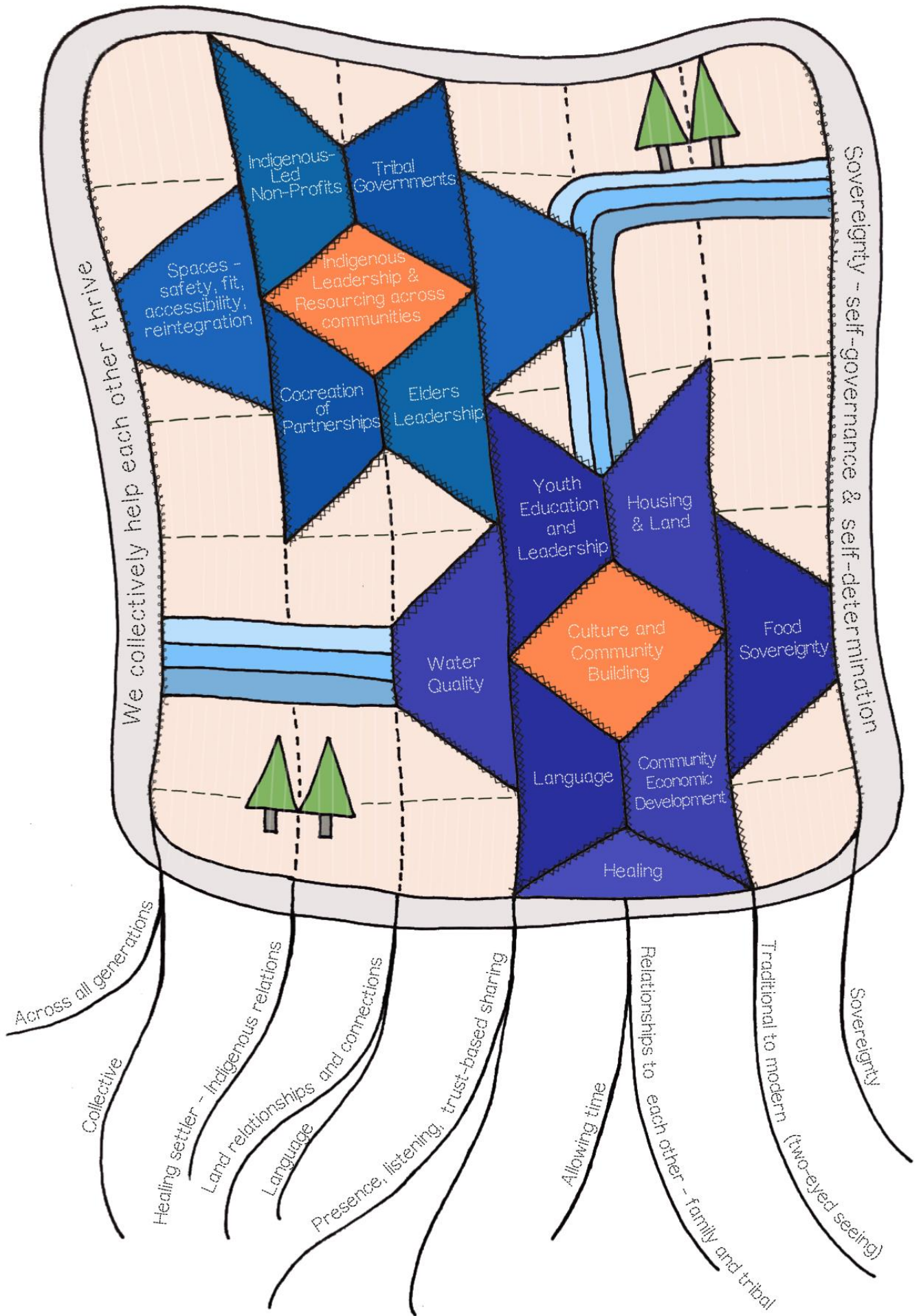


# Listening to Community Priorities in Wabanakiq

A summary of 2021 listening sessions by Sewall Foundation to learn about individual and community priorities of Indigenous people – in particular, members of the Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Mi'qmaq and Maliseet Nations – living in Maine (USA)

