



## Food Sovereignty: White Paper

By Ronda Rutledge

Executive Director, Sustainable Food Center

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My Cherokee grandfather five generations back was one of the original signers of a treaty with the federal government that led to the infamous Trail of Tears — a devastating move on foot from the Carolinas to Oklahoma in the middle of winter. After relocation, the chief denounced all treaty signers and ordered them to be killed, so my grandfather moved his family south and thus, we became Texans — a farming family in a new and different land.

I tell that story because it's related to food sovereignty, which is the right to healthy and culturally appropriate food, produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods. My grandfather's family lost their homeland, their tribal community, and their traditional way of feeding themselves. Indigenous people have always had an intimate relationship with the land, as it's related to food security, self-determination and environmental sustainability. When people no longer have physical, economic and cultural access to food, the wellbeing of our community breaks down. And when we rely on agribusiness to feed our families, the environment pays a heavy toll.

Americans spend, on average, \$2,300 a year on food — much of that is fast food. Most of our food is transported 1,500 miles or more, stored for weeks in warehouses and refrigerators, before being delivered to our communities. This food looks good but is often nutritionally empty. When combined with preservatives, additives, antibiotics, hormones, and pesticides, this industrial food becomes what renowned author and professor Michael Pollan calls "food-like substances" making us physically sick. Shouldn't we be concerned that farmworkers in a conventional strawberry field have to wear hazmat suits when spraying? Doesn't it bother us that many neighborhoods situated near these fields or factory farms suffer from poisoned drinking water, higher rates of cancer, etc.?

In his post *Make Peace with the Earth*, Chris Bedford from the Center for Economic Security wrote: "The answer is to eat healthy food, raised locally, raised humanely, raised in harmony with Nature's complex and wonderful systems. Local is the first value. When food travels fewer miles, it is fresher, more nutritious. But local is just the beginning. To be truly healthy, think [sustainable] production. [Sustainable] food is

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more than just the absence of man-made poisons. It means raised in harmony with nature, feeding the soil, respecting diversity, leveraging natural systems controls. The truth is a strong plant can resist many pests naturally. And a strong plant needs a healthy soil, a soil full of life and energy. Plants are part of a whole living system, not a product to be manufactured with chemicals." In terms of raising food humanely, in many indigenous cultures, animals are honored in formal ceremonies before being downed and eaten. After all, if you are a carnivore like me, we recognize that animals make the ultimate sacrifice by being on our plate.

In her reflection on food sovereignty, Susan Daniels of Heifer International said it best, "If as humans, we rely on the sustenance of the earth, we are also caretakers of the earth. If from the very earth itself we draw our life breath, it would seem only logical that we would not lay waste on those places from which we draw the foods we eat."

We have something truly amazing — a beautiful, life-sustaining planet that feeds us and can hopefully recover from the havoc we've wreaked. Being able to grow our own food sustainably, share it among our communities and prepare nutritious, affordable, culturally-delicious meals brings us that much closer to achieving food sovereignty, which should be a right — not a privilege. This is a social justice issue, one that grandfather might say is among the most important of our time.

*Ronda Rutledge is the Executive Director of Sustainable Food Center. She serves on the Farmland Access and Preservation working group of the Austin/Travis County Food Policy Board and is Vice Chair of One Voice Central Texas, advocating for policy changes that help support hunger relief and sustainable agriculture. She also serves on the Advisory Committee of Austin Community College's agriculture program in Elgin, AISD's School Health Advisory Council, and the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research Advisory Council on Nutrition and Healthy Food Choices.*

*Ronda is an alumna of LeaderSpring – a two-year Executive Director fellowship – as well as the Anderson Foundation Fellowship and Leadership Austin's ESSENTIAL Class of 2014. Prior to joining SFC, Ronda served as Executive Director of the American Indian Child Resource Center in Oakland, CA. While there, she completed training from the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy Fundraising School. Previous experience includes a Rotary International Group Study Exchange to South Africa.*

*Ronda holds a Master's degree in Counseling Psychology. Over the course of her career, she has been a Licensed Professional Counselor, Marriage and Family Therapist, and Clinical Director for a residential treatment facility. She currently serves as a volunteer on the Austin Powwow Committee of Great Promise for American Indians. She is married and has twin daughters – River and Raven – along with furry feline family members.*

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