

Celebrating the Potato as a Symbol of Resilient Local Food Systems

Peru's National Potato Day (día nacional de la papa), held on May 30th each year, was formally established in 2005 thanks to an initiative championed by the Potato Park, providing an opportunity for the people of Peru, though especially its indigenous communities, to celebrate the historical and cultural significance of the potato. Potatoes were first cultivated thousands of years ago in the High Andes of southeastern Peru, and have since become a culinary staple not only in Peru, but all over the world. Today, Peru is home to over 3,500 potato varieties and hundreds of thousands of families in the country make their living growing potatoes. In the Potato Park alone, 1,367 varieties of potatoes are grown traditionally by the 6,000 Quechua farmers in the area. Naturally, National Potato Day holds particular importance for the communities that constitute the Potato Park for both cultural and political purposes. The significance of the potato, and strong local food systems as a whole, has been made especially clear during the last year and a half as the world and the communities of the Potato Park have confronted the global COVID-19 crisis.



Potato Park community leaders performing the traditional Papa Watay ceremony (May 31, 2021) Photo credit: Enrique Granados, ANDES

At the heart of Andean culture which has persisted for centuries is the concept of *sumaq kawsay*, which roughly translates to “wellbeing” or “harmonious living” in English. This fundamental principle is built on reciprocity, balance, and harmony among the three *ayllus*: *runa ayllu*, which represents the community of people as well as domesticated plants and animals; *sallka ayllu*, the community of wild things like non-domesticated plants and animals; and *auki ayllu*, the community of sacred things such as sacred mountaintops or high points (*apus*), rainbows, and *Pachamama* or Mother Earth. The preservation of this traditional cultural worldview through centuries of colonization and other threats to indigenous ways of life has required significant resilience on the part of Quechua communities. This resilience in the face of crisis, much like *sumaq kawsay* itself, can still be

seen today among the five indigenous communities (Amaru, Chawaytire, Pampallacta, Paru Paru y Sacaca) that collectively manage Peru's [Potato Park](#).

While the crises faced by the Potato Park's communities are often more long-term and persistent, such as climate change and food insecurity, the COVID-19 pandemic nonetheless provides a powerful example of resilience in Peru's indigenous communities. I recently enjoyed the opportunity to observe a small moment of this resilience when I was able to virtually attend the adapted festivities put on by the Potato Park, with support from Asociacion ANDES, in honor of National Potato Day. Although the celebration was smaller than it normally would have been, members of the indigenous communities of the Potato Park held a traditional Papa Watay ceremony and enjoyed poetry written to commemorate the holiday, while others, like myself, got to observe from a distance through a [livestream on Facebook](#).



Mariano Sutta making a ceremonial offering (ofrenda) to the Apus (sacred mountains) on National Potato Day (May 31, 2021) Photo credit: Enrique Granados, ANDES

The virtual National Potato Day celebration is just one example of several ways in which ANDES and Potato Park communities have adapted their methods of communication and collaboration in response to the pandemic. Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, NGO staff and community leaders have adjusted to remote meeting spaces such as Zoom, a process which has required training and overcoming significant obstacles, including limited access to reliable internet connections. According to ANDES' staff, when necessary, meetings were held in person and extra steps needed to be taken to ensure the safety of all participants through provision of face masks and hand hygiene materials. Although the shift to remote work was particularly difficult for these indigenous communities and access to protective equipment was more limited, those working with ANDES and the Potato Park adapted and persevered in order to continue pursuing their shared goals.

New methods of communication uncovered through the pandemic have enabled the organizations to build new connections and grow existing ones with partner organizations in different parts of the world. For instance, as a part of the National Potato Day festivities, a brief message was sent from the Potato Park to the Deccan Development Society in India. The two groups intend to meet later this month on Zoom, creating a virtual space for transnational indigenous solidarity and discussion of shared issues. While this particular relationship is longstanding, the new technology introduced in light of the COVID-19 pandemic has opened doors for new forms of collaboration and allowed for south-to-south horizontal exchange with a number of partners, both new and old. More generally, COVID-19 has pushed ANDES and the Potato Park to improve their overall communication capacities and thus expand the reach of and spread the word about their work in ways that will continue to benefit the organizations well beyond the era of the pandemic.

