

Indigenous resilience during a global pandemic

In spite of significant challenges resulting from various aspects of colonization, Indigenous Peoples around the world persist and retain a variety of traditional and contemporary ways of surviving adversity. Hearing how traditional mechanisms are being used during these difficult times, I reached out through some of my networks and offered to serve as a repository for information that I could summarize and send back so we have a sense of some of the breadth of how our Indigenous sisters and brothers around the world are coping with COVID-19. As Te Rau Ora (Strengthening Maori Health and Wellbeing) noted in their April newsletter, “although we did not choose the current situation, there is still much we can determine for ourselves.”

Across the globe, Indigenous Peoples, both on our territories and in other areas, are using traditional ways of healing and fostering wellbeing, asserting our own knowledge about what our communities need, raising voices about disparities, prioritizing community, watching regeneration of the natural world, asserting sovereignty, and looking toward the future. While this work is extensive and on-going, here are a few examples of resilience and resourcefulness that I have seen.

I humbly offer this summary:

Traditional ways of healing and fostering wellbeing

Take time and space to learn language and plant seeds. Continue our songs, dances, and traditional medicines.

For those in need of some spirit medicine in this challenging moment - here are some medicine carriers sharing their gifts for our collective healing:

<https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/indigenous-voices-sing-out-for-healing-during-covid-19-pandemic-1.4864812>

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/jingle-dance-dance-healing-covid-19-pandemic-1.5504903>

While the following remarks come from the Haudenosaunee context, I think they will resonate with many Indigenous Peoples of the world: Lacrosse is medicine. In areas where things are starting to bloom, we can go outside where things are coming alive including medicines, wild onions, and teas. Medicines are there to help us in a good way. The sap from the maple. Get out that door, pick wild strawberries. We carry forward our love for our medicines. We need to reconnect with Indigenous ways of knowing, keeping a Good Mind, connect with our elders, check-in with others.

There is nothing like a virtual drum group to help raise spirits. We will come together again.

Walk, listen to the old songs. Sing ourselves a song. Sing a song for our children. If you are a dancer, dance- for yourself, for your family, for your community. The Good Mind emanates when we all do this. Ganonyok. Give thanks. Say it with your children, your family. Some of our greatest healers in our communities have been through pandemics before. We are still here. We are still thriving.

Community day of thankfulness/prayer that virus would pass us by. Spiritually uplifting messages sent thru social media. Faithkeepers reach out with daily messages.

The day that we see no smoke coming from our Longhouse is the day that we should be afraid. As long as there is smoke coming from our longhouse, you know we will be ok. You are loved, you are cared for, you are not alone.

People began to go into the bush. And, they took their children with them. They are learning to pick medicines and gathering for elders who can't. There is a sense of community spirit. Even those who don't follow traditional ways have a healthy respect for medicines.

One outcome of the pandemic is to build faith and to elevate those within our communities who know medicines.

Know that sacred fires are burning and pipes are being raised every day. Come together as Indigenous Peoples and share. That will make us stronger.

We know what our communities need

Indigenous organizations and agencies are gathering and sharing information.

Schools and universities are reaching out to support students. Support ranges from physical health, mental health, social health, educational, cultural, etc. and includes mobile apps, delivery of school supplies, food delivery, remote or virtual mindfulness activities, and parent support activities

Indigenous-specific response plans are being developed in many places. For example: the Tangata Whenua Social Workers Association in Aotearoa is gathering materials and sharing them through the following links:

<https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2020/03/20/equity-maori-prioritised-covid-19-response.html>

<https://www.uruta.maori.nz/>

<https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/initial-covid-19-maori-response-action-plan>

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihi/414667/government-s-maori-covid-19-response-all-words-no-action-response-group>

The first issue of the Center for Indigenous Cancer Research newsletter, [The Talking Circle](#) is a special edition focusing on Indigenous resiliency, cancer and the coronavirus. The Center also held a virtual fireside chat regarding cancer care and COVID-19 in Indigenous communities. Our

experts were able to touch on many important topics including how you can cope with physical distancing, what precautions healthcare providers are taking and how western perspectives and traditional ways of prevention and care can be combined. The link can be [found here](#).

Native comedians, musicians, seamstresses, support groups and chefs are all filling needs.

Solutions will be found within our nations. Recognize our Indigenous knowledge and methodologies. Our systems have existed since time immemorial. We have what we need.

With crisis comes opportunity. We can reconstitute cultural health systems, languages, ties to land, cultural systems including systems for child wellbeing and family wellness. We take care of ourselves and each other.

Raising our voices: ongoing problems and disparities can get worse during pandemic

Activism against pipelines like the Keystone XL to prevent importation of large numbers of workers into Indigenous territories, thus heightening risk of spreading COVID-19 in addition to on-going threats to the natural environment and Native women.

