

Innovative Native Nations in Rural America

Key Partners in Building Sustainable American Prosperity

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Native people represent America's most rural population. However, like other populations, a growing proportion of Native people live and/or work in metropolitan areas. This has led Native scholars to note that "'urban' is not a kind of Indian...[it] is an experience, one that most Indian people today have had."¹ Native people often move back and forth between urban and rural areas – for short and long periods – whether for family, cultural, economic, educational, health, or other reasons.

Rural-Urban-Native Policy Context

Through the specific lens of tribal policy – and the unique innovations tribal nations offer to American policymaking (at the federal, state, and local level) – this paper will note the important relationships between rural, urban, and tribal communities. These relationships underscore the fact that both "metro" and "rural" are not kind of Americans, but an experience that many Americans have had. The point of this important insight is that – for Native and non-Native Americans – "relations do not end at jurisdictional boundaries."² Urban communities – while a growing proportion of America's population by some measures – cannot thrive, nor can the nation, if tribal nations (and other rural communities) are not successful. In short, sustainable prosperity in America is intimately linked to a robust rural-urban partnership that fully utilizes the innovation of Native nations.

In an influential 2007 report, the Brookings Institution laid out their case for America as a "metro nation." The report asserted that recognizing America as a metropolitan nation is essential to achieving "the productive, inclusive, and sustainable growth that should define American prosperity in the 21st century."³ The three growth goals outlined in the report are for America to: (1) "maintain its economic leadership," (2) "foster a strong and diverse middle class," and (3) "advance efforts to address climate change and achieve energy independence."⁴

While the data presented in the Brookings report is compelling, true success in meeting each of those goals requires a strong rural-urban partnership. There are clear examples in each of these three areas but it is important at this stage to note that, in the area of climate change and energy independence, tribal nations – and other rural communities – are both on the front

lines of the threats to America's future and offers the resources required to secure her future. As the Rural Policy Research Institute has noted, "there is a high degree of connectedness and interdependence between metropolitan and rural America."⁵ Urban and rural America possess complementary assets and opportunities that – taken together – can secure America's sustainable prosperity for generations to come. An exclusive focus on either "metro nation" or status quo government investments will be insufficient to secure America's future.

In many ways, the policies of the Obama Administration represent the influence of the Brookings Institution's contention that America is a "metro nation." Indeed, major media outlets heralded Obama's inauguration as that of the first "metropolitan President."⁶ Within a month of his inauguration, President Obama signed an executive order to establish the White House Office of Urban Affairs. This executive order was a flagship of a broader Administration-wide effort to address the economic crisis and invest in the economic potential of America's cities.

It is easy to look at these developments and assume the Administration was ignoring the interdependency between rural and urban but the first major policy initiative of the Obama Administration offered a more nuanced picture. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act) did provide significant resources for urban development in areas including: housing, education, workforce development, energy, and transportation. However, the Recovery Act also offered critical, first-of-their-kind investments in tribal economies – a total investment of more than \$3 billion. This investment in Indian Country's primarily rural economies was an early indicator of a growing acknowledgement that urban and rural economies are integrally linked. It was also an acknowledgement that tribal governments offer unique capacities to enact policy that can build a strong economic future for rural communities, and the nation as a whole.

The recent creation of a White House Rural Council is a prominent example of the Administration's sense that America's economic success requires effective investments in both urban and rural communities. In announcing the Rural Council, the President emphasized that "strong rural communities are key to a stronger America."⁷ The very wording of the executive order underscores the close relationship between tribal and rural policy by stressing that tribal governments are among the important rural stakeholders that will be engaged by the Council.

Many of the key drivers of the 21st century American economy are areas where rural communities offer strong opportunities for investment and innovation. The vision of a globally competitive America with a diverse middle class requires substantial investments in broadband, renewable energy, education systems, and economic development in rural areas. Furthermore, "metro" America is dependent on many of the resources rural America provides. Mod-

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ernizing rural infrastructure, sustainably managing natural resources, ensuring the quality of food systems, and many other rural focused policy strategies, are critical to the strength of urban economies.

