



A MESSAGE FROM OUR SAIGE CHAIR ED BLAUVELT

Dear SAIGE Members,

As your new Chair, I greet you with gratitude and strength during these challenging times. Gratitude for you allowing me to serve as your chair. This is an amazing opportunity, and I am truly grateful to be allowed to continue in the footsteps of leaders who created and sustained SAIGE for the past decades. I stand with you in strength as we face governmental and social upheavals with budget cuts, travel restrictions, and employee layoffs, some of which are rippling through Indian Country and touching our own membership. Yet, even in the face of uncertainty, I am inspired by the resilience that defines us. We are not just employees; we are stewards of this land, safeguarding America and her resources because, no matter the circumstances, this is still our home. Our ancestors endured far greater trials, and their spirit lives in us today—urging us to stand tall, united, and unwavering in our purpose.



Our work is not just for today but for the future—for the next seven generations who will inherit what we build. These challenges may test us, but they cannot break our vision. We have always found ways to adapt, to innovate, and to thrive. While our National Training Program may not gather us in person this year, we are exploring every option to keep our community connected—through virtual platforms, regional meetups, or other creative solutions. Our strength lies in our networks, our shared stories, and our commitment to lifting each other up. Together, we will lay a foundation that endures beyond these temporary storms.

To our youth, you are the heartbeat of our future. These times may feel uncertain, but they are also an opportunity—to learn, to lead, and to shape the world you will inherit. To our military service members, we honor your sacrifices and dedication, which remind us of all the courage it takes to protect what matters most. Your service inspires us to keep pushing forward, to keep our mission alive even when the path is steep. SAIGE remains a family, a circle unbroken, where every voice matters, and every step forward counts.

So, let us hold fast to hope and to each other. These challenges are not the end of our story—they are a chapter that proves our mettle. We will emerge stronger, wiser, and more determined, because that is who we are as American Indian and Alaska Native government employees and as a people. This land, this nation, is ours to care for, and no budget cut or layoff can dim the light of our purpose. Together, we will rise, adapt, and continue our sacred work—for America, for Indian Country, and for the generations yet to come.

With respect and determination,

Ed Blauvelt
Chair, SAIGE

SAIGE WARRIOR SOCIETY PROGRAM

HONORING OUR WARRIORS

BY NIEVA BROCK, SAIGE WARRIOR SOCIETY DIRECTOR



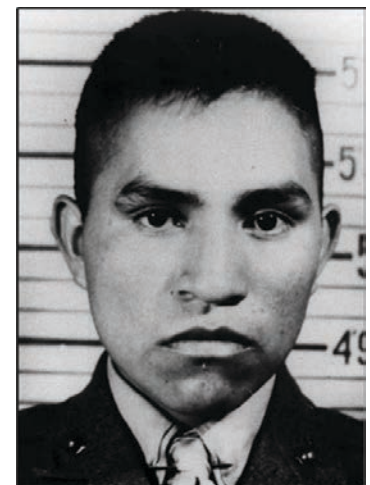
In January 2025, I was given the honor of becoming the new Director of the SAIGE Warrior Society. I thank the members of SAIGE and the former Director of the Warrior Society (now the SAIGE Chairperson!) for your confidence in me. I am very excited to engage our warriors in making a difference for Native veterans and service members across the nation. Like you, I was disappointed that it was necessary to suspend the SAIGE annual in-person National Training Program and Military Meritorious Service Award program. Though this is unfortunate, our drive and commitment to Native warriors remains at the pinnacle of SAIGE endeavors.

Even though we cannot meet in-person this year, we are undeterred and resolved to honor our warriors and are moving forward with the 2025 Military Meritorious Service Award. We are currently accepting nominations and will soon review packages. We will provide additional information about when and how we will recognize the recipients.

Pursuant to Executive Order Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing of 20 January 2025 and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs memorandum Digital Content Refresh dated 26 February 2025, historical information about Native American Warriors has been stripped from Department of Defense websites. Specifically, all DoD components were directed to "take all practicable steps, consistent with records management requirements, to remove all DoD news and feature articles, photos, and videos that promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)" from their websites and social media. It appears DoD has determined posts about Native warriors both past and present promote DEI and are removing significant amounts of historical information. The Arlington Cemetery Website has removed its page honoring Corporal Hayes. For more information about this, see <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/dod-native-american-ira-hayes-removed/>. After a week of public outcry, some pages were quietly returned to public view. This should never have happened.

