

Righting the World - the journey towards food security
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When my son was little, he had an imaginary version of the world around him that he called “backwards land”. Since I myself did not inhabit backwards land, I had to assume that things were somehow opposite to what I experienced.

More recently, I have wondered about the wisdom of my wee son as I observed the antics and culture predominating in North America. As a one-time classics student, I have not been able to shake the image of Emperor Nero fiddling while his Rome burned. It feels like we have all been dancing and spinning faster and faster with the distractions of accumulation and social media in order to avoid facing the reality of the world around us - a world burdened and scarred with the repercussions of extractive, exploitive practices that have resulted in barren, lifeless landscapes, undrinkable water, climate change, and increasing poverty for the many juxtaposed with unimaginable wealth for a privileged few.

COVID-19 may have righted our world - perhaps only temporarily - as it has made it acutely clear what goods and services are actually essential. It has also driven home that it may not be in our individual and collective best interests to have few or distant sources of essential supplies such as the precious N95 masks and, of course, our food.

We have been reassured by representatives of the grocery industry¹ that there is no food shortage. And we are all being exhorted to not hoard. Despite this, many are “stocking up” as they used to say. I would suggest that this has much to do with a natural and innate desire to stave off starvation. Both my parents’ families barely made it through the depression of the 1930’s, suffering through years of hunger and malnutrition. As a result, my childhood household was structured around food provisioning for my family of 13. Our farm was designed to exchange tree fruit for cash to secure other family needs and, just as importantly, to provide the bulk of our fruit, vegetables and protein needs.

Up and down the supply chains of the food systems that meet our dietary needs and wants, people are involved. People who may now be under quarantine, self-isolation, or are falling ill to COVID19. Despite the fact that food has been included in the list of essential services, there is no means to ensure that the workers who enable us to access food are immune to this virus. A partial list of such workers includes those who tend the crops in the field, workers in abattoirs, fishers, food processors, those who

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/big-grocers-assure-there-s-enough-to-go-around-1.5500772>

harvest and package the food, and the truckers who move so much of our food across the continent. They are the vital links in the supply chain and they are as susceptible to all the fallout of this pandemic as the rest of us. When they succumb, the link they represent in the supply chain fails.

The impact of the pandemic is and will be felt differently by the different sectors that all feed into our food supply. Two key factors will be “shelf life” (how well and for how long they store) and how heavily the food relies on human labour.

The assurances that there is a plentiful supply of grains and legumes is likely reliable for many months to come, even without new harvests to replenish them, based on the globalized structure and few large corporate players who store and distribute them from various favourable locations around the world.² The same could likely be said for the stock of shelf-stable canned goods, from soups to pasta dishes, to fruit. These all have reasonably long shelf life. Grains and legumes will see a loss of moisture and nutrients over time but will still be edible.

However, it is a very different story for perishable foods. Many perishable foods are highly dependent on people to plant, tend and harvest them, particularly fruits and vegetables intended to be eaten fresh. Some have been able to integrate equipment that reduces or removes the need for humans. But across Canada, we rely on 45,000 temporary foreign workers each year to tend to the food that will mostly end its life in the refrigerators of Canadians. While the work that they do has been included as an essential service, there are currently few options for those not already in the country to get from, Mexico for example, to Ontario or British Columbia.

Animal products have varying needs for humans. Many dairies across Canada have shifted to robotic milkers, allowing the cows to milk on their own schedule. Other supply managed sectors like chicken and eggs have well honed supply chains that ensure that the production and distribution happen consistently week by week from farm to consumer. However, they too rely on humans to ensure that each link in their respective supply chain - from fertilized eggs to incubators to barns to slaughterhouse or egg grading station - all rely on humans for each step in the process and for the transportation between them.

Truckers have long been invisible in the food system and yet they are a heroic vital link, particularly for perishable product. With the shut down of public spaces across the continent, truckers are being deprived of places to use the washroom, to eat, and to rest safely. In addition to depriving truckers of ready access to some of the essentials for their work day, they too are as susceptible as the rest of us to contracting the virus - and perhaps more so since many of them travel widely.

² See, for instance, Invisible Giant: Cargill and its Transnational Strategies, by Brewster Kneen available at ramshorn.ca

The current understanding of this virus indicates that we are at very low risk of contracting the virus from the food we eat. However, as was recently reported in Bloomberg news, “ Massive operations where workers pick berries together, cut meat side-by-side on a production line or load warehouse trucks in sometimes close proximity risk slowing down. Some facilities may have to shutter for cleaning and worker quarantines. Produce could end up rotting in fields if there aren’t enough healthy workers.”³

Despite the fact that less than 2% of our population currently farms and even fewer are commercial fishers, there are farms and local food economies where we live, and even the landlocked may be able to access direct-to-consumer fish options. This current pandemic is a huge opportunity for us to realize the importance of vibrant, accessible, local food systems - and to do something about it. A growing local food economy may also be a new employment opportunity for those whose sectors have been hugely impacted by the pandemic.

In our own spaces and communities we can get involved in growing food, whether that be in our front yards, on balconies or in community gardens (protocols are being developed across the country to enable safe use of both community gardens and farmers markets during the COVID-19 crisis). If you are new to gardening and there are no organized groups in your area, walk down the alleys of your community and take note of which yards have established food gardens. Then regularly consult those experienced gardeners from a safe physical distance as the season proceeds. Focus on what you can grow and also on what you could not readily procure from area farmers.

We need to rebuild our food skills and awareness of the seasonality of foods. Eating whole foods and with the rhythm of the local seasons will provide us with fresher, healthier and less expensive food. As fresh foods from other parts of the world become scarcer where we are, we will have to revisit our privileged diets and adjust our expectations and food practices accordingly.

Few of us will be able to produce all our household’s food needs. Seeking out and proactively supporting local farmers, fishers, and food processors can help rebuild local food economies, for the immediate and the long-term. Input - through forums, recommendations to those business owners, and through our

³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-27/food-workers-getting-sick-is-the-latest-threat-to-world-supply>

purchasing habits - can help to refine the local food supply to reflect more closely our nutritional needs. This in turn would help to ensure that as this pandemic continues to unfold, and for any future such crisis, we could have a reasonable level of local food self-sufficiency. A seminal work published in 2006 by Christian J. Peters, Jennifer L. Wilkins and Gary W. Fick entitled “Testing a complete-diet model for estimating the land resource requirements of food consumption and agricultural carrying capacity: The New York State Example” provides a useful model for those seeking to shift production to match consumption needs.⁴

The carrying capacity of Turtle Island more than sufficed for the Indigenous people of this continent. When Europeans first encountered them, the Indigenous people here were amongst the tallest on the planet, a clear indication of generations of adequate and healthy diets. Across Canada, as many focus on reconciliation, we must do all we can to respect the Indigenous communities that are self-isolating in order to protect their elders, their language and culture carriers. And we must provide them with the land and water access, the necessary funds and other resources to rebuild and expand their traditional food ways.

As many have observed, this shared global crisis provides an opportunity to revisit how we have lived on this planet, with each other, and with other beings. Among us, the most resilient and creative in the face of our dominant culture and systems of commerce are those who have been marginalized by them. They have had to be in order to survive. Now that the entire planet is focused on surviving, we must ensure that when we come out the other end, we have found ways to collectively live better on this planet. We can revisit our assumptions, the values that we hold, and the priorities that we have in order to adjust, rebuild and create spaces and food systems that are just and that truly contribute to the wellbeing of all.

⁴ <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742170507001767>