

Summary Report, Sorrento Gathering 2005: Land and Food

The Sorrento Gathering 2005 took place September 16-19th, at the Sorrento Centre on Lake Shuswap. The 106 participants (plus 16 children and a few nursing infants) were welcomed by Lakes Secwepemc people who generously shared traditional knowledge and philosophical as well as policy perspectives on the theme of Land and Food. A general attitude of respect marked the whole Gathering and resulted in real dialogue among a wide diversity of people. Participants included the ADM of policy for the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands, a Medical Health Officer and other health professionals, several farmers, a former mayor, people from large and small food businesses, and community-level leaders and participants in food and land programs and projects in both urban and rural areas and on-Reserve.

The Gathering was made possible through financial support from Investment Agriculture Foundation, Western Economic Diversification, Agriculture Canada's Networking Initiative, and the Public Health Agency of Canada. Major donors of food were Pro Organics, Nature's Path, Jerseyland Organics, and D Dutchman Dairy, along with numerous farmers and local food businesses.

Under the heading of Land and Food, the Gathering's objectives were

- To develop strategies to ensure that population health initiatives related to healthy eating are committed to using BC food products
- To encourage community food security programs to seek partnerships with local agriculture
- To facilitate the development of food policies which emphasize local, seasonal food
- By these means, to increase the market for BC food products.

Evaluations from the conference indicated that we achieved some success in moving towards these objectives. Many participants indicated that the discussions of food policies in schools, hospitals, and municipalities gave them useful information and tools to implement such policies in their own communities, and to promote local foods and support local food production.

Comments included:

“I have realized the importance of buying local.”

“Plan to begin a campaign on ALR issues.”

“Will be working on municipal food policy, and looking for a consultant to lead the community process towards the development of a community Food Action committee”.

“I plan on becoming more active in my community to promote LOCAL agriculture, via awareness, education, example.”

“Walking the talk” about local, healthy food, the meals were more like feasts, with local lamb, wild salmon and organic chicken sharing space with heirloom tomato salad with local goat cheese; organic cereals, beans and rice; organic pears, apples, plums and grapes; a variety of cheeses; fresh local corn and salads of every kind – mixed baby greens, carrots and beets, quinoa with corn and cucumbers – washed down with local apple juice and even organic ale. All the foods except the grains, beans and rice were local and most were identified in the program as to the farm of

origin.

All this was fuel for intense workshops and round-table discussions covering both practical and theoretical aspects of food security in B.C. There were sessions where people learned food dehydration or canning and others where experience and skills in community gardening and collective cooking were shared; a half-day workshop provided training on seed saving techniques. One skill-building session taught story-telling as an effective tool for communicating and there was a training session on theatre as a tool for social analysis and action-building.

On the policy side, the workshops on municipal food policies and school food policies addressed some of the practical challenges to local food policy implementation, while discussion on food security and food sovereignty provided an opportunity to examine diverse approaches, including indigenous approaches, to the issues. (These were also addressed in workshops sharing traditional aboriginal food knowledge and spiritual practices.) Projects such as the Good Food Box and Cooking Fun for Families were explored as ways of increasing consumption of local produce while at the same time providing food and skills to people in need. Among the most appreciated workshops were one on moving from food banks to food action and a workshop called “Show Me the Money” on fundraising for community organizations.

The keynote opening panel set the tone for the whole conference with a series of thoughtful and challenging presentations on the theme of Land and Food. Janice Billy began by describing the relationship between the Lakes Secwepemc Peoples and the land where they were placed by the Creator. Over the centuries they have learned to use what the land provided with over 134 different varieties used for food and healing. This relationship with the land is central to their culture, language, and spirituality and there is a strong movement to regain traditions which were lost through the trauma of the residential school experience. Janice is working with others in the community to develop a land-use plan based on their traditional values and to stop further destruction of their lands. Fred Fortier, of the Secwepemc Fisheries Commission, spoke of the lengthy struggle to establish the ability of the aboriginal people to manage the fisheries according to principles of sustainability. While the right to fish exists, it is meaningless when policies are in place permitting dams, reducing water flow, or allowing genetic engineering of fish. Not only do the people depend on fish for food (and the fish depend on the quality and quantity of water) but the salmon also feed the entire eco-system.

Comfort Ero from Nigeria spoke of the immigrant experience. Traditionally, all Africans were farmers (what North Americans call gardening). A new person in the village, or a young person starting a new family, would be given a piece of land to grow food. With the advent of colonialism, land became a commodity; people began to go hungry and many were forced to leave. In the new country, they have nothing, don't know the language or the food; they wind up buying the cheapest food, working long hours with no time for food preparation. The “African” food market is very expensive. Comfort works with immigrants to help them find local substitutes for their traditional foods so they can nourish their bodies and spirits.

In BC, agricultural land has been protected from development by the Agricultural Land Reserve.

Despite the good intentions, Commissioner Sue Irvine pointed out that the ALR faces real challenges. Although technically more land has been placed in the Reserve than has been withdrawn, the new reserved lands are poorer quality and in remote parts of the province. Only 5% of BC's land is deemed appropriate to agriculture, and only 1.5% is high quality arable land. Now that local governments share land zoning powers with the Agriculture Land Commission, there is increasing pressure to remove land for urban uses, along with rising prices for land. Sue said that the ALC needs to change from being reactive to being pro-active and working with local governments to develop agriculture plans; this, however, will not happen without real support from the public. The last topic was farm succession, and Heather Pritchard of FarmFolk/CityFolk, a passionate defender of the Land Reserve, spoke about the huge challenge to get young people onto land to farm, given the high land prices. She gave an inspiring example of a series of co-operatives in Vancouver and the Fraser Valley which have used the investment abilities of urban people to link them in a co-op model with farms and thereby enabled young farmers to get into agriculture.

The questions raised by this panel resonated throughout the conference:

- How can aboriginal peoples continue to steward the land and nurture their traditional culture and foodways?
- How can we work together to protect the water?
- Do farmers need to own land? What system will guarantee tenure?
- How can we work with municipalities to develop policies that preserve land for food production?

As we worked to address these questions, plans emerged for member groups in the Network to collaborate with the Community Food Action Initiative (under "Act Now" with funds from the provincial government through the Health Authorities) to develop useful and effective local action for community food security. These will centre on the development and publicizing of food policies at every level which support local food production, processing, and consumption. A priority for the Network is to support small-scale processing plants geared to the local market, particularly meat processing, which is understood to be a critical component of a sustainable local food economy.

Other plans emerging from the conference focus on 'eat local' initiatives, and building links between community programs and local food producers. Proven community food security programs such as the Good Food Box will be expanded with the goal of providing a reliable market for local produce; and the Network's communications will be consolidated, with work on the website and regional Gatherings.

The spirit of respect and collaboration which characterized the Gathering, it was agreed, is also basic to addressing these questions. The "cross-sectoral" dialogue which is the keynote of the BC Food Systems Network will form the basis for follow-up work towards a just and sustainable food system in the province in which

- everyone is able to acquire, in a dignified manner, adequate quantity and quality of personally acceptable food;
- people are able to earn a living wage by growing, producing, processing, handling,

retailing and serving food;

- the quality of land, air and water are maintained and enhanced for future generations; and
- food is recognized as the basis of health and celebrated as central to community and cultural integrity.