The SAIGE Warrior Society is committed to keeping the history and stories of Native Warriors alive. To that end, I share with you the iconic story of Corporal Ira Hayes, USMC, a member of the Akimel O'odham (aka Pima) Nation. Corporal Hayes served in the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II from August 26, 1942 through December 1, 1945, and is famously known as being one of five who raised a United States flag after the battle of Iwo Jima. For more information about his life, accomplishments, and impact I refer you to his extensive Wikipedia page at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ira_Hayes#Marine_Corps_War_Memorial

We will not forget. We will honor. We stand grateful to the warriors who have come before us and who currently serve. Thank you. May the Creator bless and keep you all.



Marine Corps recruit photo of Hayes in 1942

STRENGTH THROUGH SOLIDARITY: FOSTERING EQUITY AND RESILIENCE IN PUBLIC SERVICE

BY DAVID A. GROVES, PRESIDENT, BLACKS IN GOVERNMENT



As we continue to navigate a rapidly evolving social and policy landscape, organizations like ours are called not only to advocate but also to uplift, empower, and inspire. At Blacks In Government (BIG), we remain steadfast in our mission to ensure equity, opportunity, and representation for Black employees at all levels of government. And we know that in this effort, we are not alone.

In these complex times, we see the value and strength in collaboration among affinity groups—especially as we work to address government policies that impact our communities. From championing inclusive hiring practices and equitable workplace environments to promoting leadership development and professional growth, BIG is deeply engaged in efforts that reflect both resilience and resolve.

One of our core focus areas this year has been empowering our members through education and advocacy. We are hosting policy briefings, career development seminars, and equity roundtables that offer actionable tools for navigating the federal workplace. We are also building alliances across agencies through our BIG members and with like-minded organizations—like SAIGE—to amplify our collective voice in spaces where decisions are made.

Resilience, to us, is not just about endurance; it's about innovation and empowerment. It means equipping our members to rise—not just in rank but in confidence, visibility, and purpose. It means speaking truth to power and cultivating spaces where diverse voices are not only heard but also celebrated.

The strength of our communities lies in our shared commitment to justice and progress. We recognize the unique challenges faced by American Indian and Alaska Native employees in public service, and we honor the cultural strength and leadership they bring to the table. In that spirit, we stand in solidarity with SAIGE and all who work to ensure that government truly represents the people it serves.

As we look ahead, we are encouraged. There is much work to be done, but there is also great hope—and that hope grows when we support one another, share our stories, and move forward together.

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SAIGE MEMBER PROFILE

A LEGACY OF SERVICE: CELEBRATING CYNTHIA ANN DUNN'S RETIREMENT

Ms. Cynthia Ann Dunn - mentor, educator, ally, family, and great friend to SAIGE - has left an indelible mark on our community as she retires from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) after a distinguished career. For over two decades, Cynthia served as a Director within the IRS Tax Exempt and Government Entities (TE/GE) division, a role she assumed on July 25, 2004. As the longest-serving EEO Director in IRS history, her retirement this spring marks the end of an era and the beginning of a well-earned chapter of rest and reflection in retirement.

Cynthia's journey with SAIGE is a testament to her unwavering commitment to Indigenous federal employees and youth. A life member of SAIGE and affiliated with the Crow and Blackfeet Tribes, she has been a pillar of support since the organization's early days. Her dedication shone brightly when she helped establish the IRS's first SAIGE Chapter in Utah, fostering a space for Native voices within one of the nation's largest federal agencies. This initiative reflected her belief in the power of community and representation—values she carried throughout her 44-year federal career beginning in 1980.

One of Cynthia's most impactful contributions to SAIGE has been her steadfast presence at our annual National Training Programs. Year after year, she attended these gatherings, not merely as a participant but as a teacher and guide. She shared her expertise with members and youth, enriching their understanding



Photos: Top and bottom left: Cynthia Dunn and Luke Jones at her Retirement Ceremony on February 18, 2025 at IRS headquarters in DC. Bottom right: Cynthia holds the SAIGE gift - an engraved gift box filled with smudging items.

of professional development and leadership. Her sessions often delved into critical topics such as equal opportunity issues, empowering attendees with knowledge to navigate their careers and advocate for their communities. Cynthia was a beacon of inspiration for the youth, demonstrating that a career rooted in service and identity could thrive in the federal landscape.

