

What Do Farmers Want?

The Purpose of the Hopi Participatory Rural Assessment Project

By Joanne Littlefield



White and blue Hopi corn growing near Oraibi Wash on the Hopi reservation

Matt Livingston

Like many rural communities in Arizona, the Hopi reservation is dealing with people moving away to find better jobs. The traditions of the Hopi people on the reservation in northeastern Arizona have historically been tied to the land and to traditional crops.

Several years ago, Arizona Cooperative Extension's technical assistance and mentoring support with the Hopi tribe grew into the development of a Hopi-run nonprofit organization known as Hopi Pu'tavi (One Path) Project, Inc., which promotes learning, training and business opportunities for the Hopi people on the reservation—youth in particular. The intention is to provide options that will keep them close to home. The group sponsors activities on the reservation that will enhance Hopi culture and lifestyle.

The Village of Mishongnovi on the Hopi Reservation participated in the 4-H Foundation's Innovation Center program, "Charting Community Connections." In this program, youth in the village undertook a diagnostic study to determine ways to build the community.

Initially Pu'tavi members focused on enhancing the Hopi silversmith industry with activities that included training to increase hands-on silversmithing techniques, workshops on improving computer skills to market on the Internet, and the creation of affordable venues for sales of authentic Hopi arts. After hearing complaints over the years that reservation leaders put more money into ranching than into farming, the Hopi Department of Natural Resources decided the best way to find out what support the tribe could give to farmers was to ask.

With additional assistance from Iowa State University's

North Central Rural Development Center, and under the direction of the Hopi Department of Natural Resources, they focused on the future of their community through a survey of Hopi farmers with a \$35,000 Community Food Security Grant from USDA. Community representatives were recruited through the Hopi Pu'tavi Project and trained to interview farmers to find out what it would take to enable them to farm successfully.

Participatory rural assessment research projects are designed not only to gain community information, but to train area residents in interviewing techniques. Because they are a part of the community, these locally trained interviewers are often able to establish a comfort level with participants and therefore perhaps obtain more in-depth information than an outsider could. Not only did the interviewers get training on how to conduct interviews, they also helped develop the questionnaire and later presented their findings at community gatherings and before the tribal council. The community representatives said, as a result of their involvement in this project, they "gained a better understanding of Hopi farming and its needs."

"We wanted the Hopi to develop their own skills for doing this type of research," says Matt Livingston, an Extension Indian Reservation Program (EIRP) agent affiliated with the University of Arizona College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. "That way, when other projects come up down the road, these skills would be useful to them."

A questionnaire was developed that included specific questions on crops, seeds, planting dates, yields, water availability, equipment availability, farming techniques, soil conditions, crop rotations, farming by hand, garden-

ing, fruit trees, storage, uses for crops, land preparation, pest and weed control and irrigation. Community representatives established a sampling procedure to ensure that all villages and farming styles were included. They decided to conduct the interviews in Hopi whenever possible because pre-tests showed that for many Hopi farmers English does not adequately convey their ideas about agriculture.

In addition, farmers were asked who taught them how to farm and garden and when, how much longer they plan to farm and who will farm the land after they stop, obstacles they see to the continuation of farming in their households, and the kinds of actions they want to see regarding this tradition. Only 1.3 percent responded that they thought the solution lay in teaching children about growing, harvesting and using Hopi crops.

Additional questions asked:

- What do you see as some helpful future projects for Hopi farmers?;
- How much do you want to be involved in making changes?;
- Who do you see making these changes or doing these projects? The Tribe? The U.S. government?

About 43 percent responded that community (village-level) residents should get together and do something; 19.2 percent said they thought the tribe should do something; 7.7 percent thought it was their individual responsibility to find an alternative; 6.4 percent thought the tribe should make changes in conjunction with the U.S. federal government; and 2.6 percent expressed their belief that the tribe and village had a responsibility to provide answers.

Farmers also mentioned that they wanted to see Hopi values taught (51.9 percent), and that farming should be taught (74 percent). Additionally, 26 out of 77 mentioned the establishment of a community farm.

In 2003 a report based on the questionnaire results was submitted to the USDA Community Food Program and the Hopi Tribe Department of Natural Resources: they learned that farming would continue. In 2004 the wider community was informed of the results through an Earth Day poster presentation.

"It's still very much attached to the culture and the culture is attached to it," Livingston says. Spiritually, it is extremely important for the Hopi people to be farmers. And according to the survey, when asked what they do to ensure a good crop, about 57 percent of the respondents said, "We pray" in some form or another.

Livingston brings his Peace Corps background to his work on the Hopi reservation through the motto, "You don't fish for someone, but rather teach them how to fish." Since 1991 he has worked side by side with the Hopi people, teaching the various agricultural techniques they wanted to learn so they could become more self-sustaining.

The arid climate and high altitude of the area means it's especially important for crops to be well-suited to the en-



Matt Livingston

Hopi blue corn seed. The sticks below it are traditional planting sticks.

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vironment. Dryland farming—relying on rainfall—is the norm. The village of Moenkopi is the only location on the 1,561,213-acre reservation using supplemental irrigation. Farmers across the reservation grow several different varieties of Hopi corn. Beans are the second-most dominant crop; squash, watermelon and other vegetable crops trail behind in acreage.

"Gardening essentially is more a woman's responsibility and field crops are more a man's responsibility here," Livingston says.

A new survey has been designed to ask single female heads of households about their needs for traditional Hopi foods.

"We hoped that women would participate in the initial survey, but the way it worked was that mainly men answered the questions," Livingston says, "which traditionally makes sense because farming is a man's activity. However, when the crops are delivered to the house it becomes the woman's responsibility and property." There is buying and trading of crops among the reservation villages, but commercial selling off the reservation really doesn't happen.

Besides job training for those who conducted the interviews, learning the importance of Hopi cultural traditions was another outcome of the project. Throughout the process, the interviewers, tribal council representatives and Hopi Pu'tavi members gained a sense of what is important to their community. While this doesn't guarantee that young people will stay on the reservation, or get involved in farming, it does allow for more precise future planning. ☐