeing the land as relational connects indigenous people to the past and the responsibilities to stewardship of that land. Therefore everything comes back to the land. This means food systems, environmental stewardship, conservation and protection. Wabanaki Tribes have been caretaking [the land] for 13,000 years. Settlers need to understand just how much the Wabanaki cared for the land; we understood the cycle, "it wasn't an accident." [Alivia Moore].

There are definite actions that can lead to reparations for Indigenous people in Maine. Funders and other non-Native organizations can begin cultivating relationships with Indigenous led nonprofits, and create mechanisms that will consider ways to repatriate land and resources back to tribes and community members. It is imperative to learn about power dynamics within these relationships and make an effort to deconstruct dominant paradigms of oppression.

Collective Helping Each Other Thrive

This theme begins to comprehend the idea of wholeness of Indigenous systems. Without connections to one-another we fail to thrive. This kind of thinking is the root of success to all systems. However instead of using these connections to surpass our neighbors, Native led organizations and Tribes want to use this to lift each other up.



When we consider traditional knowledge systems there is respect and trust in passing on these values and culture from generation to generation and the belief that we are all connected to the land, water, flora and fauna. There are actions and practices that non-Native partners can take to support Wabanaki led organizations and Tribes.

It is incumbent on Wabanaki partners to foster ways to support the work of these tribes and their communities. There is work happening now that encompasses the ideas of helping each other thrive such as community organizing around knowledge keeping workshops, supporting a livable wage for small nonprofits, land acquisition and community investment. In addition, there are many instances where learning happens outside of community programs. In consideration of this there is an opportunity for Philanthropy to change harmful and colonial practices of funding programs that are project based. Seeing through an Indigenous lens or worldview would be beneficial to everyone.

Another way non-Native partners cultivate “thrive culture” is by creating or making safe spaces for Wabanaki people to gather free of charge. Fostering and offering more funding for collaborations is another key action. Find opportunities for nonprofits to collaborate with Tribes and vice versa especially if it is generating ways where there can be peer updates, and sharing spaces together to exchange ideas. From these opportunities others can grow such as work exchanges, trade and relationship building. Wabanaki led organizations and Tribes all have unique resources to share.

Culture & Community Building

Culture for Wabanaki Tribes is not about one single event or object. Culture is a way of life and that is the knowledge, worldview and practices we pass down to each generation. Art, music, food and language is all a part of life and survival. Consequently when we think of what it means to build community, it encompasses numerous indigenous practices. In order to foster and honor these practices many small nonprofits and tribes need to have capacity to carry out programs that benefit their communities and to find out the most valuable to everyone.

One thing that keeps tribes and nonprofits from achieving these goals is the lack of funding or infrastructure. It would be great to know what each funder is interested in funding. Small np’s and tribes have to go to each Foundation to see if their work fits into the grant programs but funders could seek out or make the processes easier to find for Wabanaki-led orgs. This could have the effect of making it easier to bring more voices of each indigenous community together lending their voices to healing, collaborations, preserving culture and sharing space that honors and builds trust for multiple generations including children, youth and elders.