

Wabanaki Foodways and the State of Maine

By Darren J. Ranco, PhD

Like other indigenous people around the world, Wabanaki (Maliseet, Micmac, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot) Tribal Nations and people have engaged, managed, gathered, planted, hunted, and fished the vast and diverse resources that form the core of Maine's food traditions for thousands of years. With the arrival of Maine's bicentennial, it is a good time to reflect on these food traditions and how they have been impacted by the creation of the State of Maine and, more generally, those who came "from away" during the last 200 years.

Wabanaki people continue to know and engage the precise location of every natural feature of their homeland, which stretches from the Connecticut River valley in the west all the way to the shores of Nova Scotia in the east. Before the arrival of Europeans and the creation of the United States and Canada and their colonial policies of control and assimilation, Wabanaki people knew where each resource was plentiful when they were wanted and roughly in what quantities. Major inland resources included white-tailed deer, moose, caribou, beaver, black bear, other fur-bearers (fox, lynx, bobcat, fisher, marten, otters, skunks), muskrat, porcupine, rabbit, fowl, berries, seeds, roots, tubers, nut trees, resident and anadromous fish, wild grasses, bark, maple sap, and plants for medicinal purposes. Upland game birds were plentiful—turkey, pigeon, and grouse (partridge)—along with raptors and birds of prey. The coast was abundant with lobsters, clams, oysters, and sea mammals such as seals, porpoises, and whales. Multitudes of waterfowl such as loons, ducks, cormorants, herons, and geese were seasonal inhabitants. Wabanaki people and others continue to hunt and fish these resources today, but it is important to note that the historical Wabanaki diet engaged a complex system of management, knowledge, and responsibility that included a great diversity of foods beyond the sources of protein we associate with hunting and fishing. From Wabanaki oral traditions, first-hand accounts, and anthropological reports, hundreds of plant species native to Maine have been documented for food, medicine, and sources of material culture.

Of course, beginning in the early seventeenth century, the arrival of Europeans started to change the ways in which Wabanaki people engaged and managed food and other natural resources. But change was not new, as Wabanaki people have been responding to ecological and climatic changes for thousands of years. The seasonal round, an adaptive management and resource extraction practice used by Wabanaki people, has for most of recent history focused on summer coastal and winter inland food resources for the last several hundred years. This was most likely an adaptation to changing ecologies and climate, and before this seasonal round was established there is evidence that it was just the opposite in deeper historical periods. Neither system is possible without a deep knowledge of ecology, seasonality, and locations of plants, fish, animals, and their lifeways.

At the time of Maine's founding in 1820, the majority of what is now the State of Maine was still Wabanaki space. Many inland areas, in particular, had a majority of Wabanaki inhabitants, most of whom used traditional Wabanaki food strategies to feed themselves. As the nineteenth century progressed, however, things started to change, often in dramatic ways. While the new state of Maine continued Massachusetts' policies to exclude Wabanaki people from some coastal resources, the increased settlement of inland

areas created new pressures for accessing food in traditional places and traditional ways. Maine's colonial and economic policies worked to transform the state that made it almost impossible for Wabanaki people to harvest food and support themselves in traditional ways. The economic policies that encouraged and made possible the clearing of Maine's forest for the lumber industry transformed the ecology of inland Maine over the course of a couple decades, causing a major disruption in food gathering systems for Wabanaki people. Colonial policies, enforced by the state through Indian Agents, restricted Wabanaki movement across the state for food access. Furthermore, the state, like other states, passed hunting and fishing laws that hugely impacted Native and other people who were relying on the commons for sources of protein. Violating these laws could often have catastrophic effects for individual Wabanaki people—oral histories of infractions for violating these laws (which often ignored treaty-reserved hunting and fishing rights), could lead to serious injury or even death by the "authorities" enforcing these laws. The overall intent and impact of these colonial policies was to separate Wabanaki people from our traditional resources and diets, but luckily this was not fully achieved.

As the twentieth century progressed, Wabanaki people have inserted ourselves in powerful ways into the debates about resource management and food sovereignty. With recognition by the Federal courts and government in the 1970s that Wabanaki lands had been illegally seized by the states of Maine and Massachusetts, Wabanaki Tribal Nations were able to re-acquire about 300,000 acres of land in the 1980s in the aftermath of the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act of 1980. Tribal management of these lands is almost entirely based on the hunting and fishing preferences of Wabanaki citizens, and habitats have returned to support these lifeways under Wabanaki management. At the dawn of the twenty-first century and beyond, we see each of the Wabanaki Tribal Nations in Maine—the Penobscot Nation, the Passamaquoddy Tribe-Indian Township, the Passamaquoddy Tribe-Pleasant Point, the Aroostook Band of Micmacs, and the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians—charting a path for their citizens and Mainers in general for food sovereignty and local foodways. For example, the Penobscot Nation has been instrumental in removing dams on the Penobscot River, and the Passamaquoddy Tribe has provided critical leadership on along the St. Croix watershed—both of which have led to the return of important fish resources. The Aroostook Band of Micmacs is feeding a lot of people in Aroostook County through their Micmac Farms and trout fishery, and the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians has been working for over 20 years to return a vibrant fish resource to the Meduxnekeag River by leading watershed management locally and internationally with Canadian partners. Taken together, these actions by Wabanaki Nations and people are helping support the food systems for all Mainers for the next 200 years.

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