Beyond communications challenges, the Potato Park, like much of the world, has faced substantial economic difficulties as a result of the pandemic. Since ecotourism normally provides a significant source of income for the communities of the Potato Park, closed borders and limited mobility due to travel restrictions and widespread quarantines took a serious toll on the organization's revenue. Thus, in the spirit of resilience, communities had to come up with different ways to bring in money. With the support of ANDES, initiatives were implemented, particularly among women, to appeal to different markets. Artisan women began producing cloth masks, women working in the Papamanka restaurant were trained in new COVID-19 protocols, as well as the production of jams and pickled products for sale, and women who work with medicinal plants were trained in the production and marketing of soaps and toothpastes. Like the expansion of communications capacities, the strengthening of these micro-enterprises which resulted from the pandemic will likely reap benefits for the communities for years to come.



Artisanal soaps produced by community members. From top to bottom eucalyptus, kechinchá, calendula, mint, and rose (November 6, 2020) Photo credit: Cass Madden, ANDES



Community members making jams using native ingredients (March 2, 2020) Photo credit: Cass Madden, ANDES

While communication has been a source of significant challenges for the organizations throughout the pandemic, it has also provided a great opportunity for successful innovation and lasting growth. However, Asociacion ANDES and the Potato Park have also demonstrated their resilience in the face of this crisis in a number of other ways. For instance, as COVID-19 outbreaks primarily attacked urban areas of Peru, especially Lima, many people returned to their home villages to avoid infection. This surge in migration back to rural and indigenous areas in the Andes and the Amazon resulted in a shortage of seeds, in turn threatening the local food system and again pushing the communities of the Potato Park to adapt. An important part of this response was the direct provision of 1000kg of seeds to 600 families by ANDES with financial support from the [Agroecology Fund](#) and the Swift Foundation. Measures were also taken to produce more of their nutritionally rich traditional crops and to strengthen the Potato Park's capacity to produce seeds for its communities. Beyond its own communities, the Potato Park, knowing that the pandemic was hitting hard in urban areas, delivered a total of 1000kg of potatoes to a variety of vulnerable populations in the city of Cusco as a demonstration of support and solidarity.

The ability of the Potato Park's communities to donate food and accommodate incoming migrants while still maintaining their own food sovereignty reflects the resilience inherent in traditional Andean food systems. In order to tap into this natural strength, another key component of ANDES' and the Potato Parks' pandemic response included the provision of training to local community members to help strengthen and support their capacities to grow more vegetables at their own homes. Dozens of organic vegetable gardens were installed and seeds for a variety of vegetables were distributed to encourage more diverse and nutritious diets. This work does not represent an effort to improve home cultivation practices in indigenous communities, but rather to support existing traditional methods by providing the resources necessary to promote and sustain local food sovereignty in the face of the COVID-19 crisis.

While ANDES and the Potato Parks' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic provide a strong example of the communities' resilience in the face of crisis, this sense of resilience can be seen just as clearly during "normal" times. For instance, the aforementioned work during the pandemic to expand household gardens builds on a longstanding effort by ANDES and the Potato Park to diversify the crops grown in local Andean food systems, as well as to promote this model elsewhere as a tool for adapting to and mitigating other crises such as climate change. One key way in which ANDES works to realize this goal locally is by supporting communities in the Lares valley of Peru that organize weekly barter markets in order to exchange the widely varying crops that they grow at different altitudes in the mountains. Like the Potato Park, these communities were able to donate large amounts of food to groups impacted by the pandemic in Cusco. There has also been an ongoing emphasis on the importance of wild species as a tool for food resilience and efforts to integrate these native crops into community member's diets as a source of nutrients that are lacking in more homogenous diets. Although these efforts were not new, the pandemic brought a new level of urgency to the issue, because now more than ever the people are in need of strong diets for

strong immune systems in order to build up physical resilience against COVID-19 in the event of infection.



