

Food (in)security and food sovereignty in the North

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Food insecurity is a chronic problem in the North American North, one that has numerous consequences for local families and communities. Despite decades of work on the problem by researchers, policymakers, and communities, limited progress has been made toward addressing its root causes. Issues such as climate change and high and volatile food and fuel prices currently capture much attention; while important, these issues only exacerbate a more fundamental problem: that Indigenous people in the North will remain fundamentally food insecure until we find the collective will to dismantle persistent inequities of power and heal the deep wounds of colonialism that lock them out of solving this problem on their own terms. To do this, we need to expand the discussion from food security to food sovereignty.

In 2015, Craig Gerlach and I performed a systematic review of research on food security in the North since the turn of the 21st century (Loring & Gerlach, 2015). We identified four areas of focus in this work: How best to define food security, who has it and who doesn't, why, and how to improve it. Easily the most researched are the second and third questions: How many people are food insecure, and why. There is much data available on the incidence of food insecurity in Alaska and Canada's Northern communities, albeit based primarily on outsiders' definitions of food security, as well as numerous examinations of the causes and consequences of these higher-than-average rates.

What does this work tell us about why people are food insecure? For one, we know that Northern food systems are overconnected to global systems in multiple ways. They are connected to the global food system through foods in the store, which today represent a significant component of Northern diets but bring with them vulnerability to the vagaries of global markets. They are also connected through the fuel and supplies that hunters and fishers need to gather country foods. Finally, they are connected through the impacts that global climatic change and globally-driven development activities have on the local terrestrial and marine ecosystems where hunting and gathering takes place. Importantly,

these connections are primarily one-way, in that local people have comparatively little ability to push back against or alter the systems that have increasing influence on their lives.

We also know that management and governance have a hand in food insecurity. Climate change no doubt presents important challenges, but people in the North have a long history of adapting to environmental change. Indeed, change, not stability, has long been the norm in the North, and diversity and flexibility are the tools with which Northern people once thrived in this changing landscape. Today, however, people's ability to be flexible in how they respond to new conditions is constrained by land tenure, natural resource management regimes, and state-based leasing of rights for oil and mineral development that collectively limit where, when, and how people can hunt or fish. People in the North need sufficient opportunities to learn the new ways that these ecosystems are behaving; they also need to be able to adjust and innovate as the land changes, as opposed to waiting for bureaucratic and policy changes that happen much more slowly.

Most importantly, and related to this last issue, we know that history matters. Social and ecological legacies of colonialism, resource development, and land claims settlement all precondition how Northern communities experience food insecurity as well as how they respond to challenges such as climate change. James Ford, Marie-Pierre Lardeau, and Will Vanderbilt (2012), for example, argue that food insecurity in the North "must be understood in the context of socioeconomic transformations that have affected Inuit society of the last half century." Similarly, David Fazzino and I (2009), writing on the experience of urban Alaska Natives coping with the food and fuel crisis of 2008, argue that our understandings of the problem need to highlight "the geographic and temporal continuity of failed food systems," rather than focusing only on the most recent or highest profile crises. "For those ... who regularly find themselves facing decisions between purchasing food or heating fuel," we wrote, "how can this be anything but catastrophic?"

A focus on the political ecology of food insecurity, in other words, is necessary for truly understanding both its causes and possible solutions. This is not a new observation; the need for legal protections for Indigenous sovereignty and traditional food practices was a central message of the pioneering work of Justice Thomas Berger (see his two reports, *Northern Frontier*, *Northern Homeland*, published in 1977, and *Village Journey*, published in 1985). His message has been echoed by numerous scholars, including Thomas Thornton, Gerard Duhaime, David Case, and James Ford. In Craig's and my 2015 review, we argue that while Indigenous food systems in the North American North do now enjoy numerous protections, some statutory and some situated in case law, these protections are piecemeal and incomplete. Northern people are still marginalized from decisions about renewable and non-renewable resource management and development, and they continue to lack influence in determining how an "opening" Arctic will reshape global markets and geopolitics.

So, while the front-line impacts of a rapidly changing arctic climate pose severe challenges to Northerners, eroding community infrastructure, interfering with country food harvests, and making land and seascapes more unpredictable and more dangerous, the real challenge for the sustainability of Northern communities and Indigenous lifeways is in continuing to allow social and political inequities and exclusions to go unaddressed. As Terry Audla, former president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and Duane Smith, former president of Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada, recently wrote,

It is at best naïve – and at worst, highly paternalistic – to discount the efforts and the capacity of Inuit residents of the Arctic to envision and develop solutions to meet the intensifying pressures faced in their homelands. ... [a] continuing challenge for Inuit is raising awareness of the obligations of non-Inuit to value and respect Inuit leadership, governance, decision making, institutions, knowledge systems, and vision for the Arctic (2014, p. 120).

Recognizing people's right to pursue their own approaches to governance and visions for their food systems and homelands, and breaking down and rebuilding the societal structures that deny them this right, is sovereignty in a nutshell. The food insecurity with which too many Northerners presently cope is an important symptom of how much progress there is to be made in this regard.

