



NATIVE HOPE

REFLECTING ON OUR FOUNDATIONS





TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 3** About this Guide
- 4** Understanding Native American Tribes and Where They Lived
- 7** An Overview of Native American Values and Spirituality
- 8** The Importance of the Tribe:
Family and Community in Native American Life
- 9** Health and Wellness for Early Native Americans
- 10** How Learning and Culture Were Passed Down by Native American Tribes
- 11** Native Americans and Attitude Toward the Land
- 12** Cultural Disruption: The Impact of Colonization on Native Americans



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The story of the North American indigenous peoples is a story of loss, hardship, violence, betrayal, and misappropriation. It is also a story of community, spirituality, diversity, honor, and resilience.

Few history books capture the beauty and complexity of indigenous life on North America before the arrival of European settlers. None of them can adequately trace the life, religious practices, and customs of the more than 600 unique tribes that lived above the Rio Grande Valley before the 15th century.

Most history books settle for accounts of the encounters between European settlers and Native tribes as told from the perspective of the settlers. In brief sections and sentences, they will allude to the **most vivid moments** in the history of colonization: the French and Indian War, the Creek War, the Indian Removal Act, the Seminole Wars, the Trail of Tears, the Long Walk of the Navajo, the Battle of Little Bighorn (or the Battle of Greasy Grass), the massacre at Wounded Knee, and many more.

But no historian has been or ever will be able to properly tell the story of life in North America from the perspective of Native peoples from antiquity up until the present day.



The Native American story is the greatest untold story of our time.

The Native American story is the greatest **untold story of our time.**

In this digital resource, we will attempt to give a broad overview of the life and culture of the Indigenous peoples of North America: where they lived, how they thought about life and community, how they ate and hunted, and how their whole way of life was slowly destroyed.



UNDERSTANDING NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES AND WHERE THEY LIVED

Because of the complex history of relocation, genocide, and disease and because of the enormous number and variety of the unique Native American tribes, it can be difficult to understand where each tribe farmed, hunted, or roamed in the days before European settlers arrived. However, tribes are typically grouped and understood in terms of **8 rough geographic and cultural regions**.



The Northeast

This area spanned from Canada's Atlantic coast down to North Carolina and inland to the Mississippi River. It was predominantly inhabited by two groups: Iroquoian speakers and Algonquian speakers. Although often at war with each other, tribes of this area were mostly settled in small, stable villages and focused on farming and fishing near bodies of water.

The Southeast

Home to the major tribes of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole peoples as well as many others, this area stretches from around the Mississippi River to the Atlantic with North Carolina and the Gulf of Mexico as its upper and lower boundaries. The rich agricultural resources of this area meant that most of these tribes were excellent farmers—raising crops like tobacco, beans, squash, and maize around small hamlets.

The Plains

This is an enormous area encompassing all the land between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. Several major strains of language and many tribes existed in this region. The peoples of the Plains were originally fairly settled hunters and farmers, but the introduction of horses by European settlers in the 18th century allowed these tribes to move more freely and to more consistently follow the large herds of buffalo which roamed the prairie.

The Plateau

This smaller geographic area was focused around two river basins: the Columbia River and the Fraser River. The Native peoples of this region spoke languages based on either the Penutian or Salishan dialects. They were settled and peaceful, focusing on fishing, hunting, and gathering in small villages. With the introduction of horses by European settlers, these peoples became part of the flourishing fur trade.

The Great Basin

This arid area is framed on all sides: the Columbia Plateau to the north, the Rocky Mountains to the east, the Colorado Plateau to the south, and the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the west. The terrain prevented settled agricultural life, and most tribes of this area survived by constant movement and foraging.

Northwest Coast

Rich in natural resources from the area's many waters, this stretch of land on the Northwest Coast from British Columbia to the top of Northern California supported highly settled and structured Native American fishing villages. Tribes in this area had high degrees of social stratification and relied on possessions to indicate status.

California

This large and temperate region, roughly the shape of the modern day state of California, supported a diverse and populous group of tribes who typically divided themselves into smaller family units or tribelets and who lived by hunting and gathering.

The Southwest

A vast desert region stretching across what is now Arizona and New Mexico, this area was home to groups of settled farming tribes and also to groups of tribes that focused on hunting, gathering, and raiding to survive.