Her efforts earned her SAIGE's 2019 "Spirit" award, a recognition of her boundless energy and heart. Beyond SAIGE, her influence was celebrated with the 2018 "Woman of the Year"

award from National Image, Inc., and the 2018 "Champion for Diversity" award from Federally Employed Women (FEW), underscoring her broader impact on diversity in government.

SAIGE honors Cynthia Dunn for the legacy of mentorship and unity she leaves behind as she retires from the IRS. She is a true beacon of leadership and hope within our community, and SAIGE is grateful for the impact she has made for us. As a SAIGE Lifetime member, we expect she will still be around to assist us as we move forward into the future.

SAIGE MEMBER PROFILE

SUE MORRIS, SAIGE TREASURER AND LIFETIME MEMBER



Photo: Sue Morris and student at the 2024 NTP in Spokane, WA.

The first SAIGE National Training Program (NTP) I attended was Washington DC in 2005. The first person I met was Shana Barehand, she was so open and friendly. In our conversation, we discovered that we knew so many people in common and there were a few from Oklahoma who I knew from their family. This was one of the first “federal trainings” I attended that I did not feel like an outsider.

Soon after I was elected to the board. Since then, I have attended every NTP and became a Lifetime member. I served as co-chair with Jay Spaan for the 2011 NTP in Oklahoma. We made a great team, just ask us! I have had the honor of serving as NTP co-chair three more times- two more in Oklahoma and once in Arizona.

In 2015, Freddie Joseph, SAIGE Chair, called me and said she saw that I was once the treasurer for a native

nonprofit in Oklahoma and that I worked in Finance and Accounting. The SAIGE Treasurer was resigning, and she asked if I would consider filling in that position until election or as long as she served as the Chair. After a great deal of thought, I accepted her offer. Now that she is no longer the Chair, it is time for someone else to step up!!

I particularly like the students who attend the NTP. For some of the students, it is the first time out of their state and the first trip on a plane. I have maintained relationships with some of the students and have been invited to their weddings and received birth announcements. It is heartening to see them achieve their goals and mentor other students in their community.

I am a full blood Comanche originally from a small community in SW Oklahoma. We lived in a small town with (2000+) a large group of Native Americans, mostly Comanche. I was related to approximately 80% of the Indians in our town. I grew up in a traditional home where Comanche was spoken more than English. While I am not as fluent as I was living at home, I try to maintain the language by speaking to my husband (non-native), my son, grandson, and our animals. The horses, cows, and dogs all respond to commands in Comanche! Two of the dogs are quite good at responding, they even know the difference in the words speak and bark. I am fluent in our songs and the words are sung with the proper pronunciation. However, when I am spoken to in Comanche, I know what is being said, my response to the conversation does not sound like, to me, the way I think the words should be pronounced.

I am a graduate of Cameron University and worked at Fort Sill in the Provost Marshal’s office while in school. When I married, we moved to Ohio and the only similarities in the two states is that they both begin with the letter O!! Once we decided to move back to Oklahoma, I was happy. Although I am still 200 miles from Comanche country, it is much better. Tulsa has a thriving Indian population and it is easier to be involved in native activities. I have been a season ticket holder for over 25 years and tailgate with several people from college. I retired from the Army Corps of Engineers in 2014 and am busier than when I was working!

In addition to SAIGE, I am involved in a few other organizations. I am a member of the Oklahoma Federation of Indian Women ((OFIW). OFIW is a nonprofit and the sponsor of the Miss Indian Oklahoma and Jr. Miss Indian Oklahoma scholarship pageant. As a member of OFIW, I was elected to serve a 2-year term first as treasurer and later as president. I served two 3- year terms on the board of trustees for the Comanche Nation College.

Other organizations I am involved in or a member of are the Walters Service Club, Comanche Indian Veterans Association (CIVA) - I am retired Association Auxiliary with them. CIVA has helped with color guard duties for the SAIGE NTP and once with a golf tournament. I also enjoy volunteering to help Jay Spaan with organizing and carrying out the Self-Governance Communication and Education Tribal Consortium’s annual conferences.

