

Food Access in Ts'msyen Territory:

The Challenge of Indigenous Food Sovereignty on the West Coast of British Columbia

The food security of the Ts'msyen (Tsimshian) people of the Northwest Pacific Coast, in what is now British Columbia, Canada, has been profoundly disrupted and weakened. For at least 5,000 years, a system of food harvesting, trade, distribution and consumption was in place that provided all Ts'msyen citizens with access to a healthy, diverse diet, intimately bound to culture, language and a spiritual connection to the world.

With the onset of European colonization and the creation of Canada, particularly beginning in the late 19th century, wave after wave of colonial policies, programs and practices unraveled this traditional food system. As Ts'msyen communities are economically, geographically and politically marginalized, and as access to traditional food sources is diminished, Ts'msyen peoples are at a much higher risk for food insecurity.

This document, building on the visual map provided for the Global Challenge, chronicles this unraveling and looks at the scattered array of existing attempts, alongside other potential solutions, that may hold clues for how to repair and reconstruct a culturally-aligned, sustainable and equitable food system for the Ts'msyen people.

The Ts'msyen Food System - Precontact

The Ts'msyen people are an Indigenous group consisting of the allied tribes of Lax K'walaams, Metlakatla, Gitxaala, Gitga'at of Hartley Bay, Kitselas, Kitsumkalum, and Kitasoo of Klemtu. For the scope of this Global Challenge, the focus will be on the coastal tribes and communities of Metlakatla, Lax K'walaams, Hartley Bay, and Gitxaala. These four communities together comprised a coherent and self-sustaining system of food harvesting, trade, and distribution.

Historically the Ts'msyen controlled the resources of the land and the ocean in the region. Food access and distribution was overseen and administered by way of the House Group system, which was the most important unit in Ts'msyen society. This system effectively used and managed resources, with each House Group having various rights and privileges. These rights and privileges included territories and resources, trading privileges, names, dances, songs, and crests (Campbell, 2005).

In pre-contact times the Ts'msyen exchanged their goods for items such as jade, obsidian, amber, pigments, copper, furs and shells. Obsidian, amber beads, and shells have all been found in archaeological sites around the city of Prince Rupert (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2001), which indicates that there has been over 5000 years of occupation in the Prince Rupert harbour area.

Colonizing Land, Culture, Trade and Diet



As with other Indigenous peoples throughout the world, the arrival of the first Europeans brought with it massive waves of change to the Ts'msyen way of life. From the 1870s onward resource control was slowly being taken away from the Ts'msyen people in a variety of ways.

European settlers and industry changed the access to many resources within traditional Ts'msyen territories (Campbell, 2005). Mining and clear-cut logging caused environmental damage to the land and its resources. The province of British Columbia joined the four-year-old Dominion of Canada in 1871. The federal and provincial governments brought in laws that controlled when and how resources could be used.



The introduction of the reserve system, which is a tract of land set aside under the Indian Act or treaty agreements for exclusive use of a First Nations band, further restricted access to the resources. Reserve lands were not strictly "owned" by bands but held in trust for bands by the crown (UBC, 2009). The Indian Act and reserve system led to further control of traditional Ts'msyen territory by the governments. Traditional territories were suddenly declared "crown land." First Nations were generally permitted to hunt and gather food on crown land, as long as settlers had not purchased it.



New laws restricted First Nations' use of the resources on the crown land. These new laws included the Forestry Act, the Fisheries Act, the Game Act, and the Migratory Bird Convention (Campbell, 2005). All of these laws enforced regulations on when and where animals and plants could be utilized and harvested. While Ts'msyen people resisted the encroachment on their lands and resources, they continued to access them. So Ts'msyen hunters found themselves being arrested for things like hunting deer out of season (Campbell, 2005). Licenses were required to harvesting seafood, such as crabs, clams, and abalone (Campbell, 2005). In some cases, people were not allowed to collect cedar bark from trees as they had always done, as a license was required to remove anything from crown land. Many traditional methods of harvesting salmon were banned or restricted. Stone traps at tidewater were banned, and weirs and traps on rivers were banned or licensed. the harvesting of salmon was severely limited or controlled. (insert example). New laws, restrictions, and the encroachment of settlement all had the effect of taking control of the resources away from the Ts'msyen.



