

How Native Tribes Are Influencing U.S. Cannabis Markets

How Tribes Are Shaping the Cannabis Industry Through Advocacy, Sovereignty, and Cultural Revitalization

A Meeting of Shared Vision: How a Simple Connection Sparked a National Movement

When Mary Jane Oatman first met Rob Pero in 2021, it wasn't through a corporate handshake or a business proposal. Instead, it was through a shared passion — a belief in the transformative power of cannabis for Indigenous communities.

At the time, Pero, owner of Canndigenous, a Wisconsin-based CBD beverage company, was working to introduce his products into tribal markets. Meanwhile, Oatman, a proud member of the Nez Perce Tribe, was spotlighting Indigenous-led cannabis brands in her publication, Tribal Hemp and Cannabis Magazine.

Their paths crossed at a pivotal time in the cannabis industry — a moment when tribal entrepreneurs were finding their voice but still facing barriers to market entry, regulation, and cultural recognition.

By 2022, their shared vision had evolved into a mission: the creation of the Indigenous Cannabis Industry Association (ICIA), a nonprofit network dedicated to empowering Indigenous voices in cannabis and establishing sovereignty-based frameworks for economic development.

The Birth of the Indigenous Cannabis Industry Association: A Platform for Empowerment

“The tribes were leading the way and needed a platform to showcase best practices and build a cohesive network,” said Oatman, who now serves as executive director of the ICIA.

The ICIA wasn't just another advocacy group; it was a necessity. Many Indigenous entrepreneurs were operating outside of formal tribal systems, facing challenges from unclear laws, limited access to financing, and cultural stigmas that still surrounded cannabis use.

Oatman and Pero recognized both the promise and the pitfalls of this emerging industry. They saw inspiring examples — like NuWu Cannabis Marketplace, which launched the first drive-thru dispensary and consumption lounge in the U.S. on tribal land — but also troubling trends, including predatory business practices targeting Native communities.

In response, the ICIA positioned itself as a policy clearinghouse, advocacy organization, and resource hub, helping Indigenous businesses develop responsibly while preserving tribal sovereignty and cultural integrity.

Creating Space and Visibility: The Indigenous Cannabis Village at MJBizCon

In partnership with MJBizCon, the largest cannabis business conference in the world, the ICIA is introducing the Indigenous Cannabis Village — a dedicated space on the trade show floor designed to foster economic empowerment, cultural storytelling, and advocacy.

The initiative symbolizes the growing visibility of Indigenous leaders in the cannabis sector. It also highlights the need for inclusion and collaboration across the industry.

By creating space for tribal representation, the ICIA hopes to educate non-Indigenous operators about tribal sovereignty, business practices, and the deep cultural roots of plant medicine within Native communities.

Reclaiming the Narrative: Cannabis as a Path to Healing and Cultural Connection

For Oatman, cannabis advocacy isn't just a professional pursuit — it's deeply personal.

As someone who grew up during the DARE era, when cannabis was demonized, she watched her grandparents face federal imprisonment for growing marijuana. That experience shaped her belief that cannabis is not merely an economic opportunity, but a sacred plant medicine with the power to heal people and reconnect communities to ancestral practices.

“Many people haven't given themselves permission to have a relationship with the plant,” Oatman said. “We are steadfast in our belief that this is a plant medicine.”

The ICIA's mission intertwines with broader social equity and inclusion efforts in the cannabis industry. By emphasizing cultural knowledge, sovereignty, and respect for traditional plant use, Indigenous advocates are reframing the conversation around cannabis — from profit-driven enterprise to community-driven healing.

Balancing Economic Growth with Community Responsibility

Despite the progress, challenges remain. Oatman emphasizes the need to balance economic development with community well-being, drawing lessons from the past.

She warns against repeating the mistakes made during the rise of the gaming industry, when profit sometimes overshadowed cultural and social responsibility. “We don't want the plant medicine to have that happen,” she said.

Oatman advocates for educational initiatives and youth outreach programs that focus on responsible cannabis use, including how to safely store products and prevent underage access.

“Schools are still zero tolerance,” she explained. “One kid swipes a vape pen from their mom's purse, and the next thing you know, six kids are expelled.”

Through proactive education and culturally grounded community programs, the ICIA hopes to ensure that cannabis legalization leads to positive social outcomes rather than unintended harm.

Debunking Misconceptions About Tribal Sovereignty and Cannabis Regulation

Another challenge Indigenous entrepreneurs face is misunderstanding about how tribal sovereignty works in cannabis regulation.

“People think tribes can do whatever they want or that they don’t have to pay taxes,” Oatman noted.

In reality, tribes operate within a complex web of federal, state, and tribal laws. Many must negotiate compacts with state governments to ensure compliance while preserving autonomy.

Revenue generated from tribal cannabis businesses often goes back into essential community services — such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure — creating tangible benefits for tribal citizens.

By clarifying these nuances, the ICIA aims to build bridges between tribal operators, regulators, and non-Indigenous businesses to foster mutual respect and collaboration.

Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainability: The Future of Cannabis

Despite regulatory hurdles, the future for tribal cannabis operations is bright. Oatman sees immense potential for Indigenous communities to set higher standards for sustainability, ethics, and quality within the cannabis industry.

Drawing on centuries of ecological wisdom, tribal cultivators are well-positioned to lead the movement toward regenerative farming, environmental stewardship, and cultural authenticity.

Oatman envisions a future where Indigenous cultivation practices and holistic philosophies influence mainstream cannabis production — integrating respect for the earth, cultural rituals, and a balanced relationship with the plant.

The Power of Storytelling and Healing Through Connection

Beyond business, the ICIA emphasizes storytelling as a tool for healing. Oatman recalls roundtables where elders shared powerful stories about incarceration, resilience, and cultural preservation.

“The healing that comes from storytelling is phenomenal,” she said. “Families torn apart by incarceration have still found ways to preserve culture and pass down traditional knowledge.”

These gatherings are more than policy discussions — they’re cultural exchanges that reconnect people to the plant, to each other, and to the spiritual principles that have guided Indigenous medicine for generations.

Building Partnerships and Looking Ahead

As the ICIA continues to grow, it is fostering stronger partnerships between tribal and non-tribal cannabis businesses. Oatman encourages operators to join the ICIA network, attend webinars, and learn about the tribal nations in their regions.

She points to models in Washington and Minnesota, where tribes have successfully negotiated compacts that respect sovereignty while allowing for regulated commerce.

Such collaborations can serve as a blueprint for nationwide reform — a future where Indigenous leadership is not peripheral, but central to the cannabis conversation.

A Movement Rooted in Education, Healing, and Collective Progress

Looking ahead, Oatman remains optimistic about the role of Indigenous knowledge in shaping the cannabis industry's evolution.

The Indigenous Cannabis Industry Association's journey reflects a broader truth: cannabis is not just an economic commodity, it is a vehicle for healing, sovereignty, and empowerment.

As tribes continue to lead through integrity, sustainability, and wisdom, they are not just participating in the cannabis industry, they are reshaping it for generations to come.

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