JOIN SAIGE!

by Duane O. Matt

SAIGE began almost 25 years ago. As a founding member, I have seen the organization continue to change, grow, and adjust to different political climates, world catastrophes, pandemics, and the list goes on and on. Throughout this time, we have stuck to our core values and mission: "To promote the recruitment, retention, development, and advancement of American Indian and Alaska Native government employees." We also aim "to ensure equal treatment under the law for these employees, educate federal agencies about their obligations under the Federal Indian Trust Responsibility, and assist agencies in delivering programs that honor the Federal-Tribal relationship." Finally, SAIGE provides a national forum "for discussing issues and topics affecting American Indian and Alaska Native government employees."



Photo: Participants at the first gathering of the SAIGE NTP in Ft. Lauderdale, FL in 2004.

We started with a VERY small group of dedicated individuals who have watched the program go from a small National Training Program (NTP) in FL to having successful training programs across Indian country. We have added new "tracks" to our agenda as we evolved, beginning with a simple "What is tribal consultation" topic to now addressing four core elements (Federal Indian Law/Indian Country, Natural Resources/Culture, EEO/HR, and Professional Development) plus adding separate youth track and veteran's tracks.

All, our original core group is STILL working hard to continue the mission of SAIGE. We need a new YOUNGER board to continue the tradition. We have seen so many talented young natives participate in SAIGE over the years! We hope that you will now come back and contribute to SAIGE. We are calling out to you NOW! Please contribute your special gifts to SAIGE and help us grow and survive. Indian country (and the country as a whole) needs you!

If you are interested, please reach out to our SAIGE Chair Ed Blauvelt, at Edward.Blauvelt@saige.org

Thank you!

Duane O. Matt (on behalf of the SAIGE Board)

SAIGE Fundraising: What We Do and How You Can Help

by Georgeie Reynolds

As you may realize, fundraising in the current environment is difficult for non-profit organizations, and SAIGE is no exception. We have undertaken a few efforts in the past few years to raise funds and would like to tell you about some of the problems we have encountered in the hope that you may have some ideas for us.

- First, we are small and we lack visibility.

Frequently, we send out news items, announcements and even – rarely - requests for funds to our listserv. Our members' listserv currently consists only of about 500 people. Additionally, we are prohibited from soliciting funds from members using their government emails.

Unlike larger groups, we have only one gathering a year, so we can easily get outpowered, outgunned and lost from view. As a small non-profit with a complex mission, we must try harder to be visible and convince people to support our organization.

What you can do: If you are signed up on the listserv with a government email, we suggest that you provide us a personal email address for the listserv. Contact Danny.Garceau@saige.org to change your email address. Ask others who might be interested in our mission to join SAIGE to sign up for the listserv.

- Second, we are decentralized.

NCAI has a headquarters—an Embassy, in fact—in Washington, DC. The American Indian Science and Engineering Society has its main office in New Mexico. These organizations and a host of others have paid staffs, even a staff to handle fundraising. We are all-volunteer and decentralized with no brick-and-mortar building or office. We are hard to find, but SAIGE has always been this way which also means we have no overhead for facilities or staff, which keeps our expenses down and enables us to expend the funds we do have primarily on our programs and scholarships.

We will probably never have a headquarters building or become centralized. One of our strengths is our board's geographic diversity. We are located across the US in Maryland, Virginia, New York, Oklahoma, Colorado, Texas, Oregon, and New Mexico.

What you can do: As for increasing visibility, we ask that you tell your colleagues about us and ask them to visit our website, once we have it up and running again. If you have attended a SAIGE NTP, tell them about your experience.

- What we have done to date:

Each year, we search out foundations with ties to Indian Country. We have sent grant proposals to the ones we believe would support our mission. We succeeded with Santa Fe Natural Tobacco two years ago when they granted us \$15,000 for our NTP in Tulsa, primarily for the Student Program.

There is a lot of free information online to help us write grant proposals and communicate with our constituents. Of these, the most important lesson I have learned by attending webinars geared to writing grant proposals, and attending in-person training, is that people like storytelling. We have many success stories to share. For example, we have featured promising students landing government jobs and starting off on careers in our emails and scholarship recipients in our newsletters. These profiles bring positive results and comments.

