

A Factsheet on Using DNA Tests to Uncover Native American Ancestry

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Can a DNA test reveal previously unknown Native American ancestry?

Consumer-driven DNA testing has recently arisen with the promise of uncovering a person's "ethnic origins", and through at-home tests, many people claim to have discovered their "Native American ancestry".

Can these tests be believed, and can they truly recognize someone as Native American? Let us find out.

How do these DNA tests work?

Genetic scientists (geneticists) have discovered that certain genetic markers appear more frequently in groups of people from particular regions. By studying DNA samples from around the world, geneticists have begun attributing specific genetic markers to different populations.

To estimate a person's "ethnic makeup", genetic markers from their DNA sequence are compared with the markers associated with different populations. Geneticists assume, for example, that if someone has enough "Native American markers", they would therefore have Native American ancestors. As we will see, however, this is not necessarily true.

How are genetic markers identified?

To identify which genetic markers appear more frequently within different populations, geneticists collect DNA samples from people who are thought to have a long family history within that population. These geneticists believe that, with enough samples, they will uncover the genetic information of some mythical "original" population.

Is DNA ancestry research objective?

Contrary to popular claims about DNA research, the findings of geneticists are not unbiased, objective facts. Instead, the science that drives DNA testing is heavily influenced by a long history of scientific racism that exploited racialized peoples in an attempt to prove the myths of white supremacy.

Native American peoples have long been subject to exploitative scientific study, and the present-day search for "Native American DNA" is a continuation of this legacy.

What are some problems with DNA sampling?

Because geneticists tend to view populations through a colonial lens, DNA population sampling often fails to consider these key facts:

1. The belief that there are "different races" is false.
2. Continents, countries, and regions do not have "pure", original populations.

3. Native Americans are not a monolithic group but are instead made up of thousands of different tribes and peoples.
4. There is incredible diversity within any country, region, or continent.
5. Populations migrate over time, and individual people move around throughout their lives.
6. Children can be born to parents of different tribes, nationalities, or groups.
7. The categories used to group populations together are based on problematic colonial understandings of the world.

Instead of recognizing these facts, many genetic scientists assume that some inherent difference exists between populations of people and attempt to find such differences through DNA testing. These scientists are looking for evidence to support their inaccurate understanding of the world instead of recognizing that humans can't be neatly categorized into distinct "races".

Why aren't these tests accurate?

The genetic markers that scientists ascribe to certain populations are not universally present within those populations, nor are they only found within them. For example, many Native American people do not have "Native American markers" in their DNA while plenty of people without Native American ancestry do.

As further evidence of testing inaccuracy, test results often vary from company to company, and they can even vary between labs within a single company.

Instead of fulfilling the claim to reveal an accurate representation of a person's ancestral makeup, these DNA tests instead offer a faulty approximation of a person's similarity to groups DNA samples of that reflect an inaccurate and problematic view of the world.

What role does DNA tests play in granting Native American citizenship?

Even if a DNA test suggested a person has Native American ancestry, that test alone is not enough to make them a member of a Native American tribe. Tribal citizenship criteria is typically based on lineage, so at a minimum, that person would need to prove that they directly descend from a registered citizen of a tribe to gain their own citizenship.

In some cases, DNA parentage tests are used to prove the biological relationship between a person and their Native American parent, but this is a far different than the results of an at-home ancestry test.

References

TallBear, Kim. *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.