Modern Mapping of Early Native American Tribes

In recent years, Aaron Carapella, who lives on the Cherokee Nation, has **dedicated years of research** to create detailed maps of the Americas that feature the names and the pre-contact homelands of the tribes that lived there. **On his map**, Aaron offers a brief description and commemoration of his work:

"Many tribes did not survive the invasion by Europeans, yet this map serves as a visual reminder of their memory. This is the first time for many of these tribes to ever have a place on a map. This is dedicated to all the Nations across this land. May it instill pride in native people and teach the non-Native public about our history."





AN OVERVIEW OF NATIVE AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY AND VALUES

The life and oral traditions of Native cultures in North America offer rich and ancient spiritual insight. Despite the enormous diversity between the hundreds and hundreds of tribes that made their home in North America, many tribes shared **some common spiritual understanding**.

Native American tribes did not think of “religion” as a distinct element of their larger life as a culture and community. Instead, they thought of all of life—every task, every ceremony, every community gathering, every relationship with humans and non-human things—as part of a larger sacred story. The spiritual and the physical are not separate, but interwoven and constantly interacting with each other.

Cangleska Wakan, the sacred hoop. Learn more here about this sacred symbol and what it means for Native Americans.

While **each tribe has a unique culture and tradition** worth exploring, the following descriptions are an attempt to help non-Natives understand the worldview of a Native culture:

- 1 The cosmos is a living womb that sustains all things.** All of life is animated by a spiritual force, the **Great Spirit**, and human beings are responsible for caring for and respecting all of creation.
- 2 Physical places and objects are powerful and sacred.** Native cultures have a strong sense of the importance of space, place, and objects. These things are alive with spiritual energy, and this makes them a crucial part of spiritual and communal life.
- 3 Life and spirituality take place in the context of community.** Each member of the tribe is born into a specific set of responsibilities, relationships, and customs. Your actions, thoughts, energy, and relationships impact the tribe around you, and the health and life of each individual helps or harms the community as a whole.

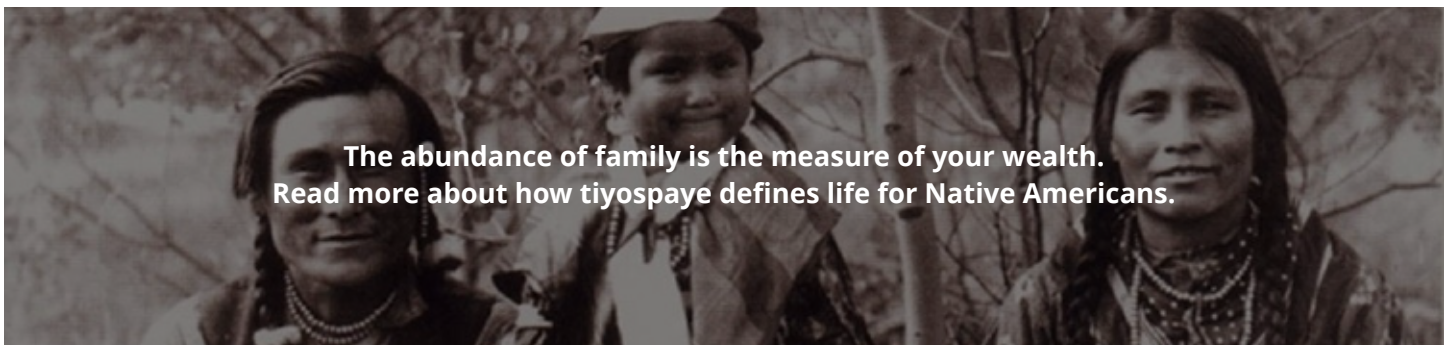
The ancient customs and oral traditions shape the unique perspective of Native Americans living today. They think about family, community, life, values, physical places, and the cosmos in ways that Western cultures do not instinctively understand. This has enormous significance for the way that Native Americans live in modern society, and it helps explain **the tension many Natives experience** as they try to live in the ancient beliefs of their peoples while also living in today’s Western-dominated culture that does not share these values.



THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TRIBE: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY IN NATIVE AMERICAN LIFE

The importance of the extended family, the tribe, and the ties of kinship cannot be overemphasized in Native American life. The Native American spiritual understanding of interdependence resulted in deep bonds of relationship between every member of the tribe.

This **sense of interdependence** created communal systems where men and women were largely considered equal. Some tribes were matrilineal, others were patrilineal, but in almost all tribes, men and women enjoyed equal respect and freedom. Native American women were revered because of their ability to create new life, and in many tribes, women held positions of power. The sexes were typically divided by the type of work they did for the community, with women farming and gathering and men hunting and fishing.



The abundance of family is the measure of your wealth. [Read more about how tiyospaye defines life for Native Americans.](#)

The Native American approach to children was and is unique. Children were considered sacred, the sign of hope and new life for the whole community, and the whole community participated in the education and raising of children. Native American kids **were treated** with great affection and respect, and many tribes did not rely on physical punishment as a method of training and discipline. Instead, they raised children with a deep respect for others and for their community—using stories, humor, and experiences to teach lessons about their way of life. Children were typically encouraged to follow and model and imitate the behavior of important people in their lives from young ages, especially those people in the tribe whose roles or tasks they would take on in adulthood.



HEALTH AND WELLNESS FOR EARLY NATIVE AMERICANS

Native American tribes lived in close connection with the natural world and enjoyed remarkable physical health and ability because of it. They had a very holistic idea of health, which included a concern for the total harmony between every aspect of the person and the environment. From the Native perspective, every physical problem had a spiritual dimension and required the help of a spiritual elder. The specific diet of Native tribes varied widely depending on geographic location, but every tribe had a developed understanding of the local animal and plant life that was best for supporting the physical and medicinal needs of the tribe.

Native American tribes **ate a wide variety** of animal meats including everything from buffalo, caribou, bear, and elk to creatures like rabbits, squirrels, beavers, snakes, wild birds. Tribes who lived near major water sources consumed large amounts of fish, while agricultural tribes grew maize, beans, squash, and other plants using advanced farming and irrigation techniques. Because of their great respect for creation, Native American tribes prayed before hunting or killing and were very attentive to using and consuming the whole creature for nutrition.

Medicine men or women were respected elders who had a special connection with the spirit world and who could see and diagnosis the spiritual problems that could be impacting the physical health of tribal members. They were also relied on to concoct the salves, poultices, and teas which would capture the natural healing power present in many plants and herbs. These lessons and traditions were passed down orally from generation to generation.



HOW LEARNING AND CULTURE WERE PASSED DOWN BY NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES

The lessons of natural medicine and spiritual healing were not the only things that were passed down orally from generation to generation of Native Americans.

The entire Native American way of life was based on oral tradition and experiential learning. This is a crucial part of the reason why an accurate picture of Native American life has been difficult to reconstruct in the modern era; without written records, the loss of Native communities and Native languages have resulted in the total loss of culture.

The reliance on oral tradition made Native Americans **natural storytellers**. They thought in terms of stories and legends, and this made them richly textured and imaginative peoples, with a story to explain or illustrate every natural phenomenon and tribal tradition.

The feather is a symbol of high honor for Native Americans. Read more about why feathers represent everything that is high, honorable, and holy.

The elders of the tribe transmitted this knowledge to the next generation, and supported the effort through ritual coming-of-age ceremonies. Most tribes had some way to commemorate the introduction to adulthood of their members. The rituals included traditions like [vision quests](#), sunrise ceremonies, [Kinaalda](#), and many others depending on the tribe.

Native American [naming conventions](#) are also a way that culture is passed down from elders to young people. The most important moments in the life of a young Native American man or woman are often commemorated with the bestowal of a new name. These new names, often drawn from nature, are supposed to reflect the character and experiences of the newly formed adult, and Native American names can change and evolve over the course of a lifetime based on events and accomplishments.

Cultural life was also celebrated in art and music. Traditional [art forms](#) like basket weaving, beading, blanket weaving, and traditional instruments like drums and flutes are all part of the tribe's symbols, celebrations, and ceremonies.