We have now joined with the Native Ways Federation which advertises Giving Tuesday and Give Native Day on behalf of its constituents. We also send out information, stories, and greetings for End of Year Giving, Native American heritage month in November, and in October, our membership renewal month. We have a presence on Facebook and LinkedIn where we advertise our National Training Program and other events and celebrate our successes.

- What we will do in the future:

We will continue applying for grants and keeping the listserv in the loop on our activities. This year, and possibly during the next few years, we will focus on applications for organizational funding so we are in the strongest possible position for our next in-person NTP.

Small grants may make it possible to have occasional free lectures on Indian law, tribal natural and cultural resource success stories, professional development topics and the employment picture. We may also offer cultural events to engage your enthusiasm.

SAIGE is comprised of many talented and creative individuals. We invite you to give your ideas to the Board and become part of the fundraising team to seek out the few available dollars.

SAIGE is determined to continue to offer its members relevant training, activities and support during challenging times and we welcome your ideas on how we can do this better. We want to reflect the interests and the strengths of our members, so please feel free to reach out. If you have fundraising experience and would like to volunteer to work on a committee with us, please let us know!

“SAIGE is determined to continue to offer its members relevant training, activities and support during challenging times and we welcome your ideas on how we can do this better.”

Revitalizing Roots: How Indigenous Native American Cuisine Nourishes Health and the Environment

By Ed Blauvelt

As spring awakens the land, a quiet revolution is stirring in kitchens and fields across Native American communities - a resurgence of Indigenous cuisine that promises to reclaim cultural heritage and enhance human health and environmental sustainability. This movement offers a compelling intersection of tradition, policy, and progress. Emerging Indigenous Native American cuisine, rooted in ancestral foods like wild rice, bison, and the "three sisters" trio of corn, beans, and squash, is gaining recognition for its potential to address pressing health disparities and foster ecological harmony. These time-honored practices are proving better for both people and the planet, drawing on scientific evidence, community initiatives, and traditional wisdom.

A Taste of Health: Addressing Chronic Diseases with Ancestral Foods

The health benefits of Indigenous Native American cuisine are profound, particularly in combating the chronic diseases that disproportionately affect Native communities. Research, such as the study "Food Diversity and Indigenous Food Systems to Combat Diet-Linked Chronic Diseases," highlights the nutritional power of traditional foods. These dishes, such as purple corn, wild rice, and squash, are rich in phenolic bioactives and compounds with antioxidant, antihyperglycemic, and antihypertensive properties. Such attributes make them allies in the fight against type 2 diabetes (T2D), cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), and obesity, conditions that have long burdened Native populations.

Consider the numbers: Native Americans face a T2D prevalence 16.5% higher than other racial groups, with rates at 17.3% compared to 10.1% for non-Hispanic whites. In North Dakota, diabetes prevalence and mortality are 2.3 times higher among Native youth aged 10–19, who are nine times more likely to develop T2D. These stark disparities underscore the urgency of dietary solutions. Indigenous foods offer a promising response. For instance, purple corn boasts a phenolic concentration of 8.0 mg/g, metrics that signal its potential to regulate blood sugar and reduce oxidative stress. Wild rice, with its high fiber and low glycemic index, stands in stark contrast to processed white rice, aiding in weight management and reducing risks of obesity-linked diseases.

Beyond the lab, practical efforts amplify these findings. Chef Sean Sherman, featured in "Restoring Native American Health with Indigenous Foods," has championed this cause since 2014 through initiatives like The Sioux Chef, the Indigenous Food Lab, and North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems (NATIFS). His work reintroduces low-glycemic, low-salt foods, such as bison, venison, fish, and wild tubers to communities like Pine Ridge Reservation, where 50% of residents live in poverty and face soaring rates of diabetes, obesity, and heart disease. These conditions, worsened by decades of reliance on government-supplied, high-sodium, high-sugar rations, find a counterpoint in Sherman's menus, which honor pre-colonization diets free of pork, chicken, beef, dairy, and refined sugars. By returning to these ancestral foods, Native communities can reclaim their culinary heritage and health.