Elmina B. Sewall Foundation





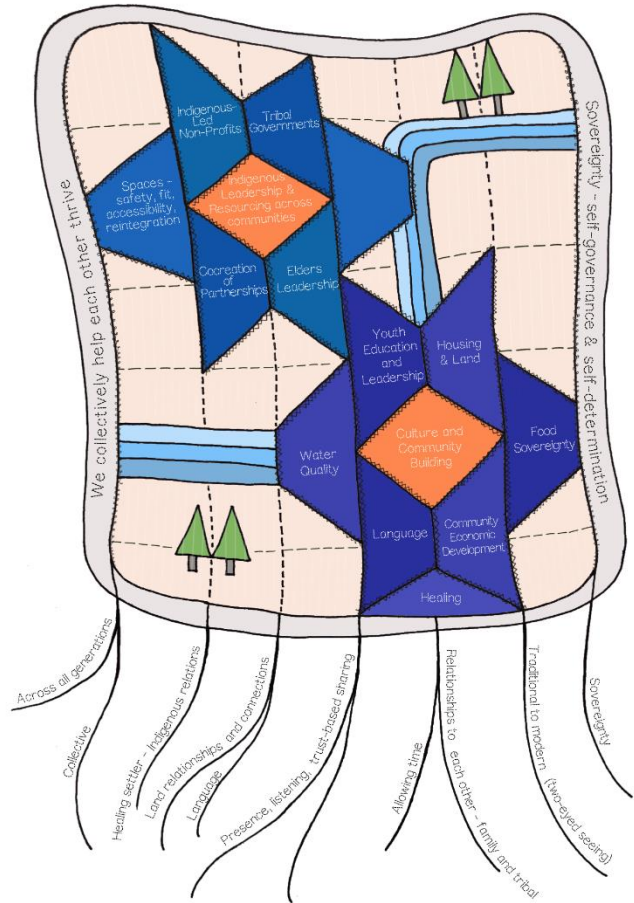
## HOW TO READ THIS BLANKET

The large blanket pieces in **orange** highlight messages that stood out across many conversations:

- Community Culture and Community-Building
- Indigenous Leadership & Resourcing Across Communities

The smaller blanket pieces in **blues** show subthemes, identified through a qualitative analysis of notes from our conversations (using NVivo software). Subthemes connect to their larger overarching theme.

The vertical **'warp' threads** that stitch the blanket together emerged in our second-round analysis. These thread themes reveal how folks spoke about deep aspirations, and where they source hope and 'what matters'. We came to notice these as 'warp threads' of our listening blanket, over and under which those who shared weave their family relationships, community initiatives, and common futures.



While all warp threads are essential, two of them stood out to us as holding all the others:

- We collectively help each other thrive.
- Sovereignty (self-governance and self-determination).

One black thread is unnamed to show future listening and learning.

On pages 7-12, below, we list all themes and provide short descriptions for each (and related subthemes).

# Sharing back with a blanket

**To learn about Indigenous community priorities, throughout 2021, Sewall Foundation met with and listened to more than 35 Indigenous people of Wabanakiq, who are affiliated with organizations and Tribal governments serving the Indigenous people of Maine. The people who shared with us worked at/represented 15 Wabanaki-led and Wabanaki-serving organizations.**

Our listening team was led by Gabriela Alcalde (immigrant, Peru, mestiza, public health professional, Executive Director of Sewall Foundation), with Lisa Attygalle (settler – Australia to Canada, Haldimand Treaty, community engagement facilitator with Tamarack Institute), Maria Garcia (Indigenous, Turtle Island – Treaty 13, independent consultant and community builder), Gillian Kranias (European settler, Treaty 13, independent consultant and facilitator).

We situate ourselves in terms of our ancestral heritage and current professional roles to recognize how each listener of our team enters and engages in conversations from a distinct vantage point within Indigenous and settler-colonial relations. From these vantage points we greet you, reader. We welcome future exchanges around what we have written here and all aspects of our relationships, as we seek to acknowledge historical and systemic injustices and harms and work on healing and repairing in the lands we now call Maine.

## **OUR APPROACH: listen, reflect, and share back what we are hearing**

Our listening team reflects the hearts and minds of its members. Each of us brings a distinct identity, heritage, life story, professional experience, and passion in our commitments towards reconciliation and healing. We were guided by Sewall's 2021 intent for deepening and broadening our listening to share our work and commitment [to trust-based philanthropy](#).