American Indian Policy Institute issues policy briefs as education shifts to virtual spaces: *Tribal Digital Divide: Policy Brief and Recommendations* and *COVID-19: The Impact of Limited Internet Access and Issues with Social Distancing for Native Students*.

We can shape the message in our own way. Shelter in place can go beyond homes to include our natural environment/territories. In British Columbia people are encouraged to go out on the land to hunt, fish, and to tend food gardens to counteract poverty that will be exacerbated by virus. In Hawaii, social distancing is done "For the benefit of our friends, colleagues, loved ones, kapuna".

Community

We now gather in zui (zoom hui).

We are protecting our elders and knowledge keepers, checking on neighbors and community members, delivering food and essential items.

We have music and dancing on-line. Music is medicine and has the power to heal. Let's lift our spirits.

[A cancelled university Pow Wow led to re-imagining engagement with Head Staff to ensure communities hear their voices and stories, creating the resource below to be shared with all.](#)



2020 Pow Wow
Committee COVID-19

The "Social Distance Pow-wow" open Facebook group allows us to share love, support, cultural teachings, and related messages to help each other get through. We operate it with prayer because people depend on it. It is a privilege to be a part of what is helping the people through these times.

People dancing in their living rooms, freely giving to others with no competition. Connecting people all across the world (200,000 in a little over a month) with a mission to provide medicine to the people and keep them strong during the pandemic. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/832568190487520/>

Tribes really stepping up with webinars.

In places with little infrastructure like the hard-hit Navajo Nation, most people have radios. A public service announcement recorded by nurse in their language provides critical information about why people need to follow public health precautions. While 11 minutes would be really long for a public service announcement in another context, it is appropriate and well received on the Navajo Nation.

Regeneration of the world

The Earth is taking a breath right now. Many of us have stories and prophecies about this.

Blackberries are emerging in the natural environment. We know that along with medicines there are also thorns. Positives and negatives can be different parts of the same thing. We always have a choice. There is always a positive side and resilience.

Like many places, Aotearoa went into lockdown. In te ao Māori we call it a 'rahui' which means that it gives the land and people time to replenish during a time of crisis.

Sovereignty

Tribal nations determine what is essential, suspend nonessential services and continue operations virtually.

Closing our territorial borders to visitors and tourists is an example of self-determination. Our elders, first language speakers, and knowledge holders are our most precious resource. It is important to protect them at all costs and do what we can to limit the spread of the virus.

The pandemic is a critical time of change but also a time of opportunity for us to be stronger as nations. Put our sovereignty forward includes issuing border restrictions and declaring emergencies, but also sharing ideas and success stories across borders.

We need to analyze our own data in our own communities to understand our needs. Nations need to step up and forward think. We can't necessarily depend on external countries to collect data on our people.

New partnerships and beginnings

Sovereign nations do not exist in a vacuum but travel along parallel paths with others. We can check on neighboring tribes and be supportive. Some have less infrastructure. In our landscape we all live together, all have different resources to share. Help each other. We won't forget about our Tribal neighbors and non-Indigenous neighbors.

The United Nations is highlighting Indigenous values of unity, solidarity, and reciprocity as models that all should follow during this global crisis. In their Sentinel newsletter 4/4/20 they note: "With the right actions, the COVID-19 pandemic can mark the rebirthing of society as we know it today to one where we protect present and future generations. It is the greatest test that we have faced since the formation of the United Nations, one that requires all actors -governments, academia, businesses, employers and workers' organizations, civil society organizations, communities and individuals- to act in solidarity in new, creative, and deliberate ways for the common good and based on the core United Nations values that we uphold for humanity."

Indigenous leaders see an opportunity to change our relationships with settler societies and mainstream health systems in ways that are grounded in cultural safety and justice. We can build a chain of unity among all Indigenous Peoples and an inclusive health strategy incorporating knowledge from Indigenous academics and helping professionals to insure no one gets left behind. We're all in this together.

When we unify we are stronger and everyone benefits, making us better prepared to handle the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th, waves of the pandemic. This is an opportunity to recognize deficits and ask why some of the most basic human needs like clean water go unfulfilled in Indigenous communities.

Global economic upheaval could be an opportunity for new statutory relationships and realizing equality. We're going to rebuild something here that is built on the sovereignty of our nations, enacted in a spirit of equity and caring for one another.

Continuity and the future

The resilience that exists amongst Indigenous people is well known. This is not the first or last time we have experienced challenges. Our descendants will look back to see what we did to ensure continuity. How we walk and what we do together is important. We honor the gifts left by our ancestors, make thoughtful decisions grounded in who we are as Indigenous Peoples, and we build a future for generations yet unborn.