



# Future Visions: A Sustainable and Healthy Local Food Production System

By James J. Garrett

## On the Ground

- A collaborative effort to create an innovative food production system is underway on the Standing Rock Lakota Reservation.
- Three land-grant universities and colleges, along with United States Department of Agriculture Agricultural Research Service, are conducting research as a foundation to begin planning for on-the-ranch production of healthier meat.
- This collaborative project uses the Lakota philosophy of natural resource management and in this paper I urge more.
- I recommend additional research to develop investigations of relationships between cattle and the native food and medicine plants that also reside within the pasture.

**Keywords:** meat production, Lakota resource management, land-grant collaboration.

*Rangelands* 38(1):42–46  
doi: 10.1016/j.rala.2015.12.001

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Indigenous people on the Standing Rock Lakota Reservation in the mixed-grass areas of the Northern Great Plains are calling for the development of new innovative food production systems. The owners of the allotted and tribal lands want sustainable methods of producing food researched, developed, and introduced in their community. They also want their land to be used to produce more diverse types of food on the same parcel of land as the current monocultural methods.

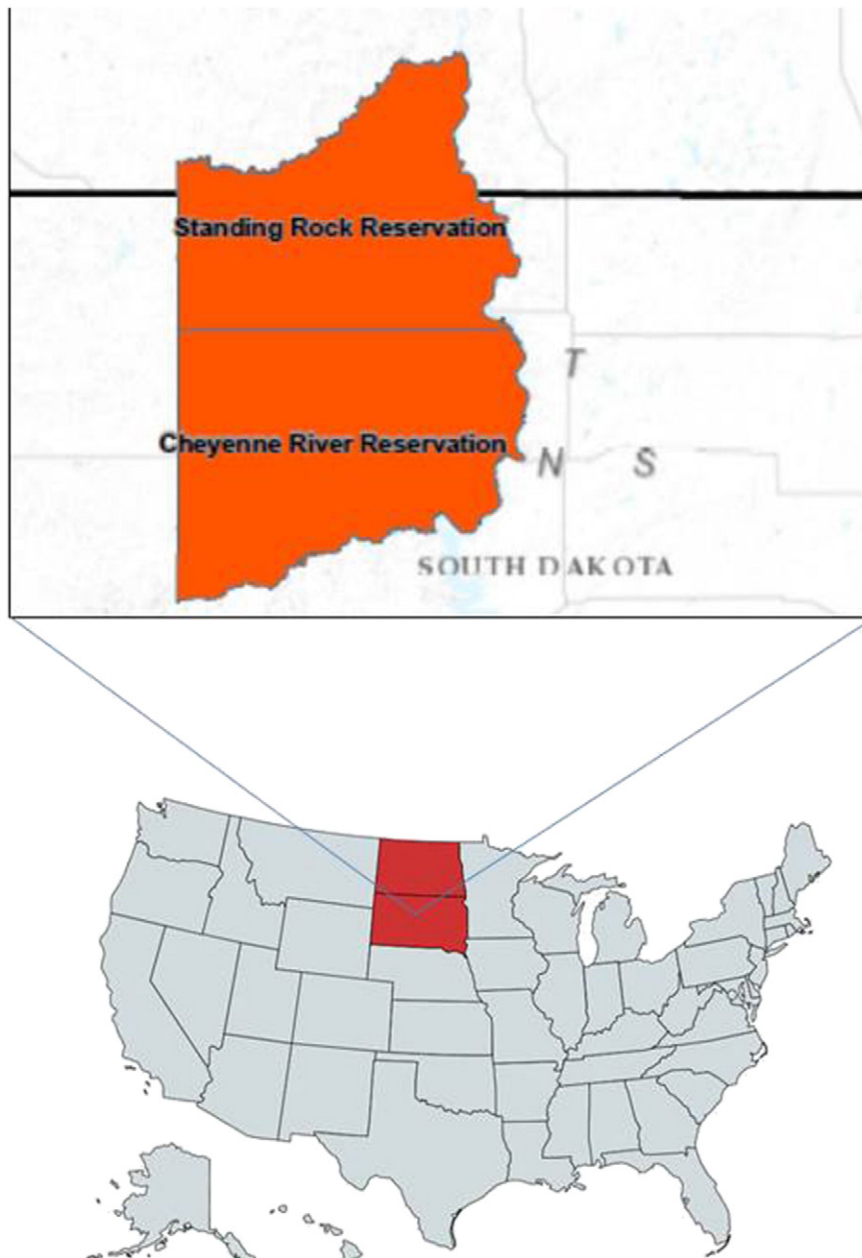
Throughout human history, old world nations have had an obsession with claiming other people's land as their own. The European nations made the new world into their colonies. As we know, this scenario played out with the European nations exploiting their colonies and extracting every conceivable natural resource available and sending them to the mother country.

