

Notes on Sorrento Gathering 2002
by Cathleen Kneen
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“Food and Medicine” was the theme for the Sorrento Gathering of the B.C. Food Systems Network, held in mid-September at the Sorrento Centre on Shuswap Lake. Elder Trudy Jack in her keynote address spent little time on making the point that from a Native perspective, food and medicine are closely related and often the same thing. Rather, she inspired the 70 participants by grounding the discussion in the deeper reality which is accessible to any person who is willing to accept the discipline of listening.

The holistic perspective presented by Trudy formed the base for all the work of the conference. As one participant commented, “we are disconnected from the source of our being, our food and our medicine.” The purpose of the conference was to renew those connections, and to develop strategic thinking towards the establishment of community food security in B.C. Participants were all people already involved in community food security, whether in pregnancy outreach programs, community kitchens and gardens, farming, or policy development. It was recognized in the first plenary session that all of these projects and programs make a difference – but “that is not the same as making a change.”

Building on the B.C. Food Systems Network food policy statement developed at the 1999 Sorrento Gathering, the Sorrento Gathering 2002 began from a recognition that the plight of the poor and hungry is getting worse, chronic disease such as type 2 diabetes is increasing, and local food systems are being dismantled (along with the healthy food they supply) in favour of imported and junk foods. One ‘stream’ of the conference shared experience and ideas on practical efforts to defend and rebuild a just, local food system, through roundtables and workshops on Community Kitchens, Good Food Box, food pantries, urban gardening, and ways to work with farmers on food security issues. Two of the most popular workshops offered training in dehydrating foods and seed saving. One participant commented that the most important element of these discussions was the way in which people living with food insecurity felt that their point of view was heard and respected.

Creating such an atmosphere was the theme of the second ‘stream’ of the conference, which dealt with organizational issues such as building

consensus in a group, handling hostility, and fundraising. In each one there was emphasis on careful listening to find out what the other person's needs are before proceeding. In fundraising, for example, it is important to see the funder as a partner with a real interest in your work, not just a source of money.

The third focus was on policy action, or, as one participant said, "it's not about blame, but about overcoming damaging structures." One group focussed on working in the health care system, and encouraging health promotion and disease prevention and recognising the role of good healthy food in building health. The Healthy Eating Active Living projects being funded in the Northern Interior Health Region as part of a prevention strategy for type 2 diabetes were among the initiatives discussed. There were also workshops to develop strategies to combat the rise of junk foods, particularly in schools, and the need for school children to have adequate, appropriate food even if it is not provided by their parents. Reflecting the elder's comment that "the more technology you have, the less it works with traditional foods," there was a workshop on biotechnology and genetic engineering of foods and medicines which endeavoured to demystify the 'science' of biotechnology and emphasized each person's authority on their body, their food, and their life.

The major purpose of the conference was not so much to develop action strategies as such, but to bring together, consolidate and galvanize a provincial network of people from rural, remote and reserve communities as well as towns and cities who will work together over the next year. Clearly the conference succeeded in this goal. It was evident in the delight of the children as they joined the group in country dancing in the evening; in the rapt attention to a local Shuswap elder explaining the history and traditions of the people of the region; in the intense discussions in every break; in the relaxed participation of young mothers with nursing infants; in the visit to the farm which provided much of the produce for the excellent meals.

The B.C. Food Systems Network recognizes that all of this is a slow process. But we will continue to meet, to celebrate our successes, to enjoy one another's company, and to strengthen our resolve and our capacity to take back our local food systems, to ensure good, healthy, appropriate food for everyone.