

Stories of Yukon food security

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Visual depiction of “A Story of Yukon Food Security” which arose from discussions at the Yukon Food Security Roundtable, May 19th, 2016. N.B.: In June 2016 minimum wage was \$11.07/hour in Yukon and the living wage for Whitehorse was calculated at \$19.12.

Food insecurity in Canada’s North is an increasingly urgent issue with far reaching effects. In order to address it, the North needs immediate and long-term collaborative efforts, led by Northerners at both the community (“grassroots”) and policy (“grass-tips”) levels, towards realistic, relevant and sustainable solutions.

In the Yukon, like in other Northern territories and regions, there are distinct social, economic, environmental and political forces at play that lead to the Yukon having some of the highest rates of food insecurity in the country. The most recent data from the Canadian Community Health Survey in 2012 showed that 17.1% of Yukoners and almost 20% of Yukon children were living in food insecure households. In a territory with a population of only 37,500, that is almost 6,500 people who aren’t getting enough acceptable healthy food to meet their daily needs. In a country so geographically, ecologically,

culturally and resource rich, food insecurity at any rate should be considered a national failure.

For Northern Indigenous Peoples, food security is more than just having a full stomach; food is linked to identity, culture and way of life. Food is central to the physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental health of Indigenous Peoples. It is an issue tied closely with survival and rights of self-determination. Yukon First Nations’ Elders have been predicting hard times ahead for some time and are encouraging their communities to plan and be prepared for long-term changes related to climate change and food insecurity. It is clear that in order to achieve long-term food security and environmental sustainability, communities need their own realistic plans that they can build from as well as the financial support to do so. Supporting food security planning led by Indigenous and Northern communities is an important part of

informing a more inclusive, food-secure Canada.

At the grassroots: Food, culture and community

The Arctic Institute of Community-Based Research (AICBR) has had the honour of working with two Yukon communities over the last three years on the development of community-based strategies for food security and climate change adaptation. Kluane First Nation's *Nourishing Our Future* project and Selkirk First Nation's *Keeping Our Traditions*

project are two examples of how Yukon First Nations are using their self-determination to preserve and pass on traditional hunting, gathering and fishing knowledge and practices, sustain and protect traditional food species and adapt to shifting landscapes, cultures and rising prevalence of food insecurity. AICBR acts as a facilitator and partner in the process of community-based research, youth engagement, and knowledge translation, and has been given permission to share these community stories.

Kluane First Nation, Burwash Landing, Yukon

Kluane First Nation (KFN)'s *Nourishing Our Future* project was a three-year (2013-2016) project with AICBR and others, developed as a direct response to the rising concerns of KFN citizens and residents of the area about changes on the land and to traditional animal species in and around Kluane Lake communities of Burwash Landing and Destruction Bay, in the western region of Yukon. These changes have been well documented both by community members and scientists alike: melting glaciers, thawing of lake ice in winter, drying creeks, and declining moose, caribou, and some fish populations.

As a result of these environmental changes and the rising prices of market foods, KFN set out to develop its own community food security strategy during the first phase of the project. This process sought to maintain traditional food sources, acknowledge and honour culture, traditional knowledge and practices, enhance the community's capacity to grow food, and contribute to a more food secure future. Themes that arose as key action items in the food security strategy included: (1) climate change, (2) sharing, (3) community hunts and fishing, (4) ancient methods of conservation, (5) outfitting concessions in KFN territory, (6) youth empowerment and mentorship, (7) healthy eating, (8,9) a community garden and greenhouse, (10) agriculture

projects, (11) community store and storage, and (12) community celebrations and get-togethers.

The second phase (2015-2016) of the project arose from the recommendations in the food security strategy pertaining to climate change, the conservation of homelands and the need for ongoing traditional food species monitoring. Together with

"This is a hard land. It always has been. There are no guarantees for the future, no promises. The future may be a difficult path but we know, that if we care for each other and for this land, the land will care for us." – *Diyet van Lieshout, KFN citizen and Narrator of film "Remembering Our Past Nourishing Our Future"*

KFN and the University of Waterloo we examined fish health (nutrient and contamination levels) of Kluane Lake trout and whitefish and explored traditional knowledge and perceptions of changes in fish and fisheries practices. Results from nutrient and contaminant analysis performed by a team of KFN youth and University of Waterloo researchers showed that Kluane Lake trout and whitefish are healthy and safe to eat. This is a good news story for the community, amidst a wave of fears of contamination in lakes across the North.

The *Nourishing Our Future* food security project not only brought the community together to share and plan collectively for a more food secure future, but it functioned as a way to preserve culture, collect traditional knowledge around fisheries, build capacity of local youth in scientific, Indigenous and community-based research methodologies, connect Elders and youth, and promote the consumption of locally harvested traditional foods. It was a way to harness strengths, build upon existing knowledge and resources, celebrate connections to food and the land, and promote stewardship of traditional food species in Kluane First Nation traditional territory.