Noted economist E.F. Schumacher's classic monograph *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*<sup>1</sup> chronicles how many countries will internally colonize sections or regions of their country as well. According to Schumacher, raw materials are mined or garnered in one region and sent to another where the materials are enhanced and enriched, developed into finished products, and returned to the original region at a substantially higher cost to the consumer. Often, the finished product provided is not the original material at all and consists of one that is of inferior quality.

The scenario described by Schumacher occurs in a cyclical fashion on cattle ranches throughout the Great Plains annually. In this paper, however, I focus on two Lakota Indian reservations in south-central North Dakota and north-central South Dakota, the Standing Rock Reservation and the Cheyenne River Nations (Fig. 1). This geographical area arguably produces some of the best grass in the world. Western Dakota grasslands, or what is left of them, produce extremely high-quality forage for local herbivores.<sup>2</sup> The grassland ecosystem of the North American continent today is extremely fractured and, according to some ecologists, is the most endangered ecosystem in North America.<sup>3,4</sup>

Situated in this geopolitical area are the Standing Rock and the Cheyenne River Lakota Indian reservations, which together encompass approximately 2,225,774 ha (5.5 million acres). The land ownership on these reservations often is fragmented. For example, although the Standing Rock Reservation covers more than 2.3 million acres, 63% is in state, federal, or non-Native American ownership.<sup>5</sup> The remaining land is in allotted lands (65%) or tribal lands (35%).<sup>5</sup> This fragmentation in land ownership can create difficulties because of the need to have a minimum viable economic unit.

These two reservations also possess some of the most intact native grasslands in the Great Plains, although they are being slowly invaded by exotic species. Each year, the region's calf crop is bought up by feedlots located in other areas of the country, fed high-protein diets that consist of grains, finished to butcher weights, butchered and packaged by huge conglomerates, and then returned to the Dakotas, as well as other regions, as consumable meat products. This product is



**Figure 1.** Location of Standing Rock and Cheyenne River Reservations in North and South Dakota. Created by J. Garrett. Map created by J. Carter.

then marketed throughout the country at a high cost to the consumer because of the large number of people involved in the operation from start to finish. The original producer of this product traditionally receives only a small share of the final cost of production. So, a situation occurs where the producers receive unfairly small prices for their raw product (in this case, calves); however, by the time all the middle men such as the feedlots, butchers, etc., receive their cuts, the finished product is rather expensive to the consumer. This is true although the finished product may have been raised within just a few miles of the consumer. This situation occurs despite research that illustrates that grain-fed meat is not as healthy for the human body as are grass-fed meats.<sup>6</sup>

A collaboration was launched between Sitting Bull College (SBC), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)-Agricultural Research Service Northern Great Plains Research Laboratory, North Dakota State University, and South Dakota State University to examine concerns about natural resource degradation, unemployment, and diet quality on the Standing Rock Reservation. For a description of how the project was initiated, see Hendrickson et al. (*this issue*). Before beginning this project, the collaborating groups polled community residents to see if the notion of sustainable growth of food products was something they wanted and desired. Focus group sessions were held in the various districts that makeup the Standing Rock Reservation. The focus group

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