In Indian Country, innovative tribal business owners have been on the forefront of the “onshoring” movement to utilize the lower cost of labor and land in rural communities to keep direct mail and similar businesses based in the United States. In addition to securing federal contracts, reservation-based businesses have garnered interest from major companies looking for alternatives to outsourcing.⁸

Indian Country's Place in Rural America

States with high Native population are overwhelmingly rural. As shown in table 2, according to 2010 Census data the ten states with the lowest population density are all states with a high Native population (ranging from 1.8 percent to 19.5 percent of the respective state's population).

Native communities also reflect the political power – at times untapped – of America's rural communities. Analysis of America's top 100 metropolitan areas reveals five states that lack a large metro area (Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming). In fact, Anchorage, Alaska, is the top metro among those five states, at 127th, a city with 10.4 percent of residents identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native.⁹ These five states still represent 10 percent of the United States Senate and have exerted political influence in recent elections and legislative sessions. In 2004, the defeat of then-Majority Leader Tom Daschle was a key blow to Democrats in the Senate and Senator Daschle's work on behalf of rural communities was significant. In 2010, the victory of Senator Lisa Murkowski, the second ever successful write-in campaign for the Senate, maintained an important rural voice in the Republican caucus. Senator Murkowski has herself acknowledged that her victory was in large part thanks to the support of residents of Alaska's remote and rural Native villages.

While the numerical influence in the House is not as significant, the political influence of the rural vote is still evident. The margin that moved Republicans from the minority to the majority came down to approximately 40 conservative rural districts (many of them with high Native population) that elected a Republican challenger to replace their Democratic incumbent.¹⁰

TABLE 1 – NATIONAL POPULATION, NATIVE POPULATION, AND POPULATION DISTRIBUTION ¹¹

Total U.S. population	Total AI/AN population	AI/AN proportion of total population	# of federally recognized tribes	People per square mile
308,745,538	5,220,579	1.7%	565	87.4

TABLE 2 – TOP 20 STATES BY AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE PROPORTION OF THE POPULATION

State	Total pop.	Total AI/AN pop.	AI/AN proportion of the total pop.	# of federally recognized tribes	People per square mile	Population density rank compared to other states
1. Alaska	710,231	138,312	19.5%	227 ¹²	1.2	50
2. Oklahoma	3,751,351	482,760	12.9%	38	54.7	35
3. New Mexico	2,059,179	219,512	10.7%	22	17	45
4. South Dakota	814,180	82,073	10.1%	9	10.7	46
5. Montana	989,415	78,601	7.9%	7	6.8	48
6. North Dakota	672,591	42,996	6.4%	4	9.7	47
7. Arizona	6,392,017	353,386	5.5%	22	56.3	33
8. Wyoming	563,626	18,596	3.3%	2	5.8	49
9. Washington	6,724,540	198,998	3.0%	29	101.2	25
10. Oregon	3,831,074	109,223	2.9%	9	39.9	39
11. Hawaii	1,360,301	33,470	2.5%	0 ¹³	211.8	13
12. Idaho	1,567,582	36,385	2.3%	4	19	44
13. Colorado	5,029,196	107,832	2.1%	2	48.5	37
14. Kansas	2,853,118	59,130	2.1%	4	34.9	40
15. Nevada	2,700,551	55,945	2.1%	21	24.6	42
16. California	37,253,956	723,225	1.9%	104	239.1	11
17. North Carolina	9,535,483	184,082	1.9%	1	196.1	15
18. Minnesota	5,303,925	101,900	1.9%	12	66.6	31
19. Utah	2,763,885	50,064	1.8%	6	33.6	41
20. Nebraska	1,826,341	29,816	1.6%	4	23.8	43

This sizable land base and unique governmental relationship makes Indian Country a key incubator for policy innovation.