Sowing Sustainability: Environmental Wisdom in Indigenous Practices

The environmental benefits of Indigenous Native American cuisine are equally transformative, rooted in practices that have sustained ecosystems for centuries. The "three sisters" method is at the heart of this, a cooperative planting system where corn, beans, and squash grow together in symbiosis. As detailed in the National Indian Council on Aging's (NICOA) "Indigenous Foods" resource, corn draws nitrogen from the soil, beans replenish it, and squash shades the ground, retaining moisture and suppressing weeds. This elegant dance enhances soil health, reduces the need for chemical fertilizers, and exemplifies sustainable agriculture, starkly contrasting industrial monocropping that depletes the earth.

Modern initiatives build on this foundation. The Sicangu Food Sovereignty Initiative (SFSI) on the Rosebud Reservation, also highlighted by NICOA, integrates regenerative agriculture into its mission. Practices like no-till farming, planting cover crops, and maintaining seed banks replenish nutrients and restore degraded land. Composting workshops and heirloom seed saving further deepen this commitment, ensuring that the soil remains fertile for future generations. These efforts align with a broader ethos of environmental stewardship, where food production works with nature rather than against it.

Sherman's approach complements this by emphasizing regional and seasonal ingredients, such as foraged plants and locally hunted game. These methods reduce reliance on imported, resource-intensive foods like dairy and beef, which were absent from pre-colonization diets. Foraging fosters a "no food desert" mindset, empowering communities to sustain themselves even in remote areas. As Sherman notes, understanding the land and its offerings—whether through harvesting native berries or preparing wild game—cultivates a sustainable way of life that minimizes ecological footprints.

Bridging Past and Future

The rise of Indigenous cuisine offers more than a culinary trend; it's a call to action. Health and environmental challenges are deeply intertwined with the policy and community development issues that government employees address daily. The scientific evidence of nutritional benefits, paired with the practical success of initiatives like SFSI and NATIFS, provides a blueprint for programs that could reduce health disparities and promote sustainability on reservations and beyond. Imagine policies that incentivize traditional farming methods or funding for community kitchens serving Indigenous meals—these could amplify the impact of this resurgence.

The cultural significance is equally vital. Reviving these cuisines strengthens food sovereignty, a cornerstone of tribal resilience. It's a reclaiming of identity, a rejection of the processed foods that have undermined Native health for generations. Reviving our cuisines aligns with our mission to support Native American government employees in fostering thriving communities. By spotlighting these efforts in newsletters, workshops, or advocacy, we amplify their reach, connecting federal resources to grassroots innovation.

Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

While the promise is clear, challenges remain. Scientific studies call for more research to validate these health benefits fully across diverse populations. Environmental gains, too, depend on scaling traditional practices in a modern world dominated by industrial agriculture—a task requiring investment and education. Yet these hurdles are also opportunities. With their unique vantage point in government, SAIGE members can advocate for research grants, sustainable land-use policies, and cultural education programs to bridge these gaps.

A Recipe for Renewal

As we celebrate spring, a season of growth and renewal, Native American cuisine invites us to reconsider how we nourish ourselves and our planet. Ours is a cuisine of resilience, born from the land and perfected over millennia, now reemerging to heal bodies and ecosystems alike. It's a chance to honor the past while building a healthier, greener future. Whether it's the antioxidant-rich bite of purple corn or the soil-nurturing embrace of the three sisters, these foods remind us that what's good for the people is good for the earth.

Is your garden in? Mine is!

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Photo taken from Oneida Indian Nation: <https://www.oneidaindiannation.com/the-interworking-of-the-three-sisters/>

Navigating Wellness with the Blue Cross and Blue Shield's Federal Employee Program (FEP®)

In times of uncertainty, prioritizing mental and physical well-being is crucial. To our Society of American Indian Government Employees, we recognize that the weight of balancing work, community, and wellness may feel heavy at times. We want you to know that we recognize the stress you may be feeling, and that all of us at the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Federal Employee Program (FEP®) are here to support you, every step of the way.



Supporting your journey: It's normal to feel overwhelmed at work. And sometimes, those feelings come home with you. If they do, they can lead to exhaustion, anxiety or struggling to find joy in what once brought you happiness. Recognizing feelings instead of ignoring them is important for your mental health.

Resources when you need them: Through the FEP, you have access to wellness tools that are built for you. Tools that prioritize privacy, flexibility and easy access to get you started. If you're interested in finding a professional to talk to, no-cost mental health resources and general wellness practice, we're only a click or call away.