Selkirk First Nation, Pelly Crossing, Yukon

The community of Pelly Crossing is located on traditional Selkirk First Nation (SFN) territory in central Yukon. Shifting landscapes and animal behaviours have raised concerns in the community over the safety and integrity of traditional lifestyles. Bears roaming closer to town in search of food, riverbank erosion and declining salmon populations in Pelly and Yukon Rivers have threatened the traditional ways in which people have traveled upon and used the land for subsistence. The *Keeping Our Traditions* project (2015-2016) was a SFN project in collaboration with AICBR, initiated to explore ways of maintaining Tutchone knowledge, practices and



Photo taken by a Kluane First Nation youth

Fish sampling in Kluane Lake, 2015.

culture while strategically adapting to the threat of climate change. A key focus of the project was to look at ways to encourage youth to spend more time on the land as a pathway to mental health and wellness.

The project involved a photo and film project with youth, winter fish camp activities, and multiple focus groups and interviews with community members. The project focused on compiling strategies around the research question “What do we do at the fish camp when there are no fish?” and resulted in a community-developed adaptation plan merging climate change, cultural survival and youth mental health. The Elders also wanted to produce a fish camp guidebook for passing on traditional and local knowledge and to encourage youth to go out on the land. Emerging from the research were six core themes that had a specific focus on youth and revitalizing connections to the land. The six themes were (1) keeping our traditions, (2) connect youth to the land, (3) raise our voice, (4) thinking outside the box, (5) decision making, and (6) food security.

Some of the key actions highlighted under each theme include: supporting ongoing on-the-land activities and fish camps as a way to celebrate culture, values and traditional knowledge, skills and laws; educate youth and promote mental health through culture camps, winter/summer fish camps, and on-the-land summer employment; speaking up on local, regional, national and international stages about the

“Traditions have to keep going. It is our identity and who we are.”

— SFN citizen and research participant

impacts of climate change; encouraging inter-governmental collaboration for the management of salmon populations; making decisions based on an understanding of Indigenous rights, research and traditional knowledge; and building a food security strategy that incorporates SFN knowledge of the land and community strengths.

These grassroots examples depict the power that can arise when communities have a voice in finding their own solutions to food security. Community-based food security and climate change adaptation strategies can be fundamental in preserving connections between food, land and health from a holistic perspective, while strategically planning for future community wellbeing. As we enter into this time of reconciliation, supporting Indigenous voices

and collective community action is key to mitigating the rising rates of food insecurity in this country. Reducing food insecurity rates in Canada is not only a moral imperative, but it is also of sound economic and social value. Reduced health care costs and social assistance usage, and increased ability for those who are food secure to hold down stable employ-

“We work together as a family here [at the fish camp]. Working together as a family is really important to build trust amongst each other... It builds strong bonds between the family members and the kids can play freely and they’re really happy ... everybody is happy in the camp. And happiness helps your mentality. You’re not sad all the time and you’re together and supporting each other.”
— Selkirk project participant speaking about being out at the fish camp

ment when they don’t have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, are only some of the benefits resulting from investment in food security. At the community-level, the impacts are even farther reaching: Food cultivates connection; it spurs creativity and innovation and builds community.

At the grass-tips: The North providing food for the North

At the grass-tips or policy level, May 2016 was a busy time for food security planning in the territory: The Yukon Government released their *Local Food Strategy for Yukon*, which entailed a number of recommendations for strengthening the local growing economy, improving food access and food safety, building community infrastructure for local, cold climate production, processing and storage, implementing food waste reduction programs, and promoting the consumption of Yukon-grown food. In addition, AICBR hosted the Yukon Food Security Roundtable and related events (An Evening On Food Security and a Food Security Open House), which brought together multiple sectors working in the areas of food, education, health, environment, and economic development, to cultivate a common understanding of the Yukon food system and to discuss strengths, challenges and opportunities for advancing food security in the territory.

The roundtable welcomed representatives from

VISION FOR A FOOD SECURE YUKON:

...ensuring the North can provide food for the North

“We believe in a food secure, food producing and food sharing Yukon where the land and the waters are harvested and protected. Through the wise use of resources, every person has dignified, affordable access to sufficient food to sustain a healthy, happy, and productive life. Yukon leaders and citizens work collaboratively to ensure food is generated by a robust network of local gardeners, farmers, hobby growers, hunters and fishers, businesses and advanced systems that preserve and distribute food.”

