



TOXIC CONTAMINATION UNDERMINING INDIGENOUS FOOD SYSTEMS AND INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY

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Artwork by Henry Letendre courtesy of Native Counselling Services of Alberta

As an Anishinaabekwe I have heard our old people, our experts, talk over and over again about the importance of eating in a traditional way in order to maintain individual and community health and well-being. Our traditional foods are of higher nutritious value than processed foods and the process of gathering, gardening, fishing, trapping and hunting bring about a cultural, emotional and spiritual wellness a trip to the local grocery store cannot.

Harvesting of Traditional Foods was a significant part of our traditional economies in pre-conquest times. Self-sufficiency, sharing and trading all flowed from ones ability to feed their extended family and contribute to the workings of our Nations. Even in contemporary times, Traditional Foods make substantial contributions to traditional economies. Many Indigenous Peoples living around the Great Lakes as well as other areas of North American continue to hunt, fish, pick rice, fruit and berries, harvest plants and participate in traditional forms of agriculture in order to meet their needs. But traditional Foods are important for more than just economic reasons. Elders and western scientists agree that Traditional Foods are often of higher nutritional value than commercially produced food items (MacDonald 1997; Kuhnlein 1993).

From a social perspective, being out on the land strengthens our relationship to our extended families and deepens our spiritual understanding of life and our place in it. Consuming traditional foods revitalizes our cultures, our languages and our ceremonies and it reinforces our sovereignty within our families, communities and Nations. Gathering rice, berries, and plants requires our people to remember or seek out Traditional Knowledge in order to understand how to harvest these items in a respectful and traditional way. Judy Da Silva an Anishinaabekwe from Asubpeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek in north west Ontario explains:

When a hunter kills a moose, there is a certain part of the moose that the hunter takes off (a little tiny piece of the moose) and leaves it in the forest, and with that the hunter will say a few words to the moose to thank him for providing food for his family. Other animals are the same, but you put a different part of a certain animal in the forest. My brother said our grandmother told him you do not get an animal because you are a good hunter, but because the animal feels sorry for you and gives himself to you to feed your family. This is why when our people hunt, those thoughts are ingrained in

their mind and heart and they have a great respect for the animals they get. (Da Silva 2003).

People also have to remember or learn which parts of the plant are good to eat at particular times of the year, how to harvest plants in a way that promotes sustainability and to learn how to process and prepare these foods in order to enhance their nutritional value.

Mentally, being out on the land strengthens community support systems and helps people remember who they are. Anishinaabeg Elder Art McGregor explains:

In the bush, you're relaxed, you unload your worries with brothers, uncles and sons. You communicate with each other, and the animals, the land. There is a peace and happiness and physically you are in shape. Today, people don't talk, they don't help each other. Everyone sits behinds and desk and eats food that is no good, and you feel no good, tired and crabby, This is not good for us. (Martin-Hill 1997 in Simpson 2001:45).

Elders all over North America know that when the earth is sick, the people will also be sick and this rings true in Indigenous Territories throughout Canada. Colonialism and environmental degradation have greatly impacted the health and well-being of our peoples. In the times before contact, our Nations were healthy and our people were strong. We were self-sufficient relying on our relationship with the land and our Traditional Knowledge to nurture our children and provide us with a good life. We were dependent upon the plants and animals for life and our way of life was embedded with thanksgiving, humility, respect and reciprocity. When dis-ease and imbalance did strike, we had knowledgeable experts, medicine people, who were able to use their skills to restore us to a healthy state. Our systems of governance, education, health, and our food systems provided us with everything we needed. Long and Fox, write from the perspective of the Stoney People:

Our elders teach us that although our ancestors did not have problem-free lives, our people were in excellent health before European contact. , , , Moreover, [they] were very spiritual and ethical in dealing with self and others. This strength of mind and heart contributed to the wellness of our people. So too did their healthy diet.

