

Environmental Impacts on Traditional Practices & Elder Well-Being

Target Audience: AI/AN Elders, Tribal Environmental Departments, Healthcare Providers, and Caregivers

OVERVIEW

Environmental shifts, extreme weather events, and changing ecosystems directly impact the health, safety, and cultural heritage of AI/AN elders. Native elders often rely heavily on traditional foodways, harvesting plant medicines, and participating in seasonal cultural practices. Addressing environmental challenges from an elder-centered perspective is essential for preserving health, nutrition, and Indigenous ways of life.

CURRENT STATISTICS & IMPACT

- **Disruption to Indigenous Foodways:** Shifts in climate alter animal migration, fish populations, and native plant gathering, restricting elders' access to traditional, nutrient-dense foods essential for disease prevention and physical resilience.
- **Extreme weather and health vulnerabilities:** Older adults face heightened risks during extreme heat, severe winter storms, and wildfire smoke, which significantly exacerbate chronic respiratory, cardiovascular, and metabolic conditions.
- **Environmental Injustice and historical trauma:** Environmental degradation and colonial land practices have severed traditional connections to land, exacerbating cumulative environmental

stressors and historical trauma for native communities.

- **Loss of Traditional Medicine Access:** Ecosystem degradation limits the availability of sacred plants used by elders for traditional healing, smudging, and spiritual care, directly impacting spiritual and psychological health.

KEY INSIGHTS FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Recent research emphasizes that protecting elder well-being requires integrating Traditional Ecological Knowledge with modern environmental and clinical health frameworks. Land-based programs and policy protections for Indigenous spiritual practices (such as smudging and ceremonial harvesting) act as a key determinant of health and resilience for Native elders.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Research and community wisdom identify specific assets that mitigate environmental hazards and promote holistic well-being:

- **Land-Based Healing & Cultural Continuity:** Participating in traditional harvesting, hunting, and land-based programs fosters mental resilience and physical wellness.

- **Reciprocal Environmental Stewardship:** Practicing traditional plant knowledge and honorable harvesting upholds spiritual health and restores ecosystem balance.
- **Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission:** Creating structured opportunities for elders to share environmental knowledge and medicine harvesting with youth strengthens tribal continuity and reduces isolation.
- **Access to Spiritual Ceremony & Policy Protections:** Institutional policies that protect Indigenous ceremonies (e.g., smudging and medicine preparation) enhance elder quality of life in healthcare and community facilities.

The "RESTORATION & JUSTICE" FRAMEWORK

Supporting AI/AN elders against environmental threats requires an approach grounded in Environmental Justice and sovereignty. This involves moving beyond basic emergency management toward environmental restoration, protecting traditional lands, and actively upholding Native rights to traditional foods, water sources, and sacred plant medicines.

ACTION STEPS FOR TRIBAL COMMUNITIES & PROGRAMS

- **Include elders in Climate & Emergency Planning:** Engage elders and traditional knowledge-holders in tribal climate adaptation, risk management, and emergency response plans.
- **Establish Cool/Warm Community Shelters:** Ensure tribal senior centers are equipped with backup power generators, high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filtration, clean water, and emergency medical supplies during severe weather events.
- **Support Community Gardens & Medicine Keepers:** Develop accessible, raised-bed gardens and greenhouses to ensure elders retain reliable access to traditional foods, herbs, and plant medicines.
- **Protect Sacred Ceremonial Spaces:** Implement tribal and organizational policies that remove barriers to traditional practices such as smudging, ceremonial gathering, and land access for elders.

Contact NICOA to learn more:
www.nicoa.org or 505-292-2001

SOURCES

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