

Indigenous food sovereignty in action

Book review by

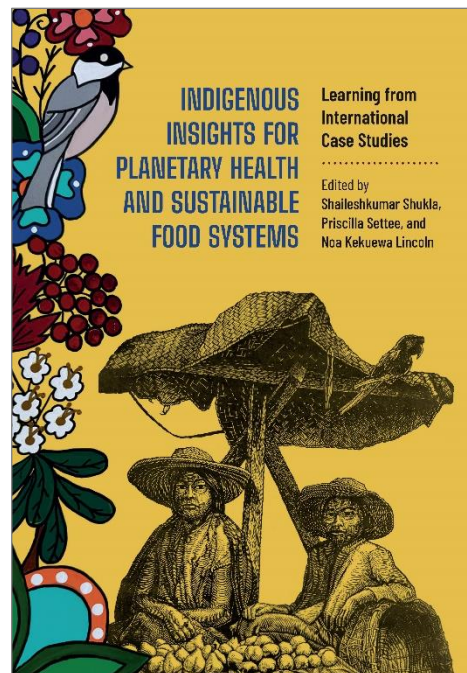
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Review of *Indigenous Insights for Planetary Health and Sustainable Food Systems: Learning from International Case Studies*, edited by Shailesh Shukla, Priscilla Settee, and Noa Kekuewa Lincoln. (2025). Published by Canadian Scholars. Available as print and eBook; 372 pages.

Publisher's website:

<https://canadianscholars.ca/book/indigenous-insights-for-planetary-health-and-sustainable-food-systems/>



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If you are looking for positive news for the health of the planet directly from people across the globe working to reclaim sustainable foodways, authors and editors Shukla, Settee, and Lincoln provide it in *Indigenous Insights for Planetary Health and Sustainable Food Systems*. The book is a compilation of case studies from food advocates, growers, and practitioners, including multigenerational voices and Indigenous scholars, representing rural and

urban areas and multiple climate zones, and demonstrating community engagement and decolonized research methods. The overall goal of the authors is to share the knowledge and experience of Indigenous people from across the globe to promote lessons for those focused on sustainable food solutions for the planet.

The book is divided into three sections, Insights, Initiatives, and Innovations, although stories about food integrate all three and there are common threads throughout. Integrative strategies such as knowledge sharing and collaboration between communities are highlighted, with many case studies providing examples of practice. The land is central to every chapter; appreciation, respect, and reverence for Mother Earth are woven through the book. Descriptions of specific actions

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and ceremonies are embedded in each chapter. Several chapters center and lift up the importance of language, highlighted in Chapter 3 with the example of the Bribri word for food, which “cannot be separated from other concepts that are essential to life, such as medicines” (p. 35).

The Insights section sets the stage for Indigenous insights into the health of the planet and sustainable food systems by including several case studies highlighting Indigenous knowledge, actions, and strategies for sustainable food systems. While many readers may already recognize the important role of Indigenous knowledge, others may not, and providing case studies (echoing storytelling methodology) sets the tone for the rest of the book. This section also shines a light on factors influencing the loss of Indigenous foodways and planetary health, particularly the role of Western policies and colonization in decreasing land access, losing cultural knowledge, and restricting ancestral practices such as gathering, growing, processing, preserving, sharing, and consuming Indigenous foods. Figure 4.3 (p. 58) clearly shows how the reclamation of Indigenous foodways and practices can restore food security and planetary health.

The Initiatives section showcases projects in Indigenous communities that offer examples and roadmaps for efforts to support sustainable food systems across the globe. Interestingly, the authors question the use of “food sovereignty” as a separate term from “sustainable food systems,” although it is commonly used in work focused on supporting Indigenous foodways. This is due to the impact on tribal communities and the barriers to achieving true food sovereignty in terms of feeding communities. In particular, the barriers to food sovereignty are critical when communities are faced with a lack of ability to grow enough food to support itself due to loss of land base and access to land. The projects discussed in this section are uplifting for those working to support sustainable food systems, providing examples and how-tos from work of Indigenous communities. Many who work in these areas will recognize key features, such as the importance of language, community involvement, multigenerational events, communication, and inclusion, that echo in each chapter.

The Innovations section of the book provides

descriptions and examples of novel food sovereignty efforts. This differs from Initiatives by tweaking the lens of the discussion and encouraging us to think creatively, not only thinking outside the box but employing strategies to embrace (or reclaim) Indigenous knowledge to support the health of the planet, including all human and non-human relatives. Tribal community members, respected elders, and Indigenous knowledge-keepers often convey a message similar to what is heard throughout the book: that the knowledge for sustainable food systems exists, but it has been impacted and continues to be restricted by Western/colonial policies, distorting the actual practice of consuming/using/engaging with traditional foods and food systems. There are encouraging stories, such as the inclusion of community members from youth to elders, but clear strategies to sustain the efforts shared in the book are necessary for creating lasting change and positive impacts on the planet. The barriers included by the editors in the final summary are bleak, adding importance to the shared efforts. The case studies shared in the book provide a ray of hope for many who may be disillusioned by years of hard work while seeing little measurable movement on food policy, land rights, consumption of traditional foods, and health outcomes, to reclaim Indigenous knowledge and practices.

The book itself is a testament to decolonized writing, centering community voices and those doing the work. The contributors and editors describe their role in the work as well as their worldview and experience, although there are a couple chapters where the authors do not clearly situate themselves in the narrative, reflecting some limitations in the research and conclusions presented. Nevertheless, if their personal experience is not described fully in a chapter, the author biographies are included at the end of each chapter for reader review. Shukla, Settee, and Lincoln also clearly describe the process of inviting authors (particularly those not often present in scholarly writing) and supporting the writing. This transparency is valuable and necessary in community-based work; reflecting it in the book is a testament to the authors’ commitment to supporting Indigenous stories. The writing is straightforward and descrip-

tive, often including Indigenous language. The authors clearly embrace the “learning from international case studies” approach, as they provide a glossary, review questions, and suggested readings and resources at the conclusion of each chapter. While not an overt intent of the book, the research presented in several of the case studies demonstrates community-based participatory research and ethical, culturally grounded methods for engaging with Indigenous partners.

The research and lessons shared in the book are especially timely as we consider the rise in

food insecurity, chronic disease rates, malnutrition, health disparities, and extreme weather events and other climate change challenges. The authors show how knowledge-sharing, collaborating between Indigenous communities, celebrating the central role of Indigenous women in food systems, embracing food as medicine, and caring and centering relationships are crucial to a sustainable food system and healthy planet. We must invest the required “time, energy, and responsibility” (p. 245) in these strategies to support a healthy future.