- We use an emergent approach (Sewall's [Emergent Approach](#) and adrienne maree brown, [Emergent Strategy](#)) informed by Indigenous research methodologies (e.g., Kathleen E. Absolon, [Kaandossiwin](#)).
- In our processes of listening, we referenced the medicine wheel, to remind ourselves to listen for mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional aspects of what speakers shared and what listeners brought. From the layers of stories, we opened to hearing Wabanaki community priorities and commitments to the future, from where people and communities stand in this story today.
- We listened through 1-1 and group conversations within virtual meetings, phone calls, email exchanges, and 2 virtual collective listening sessions.
- We identified themes (that grew to become this blanket) using a [Grounded Theory](#) approach.



## PROCESS

For context: this was a pandemic year. So far, all our listening meetings have been virtual connections. Amidst those constraints, caring, wholistic, and Indigenous-informed ways of working guided us to facilitate meaningful connections.

- At first, we met mostly with individuals. On one exception, we heard from members of a collective work team. We were honored to (virtually) join their first in-person meeting since the pandemic and engage in group dialogue and sharing.
- Mid-way, over summer, we rested and reflected on our conversations: *what had we heard, so far?* The Indigenous consultant within our team spoke about the key priorities ‘blanketing’ across those conversations. From there emerged our desire to present the thematic analysis of our conversation learnings as a colorful blanket image.
- In early Fall, we sent invitations to a broader list of Sewall Foundation contacts, and we invited the people we know to invite others. Many joined us for collective sharing and listening sessions, each two hours.
- During these collective sharing and listening sessions, we shared early blanket themes ‘we have heard, so far’ and we invited those Wabanaki community members present to further contribute to our shared learning.
- For the two collective listening sessions, we shared some guiding questions for our conversation with those we invited, but these questions were not use as a script. These questions guided our earlier individual conversations, but, again, were not used as a script. We share the questions here to be transparent about how the listening team came to the listening sessions and the questions we carried with us:
  - ***What are your passionate aspirations for yourself and your family/community?*** *By learning what your priorities are Sewall can ensure our efforts support your goals.*
  - ***How can we be in good relationship?*** *How can Sewall and others be good partners? What would allow us to walk in a good way with you?*
- After these sessions, we again took time to reflect: *what have we heard now?* A deeper layer in the blanket emerged through the collective sharing and listening spaces. The resulting Fall blanket shows many new themes, depicted as ‘warp threads.’ These came from the collective listening sessions – for which we are so grateful – and they transformed the blanket in ways that further Indigenized/decolonized it. The blanket artwork in this document was gifted by one of our non-Indigenous team members.

### THE BLANKET METAPHOR

The blanket ‘stitched together’ and ‘shared back’ our listening and emergent learning through a metaphor that was meaningful across the cultures of the listening team.

The blanket reminds us of the gifts people shared with us. It also reminds us to go slow, to rest amidst difficulties and gifts, to reflect, to welcome change, and to allow ourselves to be enveloped by the ideas, feelings, memories, and dreams of those we listened to and with.

- Our blanket is grounded in Indigenous-settler collaboration based within the principle of Two-Eyed Seeing brought forward by Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall, Eskasoni Nation, to “draw on the strengths of Indigenous and Western knowledges”<sup>1</sup>.

### **Noting limitations:**

- Despite the pandemic and the many limitations it presented, we were privileged to engage in conversation and listening sessions with Wabanaki leaders of non-profits, tribal government, grassroots efforts, academic institutions, economic development institutions, and community leaders.
- Listening during a pandemic required conversations to remain virtual, which limited some levels of connection, and certainly created barriers for those without broadband internet access (which we know is a challenge in rural and tribal communities).
- While we sent invitations to individuals beyond Sewall grantees – and asked our invitees to invite others – we know our reach has been limited and incremental. This relationship-building qualitative research effort provides a glimpse at Wabanaki community priorities as shared by specific community members at specific points in time. Through the coming year(s), we will continue to work on relationship building and strengthening.

## **WHAT'S NEXT**

At Sewall, we believe that the health and well-being of people, animals and the environment are inextricably linked, and we seek to create a Maine where all thrive. With an [equity-first approach](#) to everything we do, we strive to build mutual, trust-based partnerships spanning socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic boundaries. We commit to connecting organizations to each other and the resources they need, amplify their voices, and strive to make sure they have a say in decision-making. Together with our partners we're working to expand access to power, right historical wrongs, and strengthen communities for a just, healthy, and sustainable future.

We will use this blanket to check back with those who spoke to us, and to invite new people to share their perspectives and priorities. We will also use it to dialogue with Sewall staff and board members, and to share with other funders. We envision a near future when all funders listen first to community voices. Whenever we look over and trace the blanket threads and themes, we plan to talk about what we heard and how. We will keep listening, to keep learning.