While First Nations continued to challenge the validity of those restrictions based on their exercise of Aboriginal rights, the regional food system – alongside countless others across Canada – was dismantled in the span of a few decades. The Ts'msyen food system, which had endured for more than 5,000 years, no longer existed as it once had.

In the present day, the path to a restored and healthy, sustainable food system is no longer just turning back the clock. Climate change, globalization, and the forces of modernity mean that consideration of a 'solutions landscape' will entail a combination of the new and old. Before looking at and considering any solutions it is necessary to carefully consider the current state of the Ts'msyen people.



The Contemporary Ts'msyen



Colonization, governmental policies, and industrial activity have all impacted Ts'msyen culture and food gathering practices profoundly, and, in certain ways, irreversibly. The Ts'msyen have been able to access nutritional traditional food sources for millennia historically, but as waves of settlers arrived in Northern British Columbia, the accessibility began to change. Territory-based foods, sometimes referred to as 'country food' in other regions, are known to be a steady and reliable source of food, although there are a host of issues surrounding the inability to consume such foods, such as costs associated with harvesting, time required (away from work) to harvest food, environmental contaminants, climate change, and other threats related to territory and ability to access territory (Gendron, 2016).

Access to Nutritional Food



The major problem, though, is access to nutritional food sources, whether traditional or market grown. In the four coastal Ts'msyen villages of Metlakatla, Lax Kw'alaams, Gitxaala, and Hartley Bay there are presently no grocery stores. The closest town or city for grocery store access is Prince Rupert, British Columbia. Within the communities, food can only be purchased informally out of people's homes. Moreover, it is often highly refined, sugar-laden, low nutrient products such as pop or chips. Packaged, processed foods high in starches and sugars, such as Kraft Dinner, pastas, and rice, are light to transport, easy to store in the sea-air climate, and can feed a large family inexpensively (Anderson, 2007). These are typically shipped in from Prince Rupert on monthly grocery runs. The Gitxaala Nation for example has become increasingly reliant on social assistance and imported foods, in large part due to colonialism, which has become detrimental to the health of the people of Gitxaala (Anderson, 2007). Gitxaala residents' ability to "choose" a healthy snack or meal is heavily curtailed by economic factors and the food from which Gitxaala residents are able to 'choose' a snack or meal are already largely determined to a large degree by the community's economic positions, which is compounded by its geographical marginalization within the Canadian system (Anderson, 2007). Attempting to access traditional food sources is often hindered by economic, social, or political issues.

Food and Transportation Costs



Harvesting requires the use of a boat and maintenance and fuel expenses associated with operating a boat make the cost of harvesting prohibitive to many members of the Gitxaala nation (Gendron, 2016). The situation is similar in the 3 other Ts'msyen communities. While Gitxaala residents still rely heavily on their own traditionally harvested foods, store-bought foods now supply the bulk of the diet in many households (Anderson, 2007). This is most likely the case for Metlakatla, Lax K'walaams, and Hartley Bay residents as well. Economic hardship, combined with the geographic distance of grocery stores from Gitxaala, makes it difficult to supplement the traditional diet with nutritious store-bought foods. Prices for groceries in Prince Rupert are high compared to urban centers such as Vancouver due to transportation costs.



Purchases must then be shipped to Gitxaala at 33 cents per pound by plane and 25 cents per pound on a ferry than runs twice a week (Anderson, 2007).

The absence of grocery stores within the communities coincides with a lack of employment opportunities. The fishing industry, which historically provided seasonal employment for many Ts'msyen people, experienced a collapse in the 1980s – 1990s and has not recovered since. The Gitxaala Nation is no stranger to resource extraction in their territories, there has been long and complicated history of commercial fisheries, which have provided both economic opportunity as well as displacement of individuals harvesting practices (Menzies and Butler, 2008). (Insert sentence what the impact was of these changes in the communities.

