

FOOD SECURE CANADA SÉCURITÉ ALIMENTAIRE CANADA

Where agriculture, environment, health, food and justice intersect
Le pont entre l'agriculture, l'environnement, la santé, les aliments et la justice

DISCUSSION PAPER 1 Indigenous Food Sovereignty

Food Secure Canada is a national membership-based organization committed to fighting against hunger and to building a healthy, fair, and ecological food system. Our vision is encapsulated in *Resetting the Table: A People's Food Policy for Canada*.

FOOD SECURE CANADA DISCUSSION PAPERS

The People's Food Policy is based on ten detailed discussion papers. These discussion papers were generated through 350 Kitchen Table Talks, hundreds of policy submissions, dozens of tele-conferences, online discussions, and three national conferences. Over 3500 people participated in their development. These papers cover a breadth of issues and include detailed policy recommendations for rebuilding Canada's broken food system. Unlike *Resetting the Table*, they are not consensus documents and not every member of Food Secure Canada has signed on to every recommendation in them. Rather, they are living documents, intended to inform debate, stimulate discussion and build greater understanding of our food system and how it should be—and must be—fixed.

- 1) Indigenous Food Sovereignty
- 2) Food Sovereignty in Rural and Remote Communities
- 3) Access to Food in Urban Communities
- 4) Agriculture, Infrastructure and Livelihoods
- 5) Sustainable Fisheries and Livelihoods for Fishers
- 6) Environment and Agriculture
- 7) Science and Technology for Food and Agriculture
- 8) International Food Policy
- 9) Healthy and Safe Food for All
- 10) Food Democracy and Governance



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Indigenous Food Sovereignty

We are a group of community-based activists, scholars and storytellers who work on issues of food sovereignty. We come from diverse regions of Turtle Island and share fundamental beliefs towards the land and all she stands for. We represent fishing, hunting, and gathering peoples and bring an understanding of the impact of colonialism on our regions. Indigenous food systems include all of the land, soil, water, and air, as well as culturally important plant, fungi, and animal species that have sustained Indigenous peoples over thousands of years of participating in the natural world.

All parts of Indigenous food systems are inseparable and ideally function in healthy interdependent relationships that transfer energy through indigenous ecosystems and economies. In addition, indigenous food systems also support, both directly and indirectly, the transfer of energy through the present day agriculture based economy, which has been developed and industrialized by settlers through the process of colonization.¹

Our nations originally developed and perfected many of the world's great foods, such as beans, corn, squash, potatoes, berries, herbs and medicines for which there is no acknowledgement or compensation. For indigenous peoples, lands and food are at the centre of what it is to be indigenous. In other instances, nomadic cultures required access to vast territories, which in turn ensured access to traditional foods. Tribal values of giving, sharing and trading are at the heart of land care and food sovereignty. Indigenous peoples hold lands, foods, medicines, and animals as sacred and freely gifted. Without them, humanity would cease to be.

Natural laws, embodied in our languages and diverse cultures, speak to the sacredness of all life and ceremony and are part of what it is to be Indigenous. Plants, animals and Mother Earth are not resources; they are the source of life itself and are at the centre of our ceremonies. Traditional harvesting and management strategies and practices adapted over millennia, as well as traditional foods, saved colonial settlers from starvation and death. As Indigenous peoples, we do not necessarily have to agree on all issues but we must come together with one voice to share our concerns about the land and food.

In a place where biological diversity lends itself well to tremendous localized abundance of traditional foods, Indigenous peoples throughout Canada have developed distinct cultures based on traditional harvesting strategies and practices including hunting, fishing, gathering and cultivating culturally important plants, animals and fungi in their respective traditional territories. This is in contrast to the highly mechanistic, linear food production, distribution, and consumption model applied in the industrialized food system.

We stress the importance of building on our collective strengths and Indigenous worldviews rather than focusing on the differences of community origin, pathologies, or issues that affect and separate us. As representatives of nations that represent collectivities, we oppose privatization of reserve lands and the imposition of the fee simple land tenure system on collectively owned lands and territories.

As a result of harmony in our food systems, Indigenous peoples exemplified food sovereignty. Thus, the current efforts within the rapidly expanding Indigenous food sovereignty movement to restore and enhance access to traditional Indigenous foods in the forests, fields and waterways continue to be linked to the historic claims to the hunting, fishing and gathering grounds in their respective traditional territories.

When looking back over the past few hundred years a few examples stand out:

The arrival of European settlers and their beliefs that the land was largely empty (*terra nullus*), and Indigenous peoples' limited understanding of the European style of land ownership and agriculture, was used to justify the expulsion over the centuries of Indigenous peoples from their historical land and food systems. First Nations peoples were forced off the land onto reserves in order to assimilate to some of the European ways. The Indigenous traditions around food, as well as their languages and wider culture, were treated with contempt and viewed as detrimental to linear models of progress and development introduced by the settlers.