Quechua women at the Lares barter market (April 20, 2015). Photo credit: Tammy Stenner, ANDES

An urgent threat that is constantly being confronted by the indigenous communities of the Andes is climate change, which has significant adverse effects on the peoples' agricultural production and overall livelihoods. As global temperatures rise, changes in weather patterns, melting glaciers, and increased presence of pests, among other factors, disrupt the natural balance upon which the communities' traditional potato cultivation has long depended, in turn threatening food security in the area. However, the communities, as well as the potatoes themselves, have been able to adapt fairly effectively to these changes.

ANDES and the Potato Park consistently stress the importance of traditional knowledge systems, in conjunction with science, for adapting to the changing climate and resulting threats to food security and food sovereignty. In a [2017 article](#) in the *Journal of Culture & Agriculture*, ANDES staff emphasize the natural resilience of traditionally grown field crops and note that "Association ANDES and the Potato Park are attempting to increase resilience in indigenous communities, through conservation of cultural and biological diversity, support for sustainable livelihoods, and participation in global policy processes," (103). A crucial component of this for the Potato Park is strategically breeding potatoes in such a way that fortifies them against rapidly rising temperatures. This practice not only reaps benefits on the local level, but on a global level as well, as the preservation of these genetic variations strengthens the capacity of global food and agricultural systems to adapt to climate change.

Part of ANDES' efforts to support sustained community resilience and resilient food systems is the promotion of public policies that align with their values and long term goals. [In general](#),

the organization pushes for policies focused on indigenous and farmer rights, the protection of local food systems against industrial agriculture, and climate resilience. A specific policy that ANDES has supported in recent years is Peru's moratorium on genetically modified organisms (GMOs), which was first passed in 2011 and recently renewed to last until 2035. This statute prohibits the entry or production of GMOs within Peru's borders, in turn defending the natural biodiversity and cultural heritage of the country's traditional agricultural systems. In a [YouTube video](#) published by ANDES in 2020, the narrator articulates that "genetic alteration of food abides by economic interests that damage the soil, the water, the body, and society. Supporting the production of GMOs threatens life, communities, and Mother Earth." Co-founder of ANDES and current Director of Programs at the Swift Foundation, Alejandro Argumedo, has emphasized that the overall theme of National Potato Day is ultimately the promotion and preservation of Andean food sovereignty. This overarching theme encapsulates many of the themes discussed above, such as community, cooperation, agrobiodiversity, adaptation to climate change, fair distribution of resources, nutrition, innovation, and careful attention to culture and language. In promoting policies that attend to these objectives, ANDES always works hand-in-hand with their partner communities, such as the Potato Park and the Lares barter markets.



Potato Park community leaders preparing the ofrenda for the Apus in celebration of National Potato Day (May 31, 2021). Photo credit: Enrique Granados, ANDES

As Asociación ANDES and the Potato Park have celebrated yet another National Potato Day in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were not only celebrating the potato itself, but also everything it represents regarding the strength and resilience of local traditional food systems as a whole. The present crisis has only made more visible a truth of which these indigenous communities are already well aware: that in the face of crisis, whether it be a global pandemic or climate change, small and local food systems are more reliable and sustainable than global industrialized food systems. This resilience is perhaps most clear in the fact that both the Potato Park and the communities participating in the Lares barter

markets were able not only to accommodate people who migrated back to rural areas as urban food supplies collapsed, but also donate surplus food to those affected in cities by such delicate supply chains.

Carlos Loret de Mola, chair of the Asociación ANDES board of directors and former president of the National Board of the Environment (now the Ministry of the Environment), has acknowledged how important the potato is for the world. “The potato is an important symbol for everyone: for the Potato Park, for us, for Peru, for the world. It is a symbol of survival and resilience for the whole world and how we can overcome difficult times with the help of the potato... [The Potato Park’s] diversity and agriculture is important for the whole world, for confronting climate change, food insecurity, everything. That is what we must recognize and celebrate. Happy National Potato Day to all!”



Several different varieties of native potatoes from the Potato Park for the Papa Watay offering to the Apus (May 31, 2021). Photo credit: Enrique Granados, ANDES

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