



Voices From Our Network

Continuous Living Cover Farmers

- Tsyunhehkw[^] Farm -



Green Lands
Blue Waters

Kyle Wisneski, Tsyunhehkw[^] Farm, Oneida Nation (Wisconsin)

Kyle Wisneski is the Farm Supervisor at the Tsyunhehkw[^] (joon-heh-kwa) Farm on the Oneida Nation, where he has worked since 2003. The farm, begun in the 1950s, was renamed Tsyunhehkw[^], or “life sustenance,” in 1983 for its focus on growing and educating about Oneida crops. The farm is best known for re-establishing high-protein Indigenous white corn, a traditional staple of the tribe’s diet that is made into over a dozen foods, including soup, mush, and corn bread. The eight acres of corn at Tsyunhehkw[^] are usually harvested with 1,500 volunteers during an October harvest and husking bee. With events canceled due to the pandemic, the 2020 harvest – with a record yield – was completed over several months by 200 dedicated volunteers.



We talked to Kyle about white corn, climate change, and the hope of a community relearning to feed itself. We have condensed and edited his words for length and clarity.

A personal connection



When I was growing up, my grandpa on my white side had a garden and tree farm, and my Oneida grandpa had a traditional three sisters garden (corn, beans, and squash). Going between the two, I remember one grandpa really working hard, using every tool he could get his hands on. On the Oneida side, it was easy farming – using the environment and the land to his advantage, and giving back at the same time.

But the one who farmed conventionally was really healthy and lived into his 90s, while the grandpa who stayed true to the land got diabetes. He was the first Oneida diabetic with a home dialysis machine, and the whole family went through that pain. When I got older, my number-one driver was how I could help my community with this disease. We’re ravaged by diabetes. Not because of our decisions, it was brought to us as our traditional foods were taken.

Reclaiming heritage and health

The Oneida are known as the first agriculturalists; it’s our heritage and culture. We say it takes a village to raise a child, and part of that village is a garden. It is woven in our DNA to be connected to the ground. The Oneida are originally from what’s now New York; when we were forced to move to Wisconsin, we lost the majority of our foods and traditions.

Through Tsyunhehkw[^] Farm and our cannery, we’re getting traditional foods back into the community. At Tsyunhehkw[^], education is key: we can’t feed everybody, but we can give them the tools and the knowledge. We hold about 20 workshops a year, on the three sisters, grazing, traditional medicines, and much more. We hold a seed and plant distribution and a garden design workshop, and we’ll come till your garden bed.

We've created over 500 raised beds and there are three sisters gardens everywhere now. The Tsyunhehkw[^] farm used to be the only place growing the white corn; last year, we counted over 75 gardens growing it.

The cannery processes the white corn into all of our different foods, and makes jams, applesauce, sauerkraut, and more from the produce on the farm. The cannery has a youth education program and community members use it too.

This work really has helped with overall health. We've seen tremendous results with people who are in the health center diabetes program with us.



Traditional crops in a changing climate

Climate change is making a huge impact in our community already. We feel like we've done as much as we can to combat it in our small area. It really seems to be closing in.

2020 was a record year for our white corn yield, but the prior two years were record-breaking for rainfall and yields were way down. Our elders are noticing drastic change in our crops as a result of the weather patterns. Our corn was 110-day, but in the last five years, it's fluctuated from 106 to 125 days. We're starting to notice a dent in the kernel. The dent means flour corn, and if it's only good for flour, we'll lose the high protein and other properties that make our other foods. We're worried that the DNA of the seed is changing. We've fought off Monsanto and Bayer, right off our site – they love our seed – but now this.

Some of our usual native grass cover crops also have not been holding as well, they don't seem to like the climate. We've been working with tribes in the Southwestern U.S. on a ten-year plan, looking to when climate shifts mean that our local seeds could really benefit each other across regions. We have 22 Nations in our Indigenous Seed Keepers Network in the Upper Midwest, and we're building the connections for a Nation-to-Nation seed bank.



Incorporating cattle into the rotation

We are the only Tribal Nation with a registered Shorthorn cattle herd; we have about 80 animals. We do intensive rotational grazing. We never leave the animals on the same paddock for more than one day. Depending on the season, they will not return to that paddock for 31-55 days. Although we don't have the land base or animals, we are recreating the move of bison on the Great Plains, which created the richest soil in North America. The closer we can mimic the bison roaming the prairies, even with cattle, the closer we can get to the Native ecosystem.

We originally brought cattle to Tsyunhehkw[^] to replenish much-needed nitrogen and nutrients to the soil for growing our Indigenous white corn. As far as we know, we are the first Indigenous Nation to use a ruminant in its white corn rotation. The cattle have brought our annual fertilizer bill for the corn from \$10,000-\$14,000 down to \$3,500. We have learned that we are also raising the healthiest meat on the reservation, and we now donate beef to our emergency food pantry.

Restoring the land

Tsyunhehkw[^] has always been recognized as the caretaker of the land, but there was always a stigma, like we were just the hippies. We had 82 acres, while the Oneida Nation Farm, which grows conventional crops and beef, had 7,000.

This started changing in the last few years with recognition for our grassfed beef and Indigenous methods, and then the pandemic really pushed it. Now we're upwards of 500 acres – within a year and a half. It's been wild.

It started with a manure spill by a non-tribal member who was renting land. Almost a million gallons went into Silver Creek, which the tribe had just put a lot of money into cleaning up and where we had started seeing trout reproduction and other fish again. The spill killed eight dump truck loads of fish. The next day, tribal leaders called to ask if we wanted 130 acres of land to remediate.



We took it over, and lowered the contamination from 100% to 7% – no one had seen that. We put our cattle on it for the winter and put our native grasses on the 20 acres that were most affected. We let the environment do its thing. We brought a lot of prayers, brought people who are experienced with that type of environmental remediation, both our traditional folks and our environmental department. The recovery was amazing.

Since then, Tsyunhehkw[^] has recovered an additional 260 acres that were conventionally farmed. We let the land rest for a year. The weeds that grow tell us everything we need to know – they show us the soil's deficiencies. The second year, we'll try to get animals on, or if we can't, we'll disc it once. We plant sunflowers; when they're 8-10", we'll throw a native grass in there to cover the ground. The sunflowers grow so fast that the grass doesn't get more than half an inch to an inch tall all year, we're just looking for cover. We do that for two years. At that point, the land is prime for food production or for our seed bank, that's when we'll get the best yield.

On finding hope

Our community is thriving. When the pandemic hit, the Nation told us to focus on feeding people. We started a food security giveaway, giving away boxes of food: our white and blue corn, our beans, cabbage, apples, beef, chickens, eggs... There were 125 cars in line for the first one. We gave away over 8,000 pounds of food this year.

People are really into what we're doing; they're talking about climate change and RoundUp. It's really looking bright for the Oneida Nation.

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