The Indian Act, legislated in 1876 only made things worse since now all spheres of First Nations and Inuit life including their connection to Indigenous land and food systems, are controlled by colonial governments without any meaningful consultation.

Residential schools made a bad situation worse by serving minimal amounts of poor quality foods to children and refusing any allowances for traditional foods in their diet. Thus, not only were children malnourished but they lost much of their traditional knowledge regarding food preparation along with their languages and other aspects of their cultures. The legacy, linked to poverty, was a poor diet and epidemic proportions of food related illnesses (i.e. diabetes and obesity) amongst many of the Indigenous peoples in Canada.

The sad irony is that, in reality, it was Indigenous food ways that kept the first Europeans alive, whether as a cure for scurvy for Jacques Cartier and his men or in the preparation of pemmican that allowed the explorers and voyageurs to cross the continent. Without this food support, European settlement would have developed at a far slower pace, if at all. Many Indigenous foods from the Americas, such as corn, potatoes and tomatoes were introduced into Europe, which in turn led to better nourishment for Europeans in general. For Indigenous peoples, the land, food and identity were seen as parts of a whole system. For us, the land and food feeds the whole community as an extension of the family unit, whereas settler society treats food as a commodity to feed individuals within nuclear family units.ⁱⁱ

These colonial relationships with settler nations have ravaged Indigenous nations and their relationship with the land. Within our nations, legal categories such as Treaty, non-Treaty,

Metis, non-status, status, and urban, reserve and rural separate us. These separations further exacerbate larger food issues. Lack of respectful development and massive and uncontrolled resource extraction based on colonial models, designed to create urban neoliberal wealth have forced many land-based peoples into cities.

In urban areas deprived of traditional foods, we experience food deserts, extreme hunger, and the onset and entrenchment of preventable diseases. First Nations, Inuit and Métis are usually marginalized and have minimal resources to provide the necessities of life. Shelter, warmth and food are prioritized due to limited financial resources. Food insecurity, a reality for Indigenous people in the best of times, can become even more precarious following relocation to urban centres. The ability to access traditional country foods such as moose, caribou, seal meat, or wild geese becomes that much more difficult. We know that traditional foods, as opposed to processed foods, are more nutritious and help to stave off the development of diabetes and other ailments that did not exist in traditional Indigenous societies. Moreover, country food retains a vital symbolic and spiritual value, essential to the cultural identity of many Indigenous people. Consequently, it becomes important to expose Indigenous children to the foods of their ancestors, giving them a chance to develop a taste for their traditional foods, the nature of which varies considerably from one part of the country to another.

In order to counterbalance urban reality with its limited food choices, a number of projects have been undertaken. Because there is travel between cities and traditional territories, country food is brought back and shared amongst members of urban Indigenous communities (urban country food caches). In this way, vital links are retained to traditional foods for nutritious, health and spiritual reasons. Though food banks are used, they often lack fresh foodsⁱⁱⁱ. Indigenous women who participated in a 2008 study stressed the importance of accessing traditional foods because of the link to culture and its importance for physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual wellbeing. The women also suggested that traditional foods be transferred to urban areas in organized ways, that Indigenous community gardens should be created, and that an indigenous grocery be established. Their proposals have been confirmed by other studies that emphasize the need for community gardens to meet nutritional, medicinal and spiritual needs (by growing tobacco, sage and sweet grass).^{iv}

While most Canadians think nothing of their choices or their own access to food, Indigenous people, especially from the North, encounter many problems in accessing healthy, inexpensive and nutritious foods. Rural and remote Indigenous peoples experience difficulties with bureaucracies and societies that do not understand the need to hunt, trap, fish or otherwise harvest from the environment for sustenance. Recreational harvest by the non-native population was often considered more important than Indigenous harvest. Until recently, the sustainable hunting practices of Indigenous peoples was viewed with suspicion and distrust. Coastal peoples have different practices from inland hunters/gatherers, whose practices differ in turn from those of Northern peoples and Southern farming peoples.

How each nation views food resources is paramount to the survival of Indigenous people. At present, Northern Indigenous peoples and their neighbours pay exorbitant prices for basic

nutritional foods but pay regular Southern prices for junk food and pop. This disparity has led to health problems such as child obesity, diabetes and malnutrition. The importance of traditional foods has become apparent as enforced community structures take the people off the land. Additionally, wildlife deserts are occurring around structured communities that make it increasingly harder to hunt and gather.