Reflecting Rural America's Complexities, Diversity, Challenges, and Opportunities

Many have noted the complex definitions of rural – primarily because rural is generally described as “not urban.” Rural America is home to at least 60 million Americans and by some estimations, as many as 90 million.¹⁴

Like the rest of rural America, tribal nations consist of a large land base relative to population size and represent significant political influence. As shown in table 1, Native people represent 1.7 percent of America's population but Indian lands consist over 5 percent of the nation's land base, an area comprising more than 100 million acres. Taken together, this area would make Indian Country America's fourth largest state behind only Alaska, Texas, and California. This sizable land base and unique governmental relationship makes Indian Country a key incubator for policy innovation. Especially given Indian lands comprise 10 percent of the nation's natural resources and significant energy potential – enough to meet 20 percent of the nation's energy needs with wind power and 4.5 times the energy needs with solar power.¹⁵

Native communities also share the socioeconomic disadvantage evident in many rural communities, especially rural communities of color. Data reflecting nonmetro county poverty rates aligns closely with four geographies with concentrated communities of color: Indian lands¹⁶, the borderlands, Appalachia, and the Delta. This is especially true of the 361 nonmetro counties that reflect “persistent poverty” – communities that have exhibited a poverty rate above 20 percent in each decennial Census since 1960.¹⁷ Of the ten counties with the lowest per capita income, nine include Indian lands and/or substantive Native population.

Homes in Indian Country reflect the pronounced challenges of persistent poverty. Eleven percent of Native households lack kitchen facilities, 17 percent lack telephone service, and 12 percent lack complete plumbing. These percentages stand in stark contrast to U.S. households: less than one percent of the overall U.S. population lacks any of these facilities. Only half of reservation homes are connected to public sewer lines, and Native homes are almost three times more likely to be overcrowded than the national average.

Access to infrastructure to develop robust economies is also missing with 86 percent of Native communities lacking a single financial institution within their borders and broadband availability and utilization well below the national average.

These substandard economic and quality of life indicators have a social toll as well. Health disparities are prevalent; and suicide rates, a symptom of lack of opportunity, are high, with over 60 percent more incidents than the national average. Alcoholism on reservations and diseases like tuberculosis are both over 500 percent higher among Native Americans.

While Indian reservations are primarily located in rural areas, some communities that are adjacent to or even within the boundaries of major metro

areas face similar socioeconomic challenges and limited access to important services. In the Phoenix metro area, for example, a map of financial institution distribution shows a near perfect outline of the borders of the four reservations surrounding the city. Literally by crossing a highway, Native community members can have more in common with Native people in rural areas than with their urban neighbors.

While this profile demonstrates significant challenges facing Native communities, there are also promising opportunities. Rural investments need not be a zero-sum game.¹⁸ Building broadband in rural areas can increase the availability of onshoring opportunities where land and labor is more affordable. Investing in rural roads and bridges can build the 21st century infrastructure our growing cities need to access low cost and healthy food. Providing access to the power grid can address rural disadvantage and provide opportunities to scale up alternative energy opportunities in reservations and other rural communities.

Tribal Innovation — a Way Forward for Rural America — and the Nation as a Whole

As the home to 565 federally recognized tribal governments – members of the “American family of governments” – Native communities are in a unique position to enact policy innovation. This innovation covers critical policy areas to sustaining America’s prosperity including: energy and climate change, business development, health care innovation, broadband deployment, transportation, education, housing, and much more. This section will address three emerging innovations in Indian Country related to: transportation, investment, and data collection.

Next Steps in Rural-Tribal Partnerships

This paper is the beginning of a conversation between tribal nations, rural communities, and our partners in urban areas. The initial survey of tribal innovations and the contribution Native nations can make to American prosperity demonstrates at least three next steps for the promising partnership between rural and tribal communities.

1. We can advocate together

As demonstrated above, tribal nations and rural communities can make a meaningful contribution to the prosperity of America. Across an array of policy areas discussed in this paper, there are natural opportunities for tribal

Umatilla: A Tribally Driven Transportation System

Lack of access to transportation is a significant challenge in many rural places. The more detailed case study provided in Appendix A outlines the innovative program developed by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR). Their transit system serves their 2,300 members and provides service to a population of over 275,000 and an area covering the 6.4 million acres of land that constituted their traditional territory. The story of CTUIR Public Transit is proof positive that investments in rural development can provide “positive sum” results for tribal nations, other rural communities, and their urban neighbors.

