



Food Sovereignty for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe

Adapted from the article "The 'Thanksgiving Tribe' is Still Fighting for Food Sovereignty" by Alexandra Talty, published by Civil Eats, June 26, 2020

Directions: Read the key words and the article below and answer the questions that follow.

Key words

- **Food Sovereignty (n.):** The freedom of people to grow and eat food that is healthy for their bodies, familiar to them and their culture, and produced in a way that does not harm the environment.¹
- **Industrial foods (n.):** Foods that are produced and packaged in a factory that are ready to eat or require very little cooking.²
- **Reservation (n.):** Land that has been set aside for use by a tribe.
- **Sovereignty (n.):** Supreme power or freedom from control by others³.

Article

The Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe: Life on the Land

For more than 12,000 years, the Mashpee Wampanoag, also known as the People of the First Light, have lived in Massachusetts and Eastern Rhode Island⁴. For thousands of years, generations of Wampanoag have handed down ancestral knowledge of how to survive in harmony with the land and local waters. It was the Mashpee Wampanoag who encountered the Pilgrims in 1620 and who taught them the skills they needed to fish, hunt, farm, and gather the foods required to survive in New England's harsh climate. The Mashpee Wampanoag and the Pilgrims even shared the first Thanksgiving together. Today, members of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe are taught how to fish, farm, hunt, and forage for foods, including elderberry, blueberries, and wild garlic⁵.

Sovereignty

Nowadays, the Mashpee Wampanoag live on and manage a **reservation**, or a piece of land set aside for their use, that includes 321 acres. This reservation allows the Wampanoag to hunt, fish, farm, and gather foods the way that their ancestors did.

¹Food Sovereignty | USFSA. (n.d.). U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance. Retrieved September 21, 2020, from <http://usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org/what-is-food-sovereignty/>

²Petrick, G. M. (2012). Industrial Food. *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 258. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199729937.013.0015>

³Sovereignty. (n.d.). The Merriam-Webster.Com Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sovereignty>

⁴Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe. (n.d.). Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe. <https://mashpeewampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/>

⁵Talty, A. (2020, July 3). *The 'Thanksgiving Tribe' Is Still Fighting for Food Sovereignty*. Civil Eats. https://civileats.com/2020/06/26/the-thanksgiving-tribe-is-still-fighting-for-food-sovereignty/?doing_wp_cron=1600873926.6936988830566406250000

Recently, however, the federal government has threatened to take away the land's protected status. This threat would mean that the tribe may not be able to continue to use the land as they have for thousands of years.

For the tribe's leaders, losing their land is most concerning because the tribe depends on the land and local waters for food. *"When you think of our homelands being taken away, that would take away our ability to farm our land as a **sovereign nation**,"* said Chairman of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, Cedric Cromwell⁶. Cromwell says that the tribe's health has been harmed by **industrial foods**, or foods that are produced and packaged in a factory. For example, the Wampanoag people have experienced higher rates of diabetes, a disease that occurs when a person's blood sugar is too high. According to Cromwell, having **food sovereignty**, or the freedom to grow and eat food that is healthy for their bodies, familiar to them and their culture, and produced in a way that does not harm the environment, is important to the well-being of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe. The tribe has long relied on traditional foods, like beans, squash, and corn, which, Cromwell says, "help heal the body"⁷.



An overhead view of the Mashpee Wampanoag's traditional territory on Cape Cod. [Photo provided by the Mashpee Wampanoag, from *Civil Eats* (Talty, 2020)]

The tribe hopes the government will pass a bill that protects the Mashpee Wampanoag reservation and allows the tribe to continue managing it for years to come. For the Mashpee Wampanoag, their reservation not only provides access to healthy foods, but it also allows the tribe to protect their generational knowledge and cultural traditions.

Questions for Discussion

1. What problem is the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe facing?
2. Why is the Wampanoag's land important to the tribe?
3. Why does the tribe want food sovereignty?
4. What traditional foods are important to the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe's health?

⁶ Talty, A. (2020, July 3). *The 'Thanksgiving Tribe' Is Still Fighting for Food Sovereignty.*

⁷ *ibid*