This is a national disgrace in view of the wealth of Canada and situates Indigenous people's health far behind that of the national average. It is time for our peoples to take back the once pristine lands and stand up for the survival of those species that have no voice, as was established at the recent Aboriginal Networking on Species at Risk Conference at Enowkin Centre and Lower Similkameen Indian Band in B.C .

Deep discrimination is at the heart of Canadian nationalism, preventing similarly affected peoples from working together to address our common dilemmas and food challenges. Our collective experiences will help formulate and strengthen the larger food sovereignty movement. Many First Nations contributions are foundational and without this knowledge, many settlers would have perished. The current socio-economic and political system of neoliberalism has meant disaster for Indigenous Nations and others whose traditional lands and a way of life are commodified and destroyed. Colonialism and neoliberalism has meant loss of language, cultural identity, and biodiversity. It has also meant a food system that focuses on monocultures, capital-intensive food production, and loss of respect for lands and waters. Indigenous peoples throughout the world are often paupers in their own lands, with destroyed local economies and ways of life. Many times, international aid and trade is available only if tribal nations accept food that is culturally non-appropriate and genetically modified. State laws often abrogate Indigenous food sovereignty by giving license to transnational corporations over our land. While we tokenly participate in processes such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and Species at Risk discussions, our voice is seldom considered when we stand up for plant and animal life, organisms that cannot speak for themselves. In addition, while governments pay lip service to species-at-risk initiatives, development practices and lack of policies show the real intent. We emphasize the value of traditional knowledge that is foundational to maintaining cultural and biological diversity and we decry notions of monocultures or patents on life forms.

We believe that traditional knowledge, as well as addressing the social determinants of health, should be at the heart of food policies and practices of governments. Indigenous peoples in different areas have sustained themselves on the wildlife and plants that their areas have produced. Various forms of agriculture have been practiced by Indigenous peoples in order to sustain the soil and land. This knowledge has been used by Indigenous peoples and in many cases shared with their non-native brothers and sisters. The uses of plants and animals as medicines and foods were common among Indigenous peoples. This unique knowledge belonging to Indigenous peoples has also assisted the Canadian people to live on the land and to prosper.

As time goes by, more and more of this information about the animals and plants of Canada is being lost as resources diminish. Indigenous communities are trying to maintain this knowledge but can only do so by utilizing the resource. Elders and knowledge holders are becoming increasingly rare as “town centred” culture grows. Their traditional knowledge that they sometimes shared is appropriated as common Canadian knowledge, and any benefit derived from this knowledge is to be used by “everyone” rather than for the benefit of the Indigenous communities. Traditional seeds and genetic stocks are viewed by the Canadian economic structure as something to be patented by private interests. The genetic diversity in indigenous food is seen as products for exploitation by the Canadian bio resources industry.

We have deep concerns for industrialized forms of agriculture that food security embraces. It undermines small farmers, is fraught with health concerns, is heavily reliant on agrochemicals and capital intensive food production systems, and strikes at the core of food sovereignty. Industrial agriculture’s sole purpose is to support market economies of scale. We join our indigenous relatives throughout the world when we voice our concerns about genetic modified organisms, species destruction, and other desecrations of life. These issues threaten our foods, our community fabric, and ultimately our ability to survive.

As the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states, Indigenous peoples, under the concept of prior informed consent, have a right to approve or disapprove any incursions on their land especially as it affects food sovereignty. This includes oil exploration, forest clear-cutting, dams, mining, road development, bombing test sites, and other colonial practices that strike at the heart of food’s sacred nature and reduces Indigenous capacity to gather culturally appropriate foods. Despite the fact that our human rights are identified under Section 35(1) of the Canadian Constitution, in our own lands we are often charged and jailed for practicing traditions and challenging life destroying forces. This requires that all levels of government work to ensure corporate social responsibility on our un-ceded lands and territories. Rampant human hunger requires more access to land for sustenance harvesting such as hunting, fishing and gathering.

We recognize the important work that non-Indigenous food sovereigntists do throughout the nation and the world, but we stress that Indigenous peoples speak for ourselves. In Indigenous nations, relatives, relationships and respectful protocol are at the centre of what it means to be Indigenous. In all of our collective work that we undertake we must set these principles and values at the beginning of our discourse, dialogue and relations. Indigenous food sovereigntists have been participating in a wide range of food related issues and activities, bringing their invaluable knowledge to the process and prioritizing responsibilities and relationships. Recognizing solidarity work with similarly impacted groups requires deep listening, discourse, and sometimes dissent.

The global colonial experience of Indigenous peoples requires that Indigenous peoples have their own experience reflective of their particular history and culture and it is important that this be recognized. We represent a stronger voice when unity is based on listening, mutual respect, and strategies. Our survival and the survival of the natural world require that we work towards

mutual understanding to strengthen our voices. Finally, our voices must be heard in the important work of policy development in food sovereignty as a framework for reconciling past social and environmental injustices and relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canadian society.