Cheyenne River: Integrated investment strategies¹⁹

Measured by per capita income, Ziebach County is the poorest county in America. It is also home to the Cheyenne River Lakota people whose reservation is approximately the size of Connecticut. The poverty rate in the county is 62 percent and the Bureau of Indian Affairs reported unemployment on the Cheyenne River reservation at 88 percent.²⁰

Amidst these challenging circumstances, the Four Bands Community Fund (Four Bands) – a Native Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) – has led a decade-long, reservation-wide effort to strengthen the local economy and improve the quality of life for their community members through financial education, entrepreneurship development, and lending programs. With a vision driven by Native culture and a holistic approach to develop the entire reservation economy, Four Bands has: (1) made 300 loans totaling over \$2.3 million dollars; (2) provided business training to 302 entrepreneurs; (3) provided business technical assistance to 1,917 individuals; and (4) helped start or expand 100 businesses.

Partnerships are also integral to Four Bands' work. They have worked closely with the tribal government to pass a resolution supporting their efforts to promote reservation-wide financial education. Their partnership with Habitat for Humanity has allowed them to offer their clients energy efficiency renovations to keep much needed resources in the pockets of tribal citizens.

Their most promising partnership has been to serve the youth of the reservation. Cheyenne River youth have won state-wide business plan competitions for



three consecutive years. This coincides with the launch of Making Waves, a program Four Bands designed to introduce concepts of financial literacy and entrepreneurship into the K-12 classrooms of the five reservation schools since 2008.

Four Bands programs serve over 10 percent of tribal members and Census data reveals these efforts are having a tangible effect. Since the 2000 Census, median household income on the Cheyenne River reservation has grown at a rate of 51 percent, almost doubling the statewide growth rate (27 percent) and exceeding the average growth on reservations in the state (40 percent).²¹ Employment has also expanded by 20 percent on Cheyenne River compared to the South Dakota average of 6.8 percent. It is no accident that the encouraging on-reservation growth occurred in a context where seven of the nine reservations are served by a Native CDFI.

The Four Bands story is one of building long-term prosperity for Native people – defending the Lakota culture, values and way of life through development strategies. Their success demonstrates the immense potential of partnerships between tribes, Native CDFIs, and external partners, to bring economic revitalization to some of America's most disadvantaged – and often forgotten – communities.

Indian Country Counts: Data Quality that Shapes the Future

As part of the 2010 Census campaign, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), along with an array of national, regional, and local partners, launched the “Indian Country Counts” initiative to ensure American Indian and Alaska Native communities are counted in national data sets. Since the conclusion of the 2010 Census, Indian Country Counts has continued to work to analyze the accuracy of national data sets and advocate for improved data collection.

The concepts behind Indian Country Counts are not new. In the late 1980s, the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation worked with state governments and the Census Bureau to replicate the Current Population Survey to collect data related to unemployment on the reservation. The problem identified in the 1990 report describing the effort noted that:

In the context of urban priorities for economic and labor market information, sampling theory, cost effectiveness, and political expedience, a federal statistical system has emerged which systematically ignores the relevance of locality as a crucial determinant of labor market outcomes.²²

Twenty years later, this reality is even more relevant and concerning.

In 2005, the Census Bureau began the process of replacing their collection of detailed socioeconomic data through the decennial Census “long-form” with a rolling sample from the American Community Survey (ACS). This decision poses significant challenges to data quality for small communities that will only have access to 5-year estimates while larger urban communities will have annual data. In late 2010, NCAI con-



vened Native Census Information Centers, members of the Rural Assembly, and representatives from other hard-to-count communities to discuss the accuracy of the American Community Survey (ACS). Reports commissioned by NCAI on the 3-year and 5-year ACS estimates have revealed troubling trends that may indicate significant underestimations, particularly of Native people living on reservations, and changes in socioeconomic indicators that do not appear to accurately reflect conditions on the ground.

Despite these challenges to data accuracy, the role of tribal governments – especially in a context where the federal government is committed to meaningful consultation – offers a way forward for Native communities and other rural communities. Indian Country consists a defined geography with approximately 5 million people who are among the nation’s hardest to count. Some tribal governments have already enacted plans to conduct their own censuses (building on the experience of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe in 1990) and the Administration’s attention to the importance of quality data to guide policy offers promising signs. A partnership between Indian Country and the Census Bureau to explore new ways to improve the data outcomes in small rural areas is an investment in improving the quality of the count for 5 million people that could show the way forward for the other 60 million residents of America’s rural communities.

and rural advocates to partner to achieve better outcomes for our communities. Our untapped political influence can often be traced back to the fact that we fail to see our shared interests and advocate with and for one another's policy priorities.