We believe that spending more time in conversations around this blanket will grow our awareness and nurture good relationships. Please connect with us! Email Gabriela Alcalde: [galcalde@sewallfoundation.org](mailto:galcalde@sewallfoundation.org)

---

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.integrativescience.ca>

# Exploring themes

“What we heard so far” means we are still listening, and these themes reflect a moment in time. We provide some theme descriptions and illustrative quotes, below.

- The ‘warp thread’ themes were emphasized during the collective listening sessions of Fall 2021. They hold together the blanket.
  - “Indigenous Leadership & Resourcing Across Communities” was mentioned in all conversations.
  - Other high-level themes were mentioned in over half of our conversations.
  - Subthemes were mentioned in three or more conversations.
  - Quotes are from the words of contributors who gave consent for sharing. They represent one perspective (of several) behind each theme.
- 

## THREADS THAT HOLD TOGETHER

The warp threads highlight non-rigid, always connected, knowledge/ways that inspire the futures Wabanaki community members told us they dream and weave together. We understand the threads of the blanket ‘warp’ as wholistic Indigenous resources maintained by community: not reliant on funding — they come from Indigenous ways of living.

We also heard how the warp threads of the blanket weaken or break under colonial constraints, violence, and rifts. Also, how mending a frayed section requires sustainable healing efforts. More directly connected to Sewall Foundation’s listening focus, we heard about stressful and/or taxing funder directives, contracts, and application/reporting requirements — as well as shared appreciations and aspirations for non-directive, collaborative funding partnerships.

We understood how any torn warp thread in the blanket weakens or unravels both aspirations and the ‘stitching’ work of Community Culture and Community-Building, as well as Indigenous Leadership & Resourcing, highlighted in the blanket squares. The warp threads are foundational to blanket stitching on the surface.

These themes offer insights for directions to rethread relationships – both within Wabanaki communities, and with colonial institutions (including philanthropy).

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>We collectively help each other thrive</b></p>               | <p>Strong communities happen when we collectively help each other.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Helping and healing relationships among individuals, families, human communities.</li> <li>- ‘All my relations’ (all our relatives in the natural world).</li> </ul> <p><i>“[fellow participant] mentioned it’s going to take all of us – this is the aspect of holism. It’s our cultural way...”</i></p>  |
| <p><b>Sovereignty (self-governance and self-determination)</b></p> | <p>Sovereignty (self-governance and self-determination).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Land, water, and economic sovereignty (includes food).</li> <li>- Wabanaki communities leading their own research, following the First Nations Principles of <a href="#">OCAP</a> (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession).</li> <li>- Education, housing, culture.</li> </ul> <p><i>“Thank you for having faith in our organizations to determine how to prioritize the use of our funds to help our communities.”</i></p> <p><i>“We can’t wait for the day when we are not dependent on federal funds to do what we need to do.”</i></p> <p><i>“...like how the blanket – sovereignty, lands, all connected (vs public health is here, governance is here...) we have so much success when we can see how these things are connected.”</i></p> |
| <p><b>Across all generations</b></p>                               | <p>Doing things together as family and across all generations. Contrast of identity as a collective instead of deeply individualistic sense of identity of colonizer-settler cultures.</p> <p><i>“...some family becomes the support network that you need in order to navigate the world as it is now.”</i></p>   |
| <p><b>Healing (decolonizing) settler-Indigenous relations</b></p>  | <p>A trauma-informed healing focus that recognizes ongoing trauma from ongoing colonialism in institutions and settler-Indigenous relations.</p> <p><i>“Some ways to [change] is to get back some of those jurisdictional powers that were taken. And bringing in our traditions and cultures... e.g., getting away from Roberts Rules of Order when they are not making sense... incorporating our traditions that have helped people in the past”</i></p>  |