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When life throws you a curveball, it can help to have small habits to turn to. Check out our [Daily Wellness Tips](#) where you can find tools for reducing stress, eating healthier and achieving overall health goals.

Your service is honorable, and we value your identity, community and history that you bring to work every day. As American Indian and Alaska Native federal employees, your perspective and experience strengthen public service for us all.

Your strength deserves support, and we'll always be here to offer it.

Unearthing the Past: Paleo-Indians and the Travois in New Mexico

By Ed Blauvelt

In the shifting sands of White Sands National Park, New Mexico, a groundbreaking discovery has rewritten the story of early human ingenuity in the Americas. Archaeologists have uncovered 22,000-year-old drag marks alongside human footprints, believed to be the earliest evidence of transport technology in the form of a travois—a simple, pole-based device used to haul goods. This finding, detailed in a study published in *Quaternary Science Advances*, not only pushes back the timeline of human settlement in North America but also highlights the resourcefulness of Paleo-Indians, the first peoples to inhabit the continent. For members of the SAIGE, this discovery resonates as a testament to the deep-rooted innovation of Indigenous ancestors.

The travois, a precursor to wheeled vehicles, consists of wooden poles arranged in an A- or X-shape, with a platform or netting to carry loads. Dragged by humans or later by animals like dogs or horses, it was a vital tool for Indigenous peoples across North America, particularly on the Great Plains, well into the historical period. However, the White Sands discovery, dated to approximately 22,000 years ago, predates the invention of the wheel by some 17,000 years, making it one of the oldest known examples of transport technology worldwide (Bennett et al. 100274). Matthew Bennett, a professor at Bournemouth University and lead author of the study, describes the travois as a “wheelbarrow without the wheel,” emphasizing its simplicity and effectiveness (qtd. in Le Page).

The fossilized tracks at White Sands reveal two distinct types of drag marks: single grooves, likely from an A-shaped travois, and parallel lines, suggesting an X-shaped design for added stability. Some tracks extend up to 165 feet, preserved in dried mud near the ancient shores of Paleolake Otero, a massive Ice Age Lake that once dominated the region (Bennett et al. 100274). Accompanying these marks are human footprints—some adult-sized, others child-sized—indicating that entire families may have participated in these early transport efforts. “Many people will be familiar with pushing a shopping trolley around a supermarket, moving from location to location with children hanging on,” Bennett notes, drawing a relatable parallel to modern life (qtd. in Reynolds).

To confirm their hypothesis, researchers constructed replica travois and tested them on mudflats in Dorset, UK, and along the Maine coast, USA. The resulting marks closely mirrored those at White Sands, reinforcing the

idea that Paleo-Indians used these devices to move heavy loads—possibly firewood, food, or camp supplies—across the landscape (Reynolds). Unlike later Indigenous groups who employed dogs or horses, the White Sands evidence suggests humans alone powered these travois, as no animal prints accompanied the tracks (Newcomb).

This discovery challenges previous assumptions about early human migration and settlement. Traditional theories posited that Paleo-Indians arrived in North America via the Beringia land bridge around 13,000 to 16,000 years ago. However, the 23,000-year-old footprints and 22,000-year-old travois marks at White Sands push this timeline back by thousands of years, aligning with emerging evidence of an earlier human presence (Bennett et al. 100274). For Indigenous communities, this reaffirms oral histories of deep ancestral ties to the land, often overlooked by earlier archaeological narratives.

The travois’ significance extends beyond its antiquity. It embodies the adaptability of Paleo-Indians, who navigated a post-Ice Age world of megafauna and shifting climates without the aid of wheels or domesticated animals. As Sally Reynolds, a co-author and paleontologist, states, “Every discovery at White Sands adds to our understanding of the lives of the first people to settle in the Americas” (qtd. in Le Page). For government employees of Indigenous descent, this find is a source of pride, connecting modern stewardship of land and resources to the ingenuity of those who came before.

As we reflect on this milestone in the Spring of 2025, the White Sands travois tracks invite us to honor the legacy of Indigenous innovation—a legacy that continues to shape our understanding of history and our responsibilities today.

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Talking Leaf Newsletter

The Talking Leaf Newsletter is issued twice a year - Spring and Fall. SAIGE welcomes your stories, suggestions, and ideas. If you want to contribute to the newsletter, please email Georgia Madrid at **newsletter@saige.org**

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