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5 Questions for...David Strelneck



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David Strelneck is the founder of [Nourish^n](#), a coalition of social entrepreneurs, scientists, and supporters around the world who are advancing “nourishment

economies” — social and business solutions that build on healthy nutritional relationships between people and the planet. What’s Next Health spoke with Mr. Strelneck about his Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded project to deepen and spread nourishment economies, including initiatives with nine Indigenous communities around North America.

This interview is part of our [5 Questions For...Series](#), where we learn about the ways RWJF’s Pioneering Ideas for an Equitable Future grantees are helping us get to a healthier tomorrow — today.

Q: What do you hope to accomplish through this project?

A: We set out to examine in detail how certain innovative social entrepreneurs around the world are succeeding in promoting a combination of human health, environmental health, and economic development. We found an unexpected pattern: despite differences in topical focus and location globally, they are all tapping the benefits of nutrient cycles — where nutrients move through the ecosystem, including soil, plants, animals, people, and the atmosphere. Now we focus on putting this insight, with practical examples and data, in front of additional communities, social entrepreneurs, and others to help spark new, locally-led, and scalable actions.

These entrepreneurs are farmers, food producers, health and wellness providers, waste recyclers, chefs, and innovative schools. They include people like the Sioux Chef [Sean Sherman](#), who established the award-winning restaurant [Owamni](#). Sherman uses all native ingredients that were

present in North America before the European colonists arrived, sourcing from Indigenous producers who — because they work in harmony with the land — produce tastier, healthier, and more culturally affirming foods. Another example is the Irish farmer-entrepriser whose approach brings the wildflowers of famous Irish poetry back to farm fields where they had begun to die off, stimulating an increase in biodiversity and cultural tourism to the region. Even though the farmer now raises fewer sheep, the entire community benefits financially, culturally, and ecologically. Yet another, COMACO in Zambia, works with over 250,000 small farmers to locally monetize the overlap of organic farm products, elephant conservation, and carbon sequestration.

We call these “nourishment economies” — business and social enterprises that nourish people and land *together*. With this support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and others, we have now identified 13 different, tangible economic benefits that can be sparked by stimulating nutrient cycles, capturing them in a framework we now use to help others see the potential for creating their own nourishment economies.



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Q: What are you learning?

A: We've learned that this nutrient-cycling insight and concept of nourishment economies resonates with people, and it does work. And we're learning how to offer the framework along with some inspiring examples and practical action steps in new communities, rural and urban, who then apply it in their local economic and cultural context.

With this grant, we convened nine Indigenous entrepreneurs from New Mexico, Arizona, and California over several months to explore how they do or could act on the nutritional relationship between people and land to help spur local economic development. We were also able to support these new partners in following their own nourishment economies ideas, for example developing the menu for a new Indigenous food truck with ingredients

sourced from Native gardeners in the region; enabling entrepreneurial Native farmers to join an urban community capital development fund; and incorporating a local farm stand and farm tourism site around an already-innovative Indigenous school property that blends healthy foods, cultural relationships, and economics.

Some of these Indigenous partners approached us because, in our work, they saw the tangible benefits of positive relationships between different forms of life (including humans) both above and below ground. And it's been very exciting to see the sense of agency and momentum grow within their communities. They've taken nourishment economics in new directions that seem powerful and important. For example, two separate groups of Indigenous community farmers are now using this framework to help envision and plan new local economic sovereignty actions; and New Mexico Community Capital is now developing a decentralized autonomous organization (DAO) with Native farmers and artisans, which will allow them to collectively allocate money, labor, decisions, equipment expenses, and profits from their sovereign nourishment enterprises.

“As these nourishment economies start to flourish, I can then envision a future where we recognize that nature really plays a central and practical economic role in society's health.”

Q. What signals of the future or emerging trends were you noticing that led you to want to do this project?

A: As I mentioned, over 10 years of working with social entrepreneurs across lots of countries and cultures, we began to see a pattern whereby over and

over again successful entrepreneurs were tapping into the economics of nutrients cycling between natural ecosystems, land, and people. These folks were all different, and they didn't find themselves in the same room very often — they included an environmentalist, a food system innovator, a refugee camp coordinator, and a Native American rights activist, for example. They were from Ireland, India, Indonesia, Ecuador, the Navajo Nation, Belgium, Germany, Maine U.S.A.—very disparate places where we began to pick up on this consistent signal.

These entrepreneurs were all using the nutritional relationship between earth and people to produce value for communities and businesses, whether or not they saw it exactly that way. So that's what we began calling nourishment economies. And then we came up with the bold idea that we could actually go beyond the cohort of social entrepreneurs we were already working with and help this win-win dynamic spread in the world.

As society shifted around us — as climate and weather events disrupted local communities, as our food system stuttered, as COVID-19 laid bare structural racism in our communities and sparked a re-emergence of Native American activism — these signals around connecting the nourishment of land and people seemed not just more urgent but more opportune to us than ever.



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Q. Looking ahead to five, 10, 15 years from now, how do you see this work helping individuals and communities create healthier and more equitable futures?

A: I can envision a groundswell of people with a can-do or change-minded attitude who begin to look at the nutrient cycle and see the many places within their control where value can be created. For example, they might look at local foods and see that because of how the food is grown, it can have higher nutritional value, improved flavor and aroma, greater cultural significance for the region, and lead to clean water and healthier earth. And they will begin to package up these economic forces and turn them into successful locally-driven social or business initiatives.

As these nourishment economies start to flourish, I can then envision a future where we recognize that nature really plays a central and practical

economic role in society's health. And this in turn drives more support and resources toward the vitality of our environment, because people will want to save the birds and the bees and the trees for both ethical and “practical” reasons.

Q. What should people read, watch, or listen to that might help them better understand your ideas?

A: We wrote an [article for Ashoka](#) in 2016 that remains an anchor piece. Back then, this concept was just an inkling I combined with my other environmental analysis and organizing experience, but when you read it now, you see that a lot of our core hypotheses have played out. For details of the land and economic details, I would also recommend the [Economics + Science Framework: Land and Nourishment Cycle Economics](#) that we just published on our website along with our [public call for input and insights](#) on the 13 economic points, which is an opportunity for anyone who is interested to highlight critical feedback and examples. Finally, in [this short video](#) offer an overview of the benefits of merging human health and environmental health in these ways.

For more information, reach out to action@nourishn.com.

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