Perhaps the most famous example of Native American celebration is now the powwow. Although originally a [healing or curing ceremony](#) of medicine men from the Algonquian tradition, most tribes today have adopted the custom. Powwows are primarily an expression of joyous celebration and the emphasis of these events is always on dancing, music, cultural identity, and a renewal of friendships and relationships.

Curious about powwows? See photos and read more in our blog post on this important cultural celebration.



NATIVE AMERICANS AND ATTITUDE TOWARD THE LAND

It is crucial to understand that all of life of Native American tribes—celebrations, rituals, hunting, farming, storytelling—took place within a distinct place or region of land and was shaped by the land. Tribes were intimately tied to the land they inhabited, and treated Mother Earth with reverence and gratitude.

From the Native understanding, human beings and all other things come forth from the life of Mother Earth. Their sense of generosity and respect toward others and toward the earth comes from an original sense of gratitude to the common mother of all creatures.

For Native American tribes, land is identity.



CULTURAL DISRUPTION: THE IMPACT OF COLONIZATION ON NATIVE AMERICANS

The impact on Native Americans of the arrival of European settlers can only be described as devastating. These hundreds of tribal ecosystems--deeply spiritual, deeply rooted in oral tradition and cultural practices, and deeply tied to specific areas of the land--were decimated by the introduction of foreign germs, foreign ways of life, and by the dominating forces of Western violence and constant expansion.

Original Population

Some scholars estimate that the original population of Native Americans in North America before Columbus was somewhere around 10 million people, representing 600+ tribal peoples, languages, and ways of life. Between 1492 and the late 1500s when greater and great numbers of settlers began to arrive, recent historians have estimated that there was a **catastrophic loss of American Indian life**--possibly up to **90% of the Native population** simply wiped out by the introduction of measles, smallpox, tuberculosis, and other Western diseases. As **one scholar puts it**, "the 150 years after Columbus's arrival brought a toll on human life in this hemisphere comparable to all of the world's losses in World War II."

The Destruction Continues

This biological extermination was only the first wave of atrocity, but it set the stage for the type of relationship that Western settlers would have with a once flourishing ancient civilization. The destruction continued as Western expansion pushed the tribes that remained further and further westward.

Over the next 500 years, Native Americans were abused, killed, and relocated from their ancestral lands in a slow genocide for the sake of ambitious settlers who began to make their home in the bountiful land of North America. By the 1830s, the United States government was actively forcing tribes into treaties; under the treaty system, tribes were treated as independent nations with the right to govern themselves in exchange for giving up large sections of their ancestral lands. Tribal nations moved onto small, geographically isolated tracts of land out West--the beginnings of the reservation system that exists to this day. By the 1870s, a federally funded boarding school system, consisting of hundreds of schools, began educating generations of Native children far from their tribes and families.

In many cases, Native children were forcibly removed from their parents in order to attend the boarding schools. At these schools, they were forbidden to express any part of their Native culture, language, or identity. Sexual, physical, and emotional abuse was common, and most schools forced Native children into intense forms of physical labor.

A **famous speech** delivered by Captain Richard H. Pratt of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1892 captures the general spirit of these boarding school efforts: "that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."

The great cultures of the Native American tribes that once filled the land of North America were slowly being erased. In the dominant Western culture of the United States, **it was commonly accepted** that Native peoples were a "vanishing race" and that their traditions and bloodlines were unlikely to last through the 20th century.

Nevertheless, they persisted. Under **a series of laws** passed throughout the 20th century, Native American tribes increasingly gave up sections of tribal land, but retained their self-governance and self-determination. Many tribal communities have attempted to preserve some traditional forms of life and to encourage economic flourishing amidst modern Western culture.

Native Americans Today

Today, **there are 567** federally recognized tribes existing in the United States, with 229 of these located in Alaska. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are **6.7 million** American Indian and Alaska Natives living in the United States, and they make up roughly 2% of the total population. In the wake of centuries of abuse and disruption, these resilient peoples are on a journey of rediscovery and healing.

**Keep reading for more on the foundations and
the future of Native American life.**



**Understanding the Destruction: Native
American Life Today**



**Building a Hopeful Future: The Restoration of
Native American Life and Culture**

**Contact Us
(888) 999-2108
hope@nativehope.org
PO Box 576 • 112 South Main Street
Chamberlain, SD 57325**