A return to traditions helps counteract the breaking-down of the family unit and helps lessen the extreme poverty that so many Indigenous people live with. As Winona Laduke, Anishinaabekwe activist, environmentalist, economist, and writer has stated “the recovery of the people is tied to the recovery of food, since food itself is medicine: not only for the body, but for the soul, for the spiritual connection to history, ancestors, and the land.”^v

In conclusion, the trends occurring amongst Indigenous peoples are the beginnings of a new Indigenous food sovereignty. By establishing their own projects under their own leadership, Indigenous peoples are determining what should be grown, cooked, taught, and shared. In time, these decisions will pave the way for greater food security. The larger Indigenous land struggles and food sovereignty issues are not mutually exclusive even when the struggle remains centred in an urban setting. Food sovereignty links traditional Indigenous knowledge with contemporary urban realities, which in turn contributes to new forms of knowledge and action. Food sovereignty fosters the on-going interplay of actions and understanding that continues to flow between the traditional and the contemporary, the urban and rural.

Indigenous stewardship practices and traditional knowledge of the land may help the general Canadian society appreciate its responsibilities to the land. In this time of dynamic change, the traditional Indigenous way of looking at the land may assist Canadian society to understand some of the maxims needed to protect the Earth:

1. The Earth is Our Mother.
2. Cooperation is the way to survive.
3. Knowledge is powerful, only if it is shared.
4. Responsibility is the best practice.
5. Everything is connected to everything.
6. Place is important.
7. The spiritual world is not distant from the Earth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Coordinate a cross-sectoral approach to analyzing, forming, and influencing policies through the lens of Indigenous food sovereignty in the forestry, rangeland, fisheries, agriculture, mining, environment, health, and community development sectors.
- Designate Indigenous hunting, fishing and gathering reserves; work with local Indigenous nations to map out and set aside adequate tracts of land within the national and provincial parks and lands designated as “crown” land for the exclusive use of Indigenous hunting, fishing and gathering.
- Create provincial and federal budgets that specifically finance food programs for both urban and rural remote northern communities. While these are short-term food security solutions, permanent solutions must lie within the domain of inherent sovereignty to our lands and ways of life. Where applicable recognize the sovereignty promised at the time of Treaty signing.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ MORRISON, D. “B.C. Food Systems Network. Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty. Final Activity Report,” Prepared for: Provincial Health Services Authority – Community Food Action Initiative, Interior Health – Community Food Action Initiative & the B.C. Food Systems Network – Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty, 2008.

ⁱⁱ FEE, Margery. “Stories of Traditional Aboriginal Food, Territory and Health,” in *What’s To Eat: Entrées in Canadian Food History*, Nathalie Cooke (Ed.), Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cindy Ann Baskin *et al.*, 2009. « Struggles, Strengths and Solutions: exploring Food security with Young Urban Aboriginal moms». *Esurio: Journal of Hunger and Poverty*, Volume 1, Issue 1, article 3.
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^{iv} MUNDEL, Erika. “Story Gathering with the Urban Aboriginal Community Kitchen Garden Project,” Thèse de maîtrise en science, Vancouver, University of British Columbia, 2008.

Also: SALES, C. “Le rôle des jardins communautaires dans la sécurité alimentaire chez les autochtones vivant en milieu urbain,” Mémoire. Université d’Ottawa, 2009.

^v LADUKE, Winona. “Protecting the Culture and Genetics of Wild Rice,” in *Original Instructions, Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future*, Melissa K. Nelson (Ed.), Rochester, Vermont, Bear & Company, 2008, pp. 206-214.

Also: SALES, C. Op. cit.



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Food Secure Canada is based on three interlocking commitments:

Zero Hunger: All people at all times must be able to acquire, in a dignified manner, adequate quantity and quality of culturally and personally acceptable food. This is essential to the health of our population, and requires cooperation among many different sectors, including housing, social policy, transportation, agriculture, education, and community, cultural, voluntary and charitable groups, and businesses.

A Sustainable Food System: Food in Canada must be produced, harvested (including fishing and other wild food harvest), processed, distributed and consumed in a manner which maintains and enhances the quality of land, air and water for future generations, and in which people are able to earn a living wage in a safe and healthy working environment by harvesting, growing, producing, processing, handling, retailing and serving food.

Healthy and Safe Food: Safe and nourishing foods must be readily at hand (and less nourishing ones restricted); food (including wild foods) must not be contaminated with pathogens or industrial chemicals; and no novel food can be allowed to enter the environment or food chain without rigorous independent testing and the existence of an on-going tracking and surveillance system, to ensure its safety for human consumption.