2. Rural partners can work to ensure tribes are included in federal policy

Acknowledging the potential impact of investments in Indian Country should serve as an incentive for rural partners to work to ensure tribes are included in policy development, advocacy, and implementation. This must happen at the federal level and it can also include state policy where appropriate. The simple inclusion of "and Indian tribes" in federal legislation has led to an array of innovative programs across a range of sectors. The exclusion of those words has often led to inequitable funding distribution and untapped potential in areas like energy development.

3. Rural partners must recognize the uniqueness of Indian Country

Many rural partners encounter challenges engaging tribal nations in policy development and advocacy. These challenges can often be overcome by understanding the uniqueness of tribal nations and asking the right questions. The unique context in Indian Country can also mean the partner of a non-profit might be a government department. As demonstrated in the Cheyenne River snapshot above, many Native nonprofits also perform multiple roles so asking the right questions will help determine the best partners to work with.

NCAI and our partners welcome the ongoing conversation with our rural partners. We look forward to working together for the sustainable prosperity of our nation. We will work to maintain America's economic leadership, build a diverse middle class, and achieve energy independence, but we must do it together.

APPENDIX A – CTUIR PUBLIC TRANSIT²³

Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation

In most rural areas of America, if you do not have a car it is difficult to get around. Without transportation, people depend on friends or family for rides. It can be tough to plan medical appointments, maintain work schedules, shop for necessities, or sign up for classes. The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) found this lack of mobility in and around their reservation troubling. In response, they decided to sponsor a bus and taxi-voucher service for travel in the area. Now recognized by both state and federal transit officials as one of the most efficient and capable public transit systems in the Pacific Northwest region, CTUIR Public Transit has opened up new opportunities for tribal citizens and strengthened relations with neighbors.

New Jobs but No Way to Get There

Located on the outskirts of Pendleton, Oregon, the Umatilla Indian Reservation has been home to the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla people since the three tribes ceded much of their homeland (what is now northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington) to the federal government in the Treaty of 1855. Life for the citizens of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation has changed rapidly over the last several decades. Until recently, the community struggled with high unemployment, limited economic opportunities, and widespread poverty. In the mid-1990s, the Confederated Tribes opened a small casino, followed by several businesses including a hotel, RV park, golf course, cultural institute, and a technology company. These tribal enterprises revitalized the local economy and made the Confederated Tribes one of the largest employers in Eastern Oregon.

It quickly became noticeable that potential tribal employees were finding it difficult to get themselves to work. Longstanding poverty meant that many residents did not own cars, and a large number did not even have driver's licenses. Since the reservation's limited housing could not keep up with demand, almost half of the area's tribal population lived in nearby Pendleton. The result was that citizens put themselves in danger by hitching rides or walking the five miles of highway shoulder between the city and the reservation. One tribal official notes that, "in some cases, it was harder for tribal members to get to the job site than to get a job or even housing." In short, a lack of transportation options prevented tribal citizens from taking advantage of local employment opportunities and made it difficult for reservation businesses to attract employees and customers.

All Aboard the Walla Walla Whistler

In 2001, the Confederated Tribes launched a public transit system for the reservation and surrounding area. Commuter buses run several times a day, providing service to ten neighboring towns and cities in five counties in two states. The bus system is open to anyone in the service area, whether or not they are tribal members. What distinguishes CTUIR, in part, is its stated objective of coordinating with other regional transit systems, thus more effectively expanding access and opportunities for area residents – tribal and non-tribal. A taxi voucher system—available only to CTUIR citizens and non-tribal members who work for or are doing business with the Confederated Tribes—serves those who cannot use the buses, such as employees working swing and evening shifts, or the elderly who require door-to-door service. Individuals take a local private taxi to get to their destination, but only pay 20% to 40% of the cost out of pocket.

