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Oneida Farms/Agriculture Center (ONFAC) Cultural Heritage Oneida Nation of Wisconsin

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In the 18th century, when the Oneida Nation was located in what is now New York State, the Nation's fields and orchards were vast and productive, reflecting its core cultural tradition of sustainable agriculture. A long history of land loss and forced migration diminished the Nation's ability to maintain its agricultural traditions resulting in the disconnection of tribal citizens to their customary practices and the land. More than two hundred years later, the Nation is recovering land and finding ways to restore its agricultural heritage through the Oneida Nation Farms and related programs. By reacquiring land, the Nations is returning to cultural roots in a modern, sustainable way, while also addressing important health concerns, and economic development needs.

With ancestral lands located in present day upstate New York, the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin (the Oneida Nation), is one of the original nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. Prior to the American Revolution and colonial expansion, the Oneida inhabited millions of acres of dense forests and rich farmland. Living in traditional multi-family longhouses, Oneida citizens practiced sophisticated agricultural methods in the community cultivating corn, beans, squash, and rich peach and apple orchards. The Nation was forced over time to give up over 5.3 million acres of land within the state of New York. During the 1820s, after negotiations with the Menominee and Winnebago governments, the Oneida Nation purchased close to 6 million acres in what is now known as the state of Wisconsin. Although the Nation continued to focus on agriculture, the move changed traditional farming practices, replacing community plots with a focus on individual or family farms. By 1838, treaties reduced tribal lands to 65,430 acres, and in 1887, the Allotment Act separated this into 1,527 parcels of land. By 1924, all but a few hundred acres of their purchased lands had been lost. Today, the Oneida Tribe owns approximately 17,500 acres within the reservation in northeastern Wisconsin, checker boarded with non-tribal lands controlled by private and government ownership.

The continuing loss of land proved devastating to the agrarian culture central to Oneida life ways. By the 1970s, the impact of land speculation, the Great Depression, two World Wars, and decades of migration to cities for employment, among other factors, created a change in lifestyles and only a handful of farmers remained. Radical changes in diet gave rise to health related issues such as diabetes, heart failure, blood pressure problems, and obesity, as tribal citizens began eating more of the processed, packaged foods carried in supermarkets. In fact, an estimated ten percent of the Oneida Nation's current population (approximately 12,000) is diagnosed with diabetes and one new patient is diagnosed daily.

The Oneida Nation recognized the need to ensure the well-being of its current and future generations. In the 1970s, the Nation began restoring tribal land holdings, acquiring new lands, and seeking to reestablish cultural practices, including agriculture. However, acquiring new lands is a complicated issue, as new lands cannot immediately be converted to trust status and the Nation must pay taxes on all lands not held in trust. A revenue-generating plan was needed to pay the necessary taxes. The Oneida Nation decided to develop its land in ways that would honor its agricultural traditions while also generating revenue. Starting with a small farm purchased in 1978, the Nation began to expand its land base and grow what would eventually become the Oneida Nations Farms and Agriculture Center (ONFAC), an economic development venture that also provides for the health and well-being of the Oneida Nation's citizens.

The issues of land loss and cultural erosion are faced by many tribal nations. Long histories of forced migration have created generations of tribal citizens with little connection to traditional practices or the opportunity to reside on traditional tribal lands. Loss of tribal land often results in the diminishment of economic opportunities for tribal citizens, forcing citizens to leave reservation lands to seek employment. Although many tribal governments, under current federal policy, are able to purchase land and convert it into trust status the process is expensive and time consuming. Tribal nations find themselves in a position of having pay taxes on re-acquired property while waiting for the conversion process to take place. Finding ways to combine the reacquisition of tribal lands with economic development helps tribal nations to provide for both the cultural and the material well-being of their citizens.

The establishment of the Oneida Nations Farms and Agriculture Center in 1978 creates a viable way for the Oneida Nation to return to an agrarian culture, incorporating both traditional and contemporary values and practices. At its founding, ONFAC consisted of approximately 150 acres of land and 25 head of cattle. Today Oneida Nations Farm consists of 8,000 acres, producing over 4,000 acres of cash crops, including yellow and white corn, soybeans, hay, and wheat. In addition, ONFAC owns approximately 450-550 Black Angus steers and 115 buffalo which they sell to direct markets, employees, and the general public. The ONFAC also manages an Apple Orchard with approximately 4,900 trees and a wide variety of produce, including strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, squash and pumpkins.

Much of ONFAC's success in addressing the needs of its tribal citizens is supported by a variety of complementary practices. These practices include merging the goals of land acquisition and sustainable land development, the capacity to use land for economic development in ways that support traditional and cultural ways of life, and the ability to leverage programs to educate citizens about the importance of agriculture and its relationship to tribal well-being.