Moving the discussion from food security to food sovereignty, I believe, is an essential step forward. Food sovereignty describes local control over

food systems and over any decisions that will influence them. It also refers to an increasingly worldwide movement, born in South and Central America, by people demanding more control in response to oppressive impacts of colonialism and globalization (Schiavoni, 2016). Whereas interventions designed to improve food security alone tend to focus on issues like access to specific foods or nutrition education, interventions for improving food *sovereignty* focus more broadly on improving relations and interactions among people and the state. How is authority distributed? What is the process for attaining consent or consensus on development opportunities? How are conflicts resolved, and are priorities such as food security sacrosanct?

Evidence of the centrality of sovereignty to food security issues in the North is extensive. In Canada, Indigenous people from Baffin Island to Haida Gwaii have had to rely on litigation to have a say in resource development activities that will impact their food systems. In Alaska, the development of large-scale commercial fisheries has resulted in a widespread disenfranchisement of Alaska Natives from multiple fisheries, though actors within national and global markets are happy to perpetuate the narrative that these fisheries are sustainable and responsibly managed (Loring, 2013). Similarly, Alaska Natives do not have the right to sell fish and game harvested for subsistence to neighbors or friends (Jenkins, 2015), despite the widely documented importance of cash to subsistence activities and rural community sustainability.

The global gold rush mentality that has emerged in response to the prospect of an ice-free Arctic drives the point home most clearly. Emerson, in his 2010 book *The Future History of the Arctic*, discusses how governments and businesses around the world are actively posturing for political influence, hoping to profit from new fishing, shipping, tourism, and oil development opportunities. Meanwhile, some Northern communities are quite literally eroding into the sea. Arctic peoples are expected to "adapt," while outside interests capitalize. This is the definition of injustice, and the epitome of the "broken window fallacy" – it is neither valid nor moral to legitimize the new opportunities that dramatic climate change brings over the now-lost futures that Northerners were pursuing before they were forced to be resilient and adapt.

What would it look like if the US and Canada recognized food sovereignty, or even Indigenous sovereignty more generally, in the North? Firstly, it would mean abandoning the convenient fiction of an Arctic that is an unpeopled, global commons ripe for development by whoever gets there first. Like-



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Muttaq drying at Point Lay, Alaska.

wise, as David Fazzino (2012) has suggested, it would also mean abandoning the assumption that agriculture and the global food system holds the solution to food security and food crises wherever they occur; imagine what people could do if the US and Canada freed up expenditures on subsidies to large-scale agriculture and instead applied those resources toward creating space for people in the North and elsewhere to innovate in the context of their food system as they understand it.

If food sovereignty was recognized, these nations, and indeed the world, would look to the North for leadership and direction in a changing Arctic. It would mean not abandoning new development, but working with Northerners to set the vision and agenda. At the local scale, one practical way to move in this direction would be to facilitate more meaningful engagement in, and even leadership of, the environmental assessment (EA) process for all new development (Noble & Hanna, 2015). Explicitly incorporating local people's

priorities, such as food security and health, into EAs, and elevating these local needs over simple profits, would be an enormous first step. In my experience, if you ask an Indigenous person from the North, they are likely to agree that country foods are simply not replaceable, nutritionally, culturally, or spiritually.

Recently, Inuit Circumpolar Council-Alaska (ICC-AK) (2015) released a landmark report on how to define and assess food security from an Inuit perspective. This report identifies numerous key components to food security; some will be familiar to those who know the food security literature, such as the availability of and access to important foods. Others are novel, such as knowledge sources (e.g., Elder-youth relationships) and the spiritual connections that tie the world, people, and ecosystems together. The report's central framework for food security is visualized beautifully with a drawing of a drum. Carolina Behe of ICC-AK, who is one of the many key people behind the report, told me a story of when the authors were working on an early draft of this image. They felt that the graphic was incomplete, until somebody suggested adding a handle to the drum to represent food sovereignty (Behe, Personal Communication, 2016). For the Inuit of Alaska, food sovereignty is a prerequisite to food security. It is the handle by which they pursue their destinies.

Food insecurity in the North is a problem manufactured by a long history of colonial development that marginalized local needs and concerns in favor of outsiders' narratives for progress and civilization. Climate change, and the myriad complex challenges that accompany it, is the latest, though perhaps most pernicious, chapter. Nevertheless, I believe that climate change also offers a watershed moment, around which we might collectively act to create a more just and sustainable world. Recognizing and supporting food sovereignty can be a powerful first step. We still can head off the most extreme climate change impacts by empowering and learning from the Indigenous people in the North and elsewhere. Sovereignty is the goal that they are pursuing, and if the events at Standing Rock are any indication, their movements are both growing and succeeding. For Northerners and allies of the North, the challenge is to help turn the rights that local people are asserting, such as the rights to traditional food and food security, into political and economic realities that are impossible for the rest of the world to ignore. ●

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Grant #1263853), the US Department of Agriculture (NIFA Grant #2013-70003-20921), and NOAA (Grant #NA11-OAR-4310135), that explores how climate change and natural resource development affect environmental security in the North American Arctic and Subarctic. The SFN team includes anthropologists, geophysicists, atmospheric scientists, sociologists, educators, and filmmakers. Our work focuses on issues and communities in three regions of the North: Bristol Bay and Kotzebue Sound in Alaska, and Baffin Island, Nunavut. You can follow Dr. Loring on Twitter @ConserveChange.

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