Access for all

1. Self-sufficiency
2. Support for local food producers
3. Addressing planning and policy development
4. Encouraging community gardens and greenhouses
5. Reducing waste
6. Emphasizing healthy food
7. Education and training
8. Promoting quality food preparation, preservation and storage
9. Collaborating to share food and time
10. Harvesting the land
11. Affordability
12. Building leadership capacity
13. Engaging family
14. Consideration of promising practices

13 First Nations governments (in Yukon and Northern British Columbia) as well as municipal, territorial and federal governments, non-government organizations, academics, the private sector, food producers, and citizens. There was a wide range of speakers from local governments (First Nations, municipal and territorial) as well as representatives from municipal governments in Ontario and state departments from Alaska, scholars and experts in the field of food security, local growers, and territorial and federal non-profits working in hunger and poverty reduction, agriculture and food security. Key takeaways from the presentations were the present opportunity for national food policy development; food security as both a human right and a solution to countering climate change; the importance of developing Indigenous food systems and local, Northern solutions to food insecurity; and promoting “actionism” (action + activism, which means not waiting for others to make change).

Over the two days of the roundtable and related events arose many inspiring stories of resilience, examples of promising practices, and a collectively developed vision statement for Yukon food security, including 15 ranked values and priorities (below), and 50 recommended actions for achieving them (found here).

The development of a “shared food security agenda” in the Yukon will contribute to moving towards more coordinated actions and outcomes now and in the future. The Yukon Food Security Roundtable was the first of its kind in Yukon, where multiple sectors were able to gather and discuss this important issue that affects us all. It is clear that Yukoners want to be self-sufficient and advance their food sovereignty. Food sovereignty goes deeper into the issue of food and what it means to a people. It speaks to the fact that communities want to look after each other, defining their own vision of food

security as well as to have more agency within the food system. As Northerners, we do not want to rely on the South to provide us our basic human right to food. Being at the forefront of climate change in the North, with challenging and changing economic, political and environmental times ahead, we need to work together to ensure this beautiful, plentiful land is here for generations to come.

On a broader scale, the outcomes from the roundtable and related events feed into larger, ongoing pan-Northern discussions that AICBR and partners are leading in order to develop a more comprehensive Northern picture of food security. This important networking and dialogue can contribute to the emerging national food policy that the federal Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-foods Canada has been mandated to create. Developing a Northern picture of food security, informed by Northern values and priorities, as part of the national conversation is imperative for framing the issue. Equally important however is the need to back up words with sufficient resources to sustain community action and implementation on the ground, so that policy can lead to more, higher quality, culturally appropriate food on people’s plates.

Connecting the grassroots to the grass-tips from the middle-out

To highlight the harsh realities of food insecurity across the North is an important part to raising awareness of the issue, but sharing stories of strength is also a significant motivator for sustained action. In order to move the bar on food insecurity in the North, we need to know where we are now, where we need to go, harness community and organizational strengths at many levels, and mobilize resources for sustained action. This means listening first to communities and to the people with lived experiences of food insecurity.



Councillor Sean Smith from Kwanlin Dün First Nation leading a powerful and unifying closing ceremony with some delegates at the Yukon Food Security Roundtable.

riety and moving beyond just “words” and “assumed trickle down action.” Policy and strategies need to be connected to the realities on the ground and include

...no one agency, government, or individual is going to solve the issue of food insecurity.

concrete resources and plans for their implementation. In other words, we must connect the grassroots to the grass-tips and work from the middle out.

Like a blade of grass, you cannot cut off the root from the tip and have it function the same way; the roots bring up nutrients from the soil while the tip of the blade soaks up the sun. This beautiful micro ecosystem is what keeps the field alive. Similarly, in order to achieve a healthy society we must connect community with policy makers, working on multiple levels and across multiple sectors, during multiple points in time. Each of us brings an important piece to the puzzle; no one agency, government or individual is going to solve the issue of food insecurity. There not only one solution; a range of holistic approaches is needed, and if we use our combined strengths, in a coordinated and cohesive way, both “the field” and society can thrive. ●

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Links:

Kluane First Nation's *Nourishing Our Future* project final reports and film can be found at: <http://www.aicbr.ca/kfn-project>. Selkirk First Nation's *Keeping Our Traditions* project final report, fish camp guidebook and youth produced film can be found at: <http://www.aicbr.ca/Selkirk-project>. Yukon Food Security Roundtable final report, summaries of outcomes can be found at www.aicbr.ca/outcomes.

About the Arctic Institute of Community-Based Research:

The Arctic Institute of Community-Based Research (AICBR) is an independent, non-profit research organization based in Whitehorse, Yukon working in the areas of food security, climate change adaptation, chronic disease prevention, and youth engagement and mental health. AICBR works to bridge the gap between the grassroots and decision makers in order to facilitate action on complex community health issues of relevance to our partners. Our approach prioritizes the principles of community-based research, youth engagement, collective impact, partnership development, community capacity building, knowledge sharing, intersectoral collaboration and evaluation.