Social Assistance and Wage Structures



Many people in the four Ts'msyen villages require social assistance to make a living. Basic social assistance can range from \$610.00 for a single individual to \$1700.00 for a family (Aboriginal Legal Aid in BC, 2014). This amount varies based on the individual's situation (disability, age) and the number of dependents. With the four villages being geographically isolated and having no road access, a ferry or float plane is required to get in and out of the communities. Typically, each ferry ride one-way ranges between \$3.00 - \$50.00 depending on which community you are coming from and how old you are. A float plane ride provided by Inland Air, can cost upwards of \$77.00-\$238.00 one way (Inland Air, 2017). The monthly average food cost in Northwestern British Columbia in 2015 was \$1121.00 for a family of four (Provincial Health Services Authority, 2016) and in 2017 it has been predicted that the cost of food will increase nationwide by 3–5 % (McNutt, 2016).



Nutritionally sufficient and safe food is critical to the health and well-being of the individual. Northwestern British Columbia pays more for groceries than anywhere in BC, and often the cost of a healthy diet has the highest impact on households with the lowest incomes (Provincial Health Services Authority, 2016). With Indigenous communities having lower incomes compounded with decreased access to traditional food sources, Indigenous peoples are at a higher risk for food insecurity. Elaine Power (2008) has argued that Indigenous people have unique food security considerations related to harvesting, sharing, and consuming of their own foods and she proposes that cultural food security be another level of food security to be included in working definition of the concept. It is important to understand that First Nations people like the Ts'msyen consume, harvest, and share traditional foods in ways that are unique and this needs to be understood when attempting to define food security for Ts'msyen people.



The Solutions Landscape: Policy, Cultural Enterprise and a Ts'msyen Supply Chain

The problem landscape described previously outlined the key factors associated with accessing healthy food in this region, which sits in a pristine coastal ecosystem surrounded by mountains to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west. Sea and land based plant and animal foods are still available in relative abundance, and harvested by those with access to financial resources, including non-Ts'msyen people from Prince Rupert or further afield.



However, for the Indigenous communities of the region, access to these food sources is frequently unattainable due social, economic, environmental, and political reasons.

There are a handful of programs, policies, and interventions in the region attempting to increase food security and nutritional intake for coastal Ts'msyen communities. These initiatives are mainly programmatic in nature, administered by the provincial and federal governments. There are also a small number of social entrepreneurship and program ideas/interventions happening at a local community scale. The solutions landscape is broadly interpreted to include potential application of ideas and initiatives from Indigenous communities in other parts of Canada.

Public Policy and Publicly Administered Programs



Northern Health is a provincial government program providing health services to 300,00 people in the northern half of the province of British Columbia, an area covering 600,00 square kilometers. Currently Northern Health is developing a three stage system to address food insecurity that includes poverty reduction strategies, healthy food guidelines and social housing initiatives (Northern Health, n.d.). Northern Health also works with various groups, provincial and regional networks and funds various initiatives. Northern Health also has created a Northern Health Aboriginal Health Improvement Committees, the Aboriginal Health Initiative Program. These Indigenous specific programs are crucial for providing funding, producing research, and conducting health care initiatives in communities.



Another key player is the First Nations Health Authority which is a province wide health authority and the first of its kind in Canada. The FNHA is responsible for planning, management, service delivery and funding of health programs in partnership with BC First Nations communities. Hartley Bay, Metlakatla, Lax K'walaams, and Gitxaala, all have health centers that offer limited services such as dieticians, or diabetes monitoring.

Nutrition North is a Government of Canada subsidy program to provide Northerners in isolated communities with improved access to perishable nutritious foods. However, be eligible a community must: lack year-round surface transportation (no permanent road, rail, or marine access), and must have an airport, post office, or grocery store. However, none of the four Ts'msyen communities are eligible for Nutrition North. Although access to grocery stores ranges between the four communities, all communities must travel by boat or plane to gain access to perishable foods.



I suggest a bulk buying initiative where the four communities (Metlkatla, Lax Kw'alaams, Gitxaala, and Hartley Bay) pool their resources, whether it be through individuals or with help from government or band council. This would entail the purchase of large quantities of dry goods and produce to be sent to the four communities, thereby decreasing the marginal costs associated with individuals and families importing food monthly and/or traveling at great expense to the few grocery stores in the region.