|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Land, land relationships, land connections</b></p>                     | <p>Land as a source of sustenance, healing, culture, family connections. Indigenous identity tied to land and relationship with the land.</p> <p><i>“...Hunting, fishing and gathering for sustenance needs and being stewards of the land and our ancestral rivers inform our respect for our environment and all life...”</i></p> <p><i>“Wabanaki cosmology and epistemology [is based on] holism – involves sharing of land and water with both human and nonhuman.”</i></p>  |
| <p><b>Language relationships, language connections</b></p>                   | <p>Cultural inclusion keeps coming up as central to sovereignty.</p> <p><i>“We need to dream about who we are and who we will come to be. I would like all the Indigenous people to dream - so we are not constrained in how we think by what we have learned in English.”</i></p>   |
| <p><b>Presence, listening, trust-based sharing</b></p>                       | <p>This thread stretches beyond family/community connections. It also speaks to decolonization in partnerships, including those between foundations (such as Sewall) and Wabanaki communities.</p> <p>In the experience of another contributor, resourcing conducted through friendship and community-building contrasts favorably to funds channelled through legal documents, since the latter tend to benefit those who can afford a lawyer.</p> <p><i>“Transparency - being truthful (about the things that are important for working together).”</i></p>                      |
| <p><b>Relationships to each other, family and tribal (re)connections</b></p> | <p>The healing of relationships. Practices for bringing people back into family connection, back in community, back into tribal connections (wherever they may live).</p> <p><i>“All the people in our communities are part of who we are.”</i></p> <p><i>“I don’t live on the reservation today, but I do consider myself part of the community... we are just a community who do not live within the reservation boundaries.”</i></p> <p><i>“...we have to put in community-wide recovery support, so that our communities are ready to receive these people back home.”</i></p> |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Allowing time, spending time together</b></p> | <p>This theme includes insights about the importance of sharing tea, being together in simple embodied ways. Allowing time/space, so Elders can share stories, teachings, 'medicines'.</p> <p><i>"...community-specific youth engagement... an activity where you can have conversations – get them talking while they are doing something with their hands..."</i></p>                         |
| <p><b>Traditional to modernity</b></p>              | <p>Ensuring safe, transitional, cultural spaces within modern institutions. Forwarding Indigenous expertise for abundance and security (e.g., Elder History Cafes). Participatory design strengthening sovereignty.</p> <p><i>"...our native science combines with scientific ecological knowledge and ... can be a source of pride for our youth and to connect them to who they are."</i></p> |

**INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP & RESOURCING ACROSS COMMUNITIES**

These subthemes speak to processes of truth and reconciliation, healing, and resurgence.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Elders' leadership</b></p>         | <p>Elders as a resource to all work. Truth-telling - "culturally grounded in storytelling and relationship ...the human stories that allow us to access people's hearts and minds."</p> <p><i>"I had asked the Elders to come in and talk, and the youth were excited..."</i></p>   |
| <p><b>Indigenous-led non-profits</b></p> | <p>Lots of momentum and motivation to ensure appropriate and sustainable resourcing (including capacity-building).</p> <p><i>"Your faith and trust in providing unrestricted funds has been tremendous, it helps small non-profits to be creative to place funds where most needed."</i></p> <p><i>"... our organizations are quite good at the 'community engagement' side of things and being 'led by' the community. What we really need help with is capacity building within the organizational structure"</i></p> <p><i>"...figuring out how to equitably and efficiently maintain our organizations, including hiring staff when appropriate, hiring grant</i></p> |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | <i>writers or developing grant writing skills ourselves, and upholding time equity. We all work 200% of the time, through weekends, etc., to meet the needs of our communities.”</i>   |
| <b>Leading in Indigenous ways</b>                         | <p>Leading in Indigenous (inclusive) ways - roles, responsibilities, relationships, and self-reflections.</p> <p><i>“Something I would like to contribute is to lend support to all of us who need to do the dreaming – about who we are, where we come from and who we can become collectively. We will not be defined by the systems and structures that others have built to contain us, but rather by the vision and wisdom of our Indigenous languages...”</i></p> <p><i>“Bringing back Native scholars into our communities... not only for our communities, but for our youth.”</i></p> |
| <b>Cocreation of partnerships</b>                         | <p>Not just responding to crisis, using participatory models. Working with Indigenous umbrella organizations, and/or coalitions, academics, white-led allied non-profits. Supporting new and smaller non-profits.</p> <p><i>“When I looked at the blanket... it reflects the framework of services and funding – the way money and resources come into our communities. These structures influence who we are today and the challenges we continue to face...”</i></p> <p><i>“...sometimes it’s going to take a long time of giving more to the people that have had less...”</i></p>          |
| <b>Spaces – safety, fit, accessibility, reintegration</b> | <p>Healthy and safe spaces are central: for meeting, work, celebrations, healing.</p> <p><i>“Incorporating a lot of our culture, and weaving it through, and holding space, and remembering what’s sacred - and ‘that is each other’. The ones trying to do good things and the ones outside (how do we reach them as well).”</i></p>  |
| <b>Tribal governments</b>                                 | <p>Tribal governments viewed by some participants as leaders in self-determination, self-governance in public health, and playing large roles in community economic development, collaborating with non-profits (different kinds of links). Non-profits are leading alongside them – strengthening connections and capacities.</p>   |