The CTUIR Public Transit system promises its riders “predictable, consistent, and reliable services.” The system is primarily funded using federal tribal transit funds, with contributions from the Confederated Tribes’ own tribal administration budget, and from state grants for county transit authorities. The latter is a designation the Tribes fought hard to win as a sovereign nation. The buses are owned by CTUIR Public Transit and tribally managed through contracts with three area transit providers. All bus routes are free, with the exception of one bus that makes a sixty mile trip to the city of LaGrande, Oregon for two dollars. The bus routes have meaningful names that are associated with the Confederated Tribes, such as the Cayuse Commuter and the Walla Walla Whistler.

The transit system is a runaway success. By 2009, area residents used the system for approximately 33,000 bus rides and over 12,000 taxi rides per year. In 2010, combined ridership climbed to an impressive 60,000. The daily bus routes link the reservation to three airports, Amtrak rail, major regional businesses and shops, eight hospitals, four universities, and three community colleges. The buses are interconnected with other non-tribal regional systems, so that riders can transfer at regional hubs to travel anywhere in the country. Riders use CTUIR buses and taxis for a multitude of reasons such as after school activities, grocery shopping, and getting to work. The primary reason people use the tribe’s transit system, however, is to save money on fuel.

Offering Transit Service in Traditional Territory

By managing their own transit system, the Confederated Tribes can quickly respond to the needs of their citizens. For example, during the school year, buses run from the middle school and high school to the reservation so that children can participate in extracurricular activities. Taxi services take elders door-to-door to important community events or medical appointments that they might otherwise miss. Crucially, the transit system has made it more

attractive and possible for tribal citizens to return to live on tribal lands, since they have easy access to shops and services in nearby municipalities. Transit connections are also an important tool for attracting non-tribal businesses to the reservation, since they know employees from all over the region can easily and reliably access the job site.

What is most remarkable about the CTUIR transit system, however, is that it reaches well beyond the boundaries of the reservation. While transit systems usually stop at municipal boundaries, CTUIR buses operate throughout the tribes' pre-reservation territory in the Columbia River basin. With their sovereign government status, the Confederated Tribes have negotiated agreements with neighboring local and regional governments to provide transit services across jurisdictions. The end result is that, although the Confederated Tribes have a total enrollment of just over 2,800 tribal members, the public transit system serves the entire region and its population of over 275,000. In fact, the Tribes' transit service area now coincides with the boundaries of the 6.4 million acres of land that were ceded to the United States in the Treaty of 1855.

By serving all area residents, Indian and non-Indian, the transit system has increased the visibility of the Tribes and also created an enormous amount of goodwill with neighboring jurisdictions. The Confederated Tribes manage and fund a service to the region that did not exist before, using tribal resources to benefit both their own citizens and their neighbors. Consequently, many non-tribal members in the area have found work with tribal enterprises and other businesses located on the reservation. In fact, CTUIR Public Transit figures show that 40% of the taxi vouchers are used by employees who work on the reservation.

CTUIR provides public transportation services to places and along routes used by the tribes for thousands of years in their homeland territory. Because of sovereignty and the practice of self-governance the tribes are now transcending political barriers and jurisdictional boundaries to provide essential services and economic development enhancements where state and local governments are not empowered with either a regional sense of responsibility, vision, or authority.

Bringing the Lessons Home

Highly successful public transit systems in America's rural areas are rare. This lack of transportation can make it difficult for people to make meaningful contributions to their own lives, as well as to their families and their communities. Working in close cooperation with other governments, the Confederated Tribes started a top-quality bus and taxi voucher service to make it easier and cheaper for area residents to access jobs and services. By seamlessly connecting the reservation to nearby communities, CTUIR Public Transit has improved the quality of life for tribal and non-tribal citi-

zens, boosted the area's economy, and strengthened ties with neighbors. The benefits are felt by everyone who lives on the Confederated Tribes' ancestral lands.

Lesson 1: Strategically conceived, public transportation can help a tribal nation meet its social, health, and economic goals.

Lesson 2: A transit system that crosses multiple jurisdictions can strengthen tribal sovereignty.

Lesson 3: Tribal programs that serve both on- and off-reservation communities can change perceptions through user education and experience.

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