

# Endangered Maize: Indigenous Corn, Industrial Agriculture, and the Specter of Extinction

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Many people in different contexts, from plant geneticists to indigenous farmers to industrial agriculturists, agree today that the corn they tend is endangered. In this talk, I explore how a crop as dominant in global production as corn (*Zea mays*, also known as maize) has come to be the object of diverse conservation activities. I chart the early emergence of concerns about corn's vulnerability and responses to these concerns through two examples: the collection and sale of "Indian corn" in the US northwest by the Oscar H. Will seed company in the early 1900s and the ambitious pan-American seed banking initiative of the Committee on Preservation of Indigenous Strains of Maize in the 1950s. In both cases, the growth of industrial agriculture fostered new appreciation of the diversity of earlier corn varieties as resources for expanding production. Yet those earlier corn varieties were by and large in the possession of indigenous farmers whose communities and ways of life were thought to be fast disappearing. As I show, those who sought to conserve potentially valuable corn varieties were aware of and reliant on the knowledge of indigenous peoples and also attempted to render this knowledge inessential to their work.

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This event is part of the MIT Seminar on Environmental and Agricultural History sponsored by the History Faculty and the Program in Science, Technology and Society. For more information contact [kalopes@mit.edu](mailto:kalopes@mit.edu)