*“...tribal communities have been historically left out of the giving/receiving. The reality is they don’t have the resources/time for the grant writing.”*

## COMMUNITY CULTURE AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING

These subthemes cover the different culture and community-building initiatives people spoke about.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Community Economic Development</b></p> | <p>Community economic development (e.g., production businesses, food businesses, fisheries, community gardens, construction companies).</p> <p><i>“[I want Sewall to be] rigorous and unrelenting in reaching out to the whole entire community – it’s not enough to just talk to people you know”</i></p> <p><i>“When it comes to recovery, one of the biggest challenges is getting people back to work.”</i></p>   |
| <p><b>Food Sovereignty</b></p>               | <p>Directly connected to land and cultural relationships, many hold food sovereignty as central to culture, community-building and economic self-determination.</p> <p><i>“...our old ways were welcoming, sharing, we always had the door open for a meal.”</i></p> <p><i>“Another big wish of mine is to have more food sovereignty – huge farms where we can produce our food, and chickens and fish. And part of that is getting the lands and waters healthy enough... so factoring in protection.”</i></p>  |
| <p><b>Healing</b></p>                        | <p>Building support around recovery and mental health. Reconnecting after Covid. Peer support, recovery homes for tribal people, creating safe spaces for recovery, and reintegration into community, into family. Early childhood development programming.</p> <p><i>“...I want our communities to experience so much healing. In the past we have rushed to fix the symptoms, without focus on why people are hurting so bad – the lasting effects of colonization and attempted genocide. We feel we want to ignore the people who are hurting, throw them in a treatment center...”</i></p> |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Housing and Land</b></p>                             | <p>Housing, including supportive housing, home ownership programs. Housing priorities depend on resolution of land claims.</p> <p><i>“...looking to develop native construction company - “ecolistic” is the term [we have] been using (ecosystem and holistic).”</i></p>   |
| <p><b>Language</b></p>                                     | <p>Language is a key to culture and allows a healthy and strong engagement and understanding. Aspirations to bring language to all Wabanaki babies and children and weave it into a well-rounded education.</p> <p><i>“I want us to be comfortable in our own language because the key to our thriving is there – individually and collectively.”</i></p>   |
| <p><b>Water quality</b></p>                                | <p>Sustaining relationships with “our ancestral rivers”, and an aspiration that all communities have easy access to healthy, clean potable water.</p> <p><i>“Another big wish of mine is to have more food sovereignty – HUGE farms, where we can produce our food and chickens, and fish – and part of that is getting the lands and waters healthy enough... so factoring in protection...”</i></p>   |
| <p><b>Youth education and leadership opportunities</b></p> | <p>Respect “generational cultural shifts”. Building awareness of history. Showing up for youth, being consistent (sustained relationships).</p> <p><i>“Wrapping our kiddos in that support, our families, our adolescents, our new moms and honoring their bodies and trying to learn some of the things that were taken from us in terms of our babies – and infusing that into our families ... will help move our families along.</i></p> <p><i>“...I went down to [the community] to do a wild berry assessment, and some of the youth were involved – and they were really excited...”</i></p> |

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| <p><b>Noted Challenges</b></p> | <p>It remains important to pay attention to challenges that create obstacles to the Wabanaki priorities and aspirations shared. Challenges that impede collective action towards priorities include Covid, geographic distances (some communities), infrastructure gaps (e.g., broadband, clean potable water, Tribal high school), under-resourced non-profits, among others.</p> |
|--------------------------------|--|



## **WITH GRATITUDE**

To all who have participated in this process already and to all who are working tirelessly to improve the lives of people, animals and the environment, Sewall Foundation is deeply grateful.

This report highlights what we have heard so far. We are still listening.

Reach out to us for a conversation! Email Gabriela Alcalde: [galcalde@sewallfoundation.org](mailto:galcalde@sewallfoundation.org)

---

## **About the writing of this report**

This report was written by Gillian Kranias, Maria Garcia, Gabriela Alcalde, and Lisa Attygalle. Artwork is by Lisa Attygalle. This work was supported by the Sewall Foundation and the listening sessions are part of Sewall's commitment to engaging with communities and listening.