All food was truly natural and pure. There were no such things as iodized salt, refined sugar, and chemically treated food (Long and Fox 1996: 254).

Colonization, genocide and colonial policies aimed at destroying Indigenous Nations and disrupting our physical and intellectual connections to the land brought tremendous tragedy, sickness and dependency to our peoples. Industrial activities such as mining, deforestation, road building, hydro electric development, and the contamination of the environment with toxic chemicals continue to threaten the ability of Indigenous communities to rely on our traditional foods systems for our health and well-being and the health and well-being of our families.

Revitalizing our traditional food systems is an important part of our recovery from the impacts of colonization. To be most successful, in the long term, it requires that we have access to and control over our lands and our Nations as outlined in our many international treaties with the crown. It requires Canada to decolonize its relationship with our Nations. In the short term it requires our communities who still rely on traditional foods to maintain that relationship and for other communities to return to living our traditions and living our own knowledge regarding health and well-being. It also requires a healthy environment, free of pollution and contamination.

Communities have noticed significant and alarming changes in the quality and quantity of fish and wild meat in their territories, and in some cases, scientists have detected toxic chemicals in the traditional foods regularly eaten by Aboriginal Peoples in different parts of Canada (Kuhnlein, et al. 2003, Chan et al. 1999, Muir and Pastershank 1997)

The people of the Haudensaunee Nation are known as international leaders in the fight to bring attention to the impacts of contamination in Indigenous territories and in Indigenous foods systems. The Mohawk community of Akwesasne, located along the St. Lawrence River and spanning what is now known as New York, Quebec and Ontario have been dealing with extreme PCB contamination of their land, water, fish, animals and human breast milk from General Motors, Reynolds and Domtar plants located adjacent to the reserve (LaDuke 1999).

Asubpeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek, located in north western Ontario are continuing to cope with the impacts of methyl mercury in addition to other toxic chemicals on their food system for over thirty years. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the English-Wabigoon River system was severely contaminated when Reed Paper dumped more than 50 000 pounds

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of mercury into the river (LaDuke 1999). Fish from the river system were a staple in the diet of community members, and consequently families have been dealing with the health impacts of this exposure for the past 30 years. In both communities, fishing represents a substantial component of the local economy, and so when people could no longer eat the fish, they lost their sustenance, their economic security, and their way of life became threatened.

The Elders and traditional land users in the community have always believed that contamination from the pulp mill is causing disease in their people. Recently, the community initiated a study to screen samples of wild meat for mercury and other contaminants. Preliminary results must be viewed with caution as a result of small sample sizes, but indicated mercury levels in over half of all the samples surpassed Health Canada's fish consumption guidelines for frequent fish eaters (Health Canada does not have guidelines specific to wild meat consumption). This study also showed that the community must be concerned about more than just mercury. While the sample numbers remain quite small because of funding constraints, one martin sample was found with Toxic Equivalencies (TEQs) of nearly double that of Health Canada's guidelines/tolerances for contaminants in food for dioxins/furans. Nearly half of the TEQ in this sample came from a 2,3,4,7,8-pentadibenzofuran, a compound that has not been a focus of previous studies in Canada (Asubpeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek 2002). Asubpeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek has just received funding to continue to screen many more samples of wild meat for mercury and dioxins and furans, and investigate these preliminary results further.

These results would not surprise Inuit peoples and other Indigenous Peoples living in circumpolar regions of the world. Arctic Indigenous Peoples and their political organizations have been joining forces to research, lobby and educate the dominant governments of the world about the impact of Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) on the health of their people. In 2001, representatives of 111 nations came together in Stockholm to sign a global convention on POPs, and while much more work is needed to ratify the treaty, it should serve as a wake up call for non-Indigenous Peoples. We all live on the same earth, and if Indigenous Peoples are feeling the impacts of contamination on our health, so soon will non-Indigenous Peoples. Environmental contamination does not know political, cultural or racial boundaries. In different ways, it impacts us all.

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