By establishing the Oneida Nation Farms and Agriculture Center, the Nation merged its goals of land acquisition and creating sustainable land development. The Oneida Land Management Division developed a plan with the goal of acquiring fifty-one percent of the lands that were originally part of the 1838 reservation by the year 2020. Guided by its Seventh Generation philosophy preserving heritage, providing housing, promoting education, protecting land, preserving the environment, and providing a quality of life where the Oneida people come together for the common good through the seventh generation the Oneida Nation continues to pursue a land acquisition mission. The goal of the Oneida Nation is to convert all reacquired land into trust status. Marginal lands are used for various conservation programs and wildlife restoration projects. Other prime farm lands are being developed as income generating farming operations through the ONFAC. To date, the Nation has re-

acquired approximately twenty-seven and a half percent of their former treaty lands, virtually tripling the ONFAC original land base.

In addition to generating income for additional land purchases and money to pay property taxes on unconverted land, the ONFAC has been able to garner substantial revenue for the Nation. While the Farm complex operates much like a for profit enterprise, all profits are returned to the Nation's General Fund and used for the benefit of all tribal citizens. In 2004, the ONFAC generated gross revenues over two million dollars, with around \$500,000 in gross profits, making the acquired land sustainable by most any definition.

The ONFAC is able use its land for economic development in ways that address the contemporary needs of the Nation while supporting traditional and cultural ways of life. Although the ONFAC respects state and federal regulations, the Farm and its programs create profits by operating according to the Nation's own traditional practices and contemporary tribal standards. The Tsyunhehkwa Center, translated as "provides life for us", is a certified organic agricultural community and culturally-based demonstration farm located on 83 acres of land. Tsyunhehkwa's primary focus is on self-sustainability and food security. The Tsyunhehkwa demonstration farm has a greenhouse to grow seedlings for sale and distribution to community members; processes and sells free-range poultry and farm fresh eggs; and maintains 30 acres of organic crops on a rotational basis including traditional white corn, hay, pasture (for 45 grass fed cattle), fruits, and vegetables, which plays a pivotal role in the reintroduction of high quality, organically grown foods that ensure healthier diets for the citizens. Tsyunhehkwa also manages a retail store in Central Oneida that provides information on traditional uses of herbs and essential oils and researches specific healthcare topics. It also sells food, herbs, vitamins and mineral supplements, spices, reading materials, and other health care products while providing hands-on workshops and other outreach to individual gardeners.

Culturally based programs, like those available through Tsyunhehkwa are central to promoting Oneida philosophy. For example, corn is hand harvested and braided to dry in the Oneida traditional way. The pursuit of alternative, non-chemical pest control methods also supports a return to more traditional, organic farming methods. By pioneering new methods of crop rotation, soil testing, and records management the ONFAC is recognized as a leader in the sustainable agriculture industry and has demonstrated that traditional practices and innovative approaches can be incorporated for the benefit of the Nation. The ONFAC also continues the tradition of growing food for the tribal community not only by making produce and meat products available through its retail store, but also by supplying the tribal Food Distribution Program with fresh food for families in need.

While the ONFAC participates in a number of federal and state conservation programs, it also creatively maximizes funding and projects. For example, in addressing wetland restoration the Nation was able to purchase fencing that benefits both wetlands and farmland. Federal funding for minimum tillage and agricultural practices support a return to more traditional Oneida agricultural practices. As part of its economic development strategy, the ONFAC also operates a retail store where it sells farm products to tribal members as well as non-tribal members. As more of the surrounding land is being converted for non-agricultural uses, non-Native neighbors now depend on ONFAC for their livestock feed and even for ideas about farming methods and equipment. The ONFAC builds its capacity for economic development by leveraging resources and melding traditional practices with innovative approaches.

Finally, ONFAC implements programs to educate its citizens about the importance of agriculture and sustainable land to promote tribal well-being. Educating citizens, particularly

youth, is an important goal for the Oneida Nation. For example, ONFAC is working with the Oneida Nation School System in teaching agricultural education to gain greater awareness on how food is produced and the impacts it has on the economy and potential employment opportunities. The ONFAC also supports programs for all grades of the Oneida Tribal School, including health and nutritional education. Contributing further to healthy lifestyle development, ONFAC established a tribal employee payroll deduction program for purchasing fresh produce and tribal meat products from the Nation's retail store. During 2005, over 300 employees participated in the program with more anticipated over the course of the next few years. By involving the entire community in agriculture, the Oneida Nation is able to demonstrate connections between cultivating land and cultivating the well-being of tribal citizens.

The Oneida Nation Farms and Agricultural Center and its related programs are excellent examples of how a tribe can make effective use of its land, water resources, and traditional life ways. ONFAC not only provides revenue and economic resources for the nation by successfully competing with other, similar non-Native farms in the region, but more importantly it is prioritizing the health of future generations by controlling every aspect of the quality of food production, processing, marketing, and distribution in a way that first meets needs of its own people in a sustainable, culturally significant way.

Lessons:

- By merging the goals of land acquisition and sustainable development in micro-enterprise, nations can promote economic growth, provide employment opportunities, and increase their land base.
- Traditional philosophies such as connections to land as reflected through agrarian cultures demonstrate that mores can be used to enhance and support contemporary ways of life.
- Fostering a strategic vision with a holistic approach that considers impacts on future generations allows for balance between competing needs of businesses, while ensuring the well-being of citizens.

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