



## Tribal Climate Health

For thousands of years, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people have lived in harmony with their surrounding environments, taking what they needed from the land for physical, cultural, and spiritual purposes. Tribal practices were sustainable and protected the health of current and future generations. Despite this tremendous respect for the environment, Tribes now find this harmony and balance slipping away as climate change creates far-reaching and long-lasting negative impacts. Due to already existing health disparities, the underfunding of the Indian Health Service, and the rural areas where many AI/AN communities are located, Tribes are often the first and most severely affected by impacts to the environment.

Existing health disparities in Native communities mean that health impacts from environmental damage are more severe. For example, AI/AN people suffer from higher rates of chronic respiratory diseases. When air pollution increases, Native people are more vulnerable to dangerous asthma attacks. Impacts may also be indirect, as in the case of type 2 diabetes. AI/AN have higher rates of diabetes, which traditional foods help prevent or manage. Unfortunately, environmental damage typically harms traditional food practices. Finally, environmental damage causes significant harm to general wellbeing, via damage to homes, cultural sites, and sources of income/subsistence for AI/AN and their traditional ways of life.

### **Tribal children are especially vulnerable**

Within Tribal communities, children are among those most vulnerable to the effects of environmental harm. Children's bodies are smaller and still developing – and they eat, drink, and breathe more air pound-for-pound than adults. This places children at higher risk for exposure to environmental toxicants. Children may also have unique behaviors such as crawling or placing objects in their mouths, which may present exposure risks when approximately 40% of housing on AI/AN reservations is sub-standard.<sup>1</sup> Children may also spend more time outdoors than adults, although it should be noted that many Tribal people of all ages spend time outside for subsistence or cultural activities. This can expose children to hazards like wildfire smoke or vector-borne disease. Consequently, children's health suffers not only when children experience physical problems, but also when children are deprived of their rights to inherit the lands, cultures, and traditions of their people.

### **Climate Ready Tribes Project**

In acknowledging this issue, the National Indian Health Board (NIHB), with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), hosts the Climate Ready Tribes (CRT) project. As part of this project, NIHB funds three Tribes, all facing challenges from climate change, to conduct local climate and health work. One of the Tribes, Swinomish Indian Tribal Community in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ncai.org/policy-issues/economic-development-commerce/housing-infrastructure>

Washington State, is 90% surrounded by water, and clams, crabs, and salmon are traditional food staples. Contaminant-related recommendations for the US at large may not consider Tribes and their subsistence lifestyles or cultural practices – such as eating certain foods more frequently or in greater quantities – potentially increasing exposure to harm, for example, via toxicants in seafood.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Swinomish has recognized indigenous health indicators unconnected to physical health – ranging from self-esteem to sense of place to passing teachings from elders to youth. In the Village of Wainwright, in remote northern Alaska, 93% of Wainwright households still participate in the local subsistence economy.<sup>3</sup> Traditional food is “not only sustenance but a source of pure spirituality and mental health.”<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, climate change is altering animal migration patterns and causing unstable conditions which can lead to unintentional injury, already a significant concern and disparity.<sup>5</sup> Click here to learn more about these three Tribes and the climate health issues their children and communities face: [Swinomish Indian Tribal Community](#), the [Village of Wainwright](#), and [Blackfeet Nation](#).

### Take action today!

- Learn more about Tribes and unique Tribal issues:
  - NIHB website: <https://www.nihb.org/>
  - NIHB climate pages: [https://www.nihb.org/public\\_health/climate\\_ready\\_tribes.php](https://www.nihb.org/public_health/climate_ready_tribes.php)
- Learn more about climate change and its health impacts, including the non-physical impacts of health that fit a more holistic, Tribal definition
  - Read the articles about NIHB’s three funded Tribes above: [Swinomish Indian Tribal Community](#), the [Village of Wainwright](#), and [Blackfeet Nation](#)
  - Learn about climate health in general: <https://www.cdc.gov/climateandhealth/effects/default.htm>
- Consider Tribal needs and priorities as you live, work, and vote. Tribal needs are often overlooked by surrounding non-Tribal communities. You can support Tribes by doing your part to take care of the environment, supporting politicians and policies which protect Tribes and the environment at large, and including Tribal needs and perspectives in your work. If you work on issues that could impact Tribes, research these issues and reach out to Tribes for consultation and guidance.
- Federally-recognized Tribes can consider applying for the NIHB 2019 Climate Ready Tribes funding opportunities: <https://conta.cc/2O93e1k>. Up to six Tribes will be funded. The application deadline is Wednesday, November 28, 2018.
- Contact NIHB at [aaljanabi@nihb.org](mailto:aaljanabi@nihb.org) if you have additional questions or need more information about Tribal climate health.

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<sup>2</sup> Xue, J., Zartarian, V., Mintz, B., Weber, M., Bailey, K., Geller, A. (2015). Modeling Tribal exposures to methyl mercury from fish consumption. *Science of The Total Environment*, 533, 102-109, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2015.06.070>.

<sup>3</sup> 2010 census

<sup>4</sup> Vickery & Hunter, 2014

<sup>5</sup> [http://ibis.dhss.alaska.gov/indicator/complete\\_profile/UnilniDth.html](http://ibis.dhss.alaska.gov/indicator/complete_profile/UnilniDth.html)