

Sorrento Gathering 2006 Summary Report

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More than 100 adults and a dozen children gathered at the Sorrento Conference Centre from September 14-17th, 2006, for the seventh annual Sorrento Gathering of the BC Food Systems Network. The theme for the Gathering, Food Sovereignty: Reclaiming Our Local Food Systems, was addressed in different ways throughout an event which was, according to several participants, the “best ever Sorrento”.

Diversity

The initial round of introductions indicated the diversity of participants. There were people working on policy for government, food business, and non-profit organizations; farmers and gardeners, large and small; community food action leaders and participants in programs such as the Pregnancy Outreach Programs and Community Kitchens; cooks and chefs; health professionals; high-school and university students; traditional Native elders and teachers and immigrant outreach workers and community organizers. It can be argued that the most important aspect of the Network is its ability to attract such a diversity of age, involvement, culture and race and have everyone feel included and respected. The Network has always operated on the assumption that it is those who are being marginalized who have the clearest vision of how the system works, and so it is appropriate for them to take leadership in discussions aimed at social justice.

Among the marginalized in the contemporary food system are, ironically, farmers, as policies affecting them increasingly reflect the interests of the urban population and the corporate sector. Thus the theme of Food Sovereignty: Reclaiming Our Local Food Systems struck a bell for farmers as well as those more obviously powerless, such as Indigenous people and the rural and urban poor.

Food Security or Food Sovereignty?

The opening panel addressed the first part of the theme: Food Sovereignty. Dawn Morrison, fresh from coordinating the first Indigenous Food Sovereignty Conference for the Interior BC First Nations, described how that conference made it clear that the cornerstone for Indigenous people is relationships. Sovereignty is essentially the authority to engage in the traditional complex and spiritual relationships with plants, animals, water – as well as other humans – and to fulfill the obligations of responsibility to them. Dawn echoed the concern for language expressed by Brewster Kneen who compared language to food: often, he said, we just eat food without thinking of its effect on our bodies and our health, and in the same way we often ignore the implications of the language we use. Speaking, for example, about “resources” (“genetic resources”, “natural resources”, even “human resources”) implies that these are items available for ownership and exploitation; “security” carries overtones of individualism and militarism. We need to be careful that we do not describe “sovereignty” in the same language of control that characterizes the system we are critiquing. Patrick Steiner brought the discussion back to the farm, describing how patents and other forms of control are depriving farmers of their ability to

engage in the traditional practice of saving seeds. Seed sovereignty means the power to defend the world's biodiversity from the depredations of corporations concerned only with profit, and often fully integrated with the agro-toxin and pharmaceutical industries.

The themes of respect, relationships, and determination to act in defense of diversity which were raised in the keynote panel resonated throughout the following two days. The second plenary, which addressed the other part of the theme: Reclaiming Our Local Food Systems, added a focus on the specific needs of farmers, and many of the workshops and round-table discussions dealt with the practical challenges of developing policies and programs that support local, sustainable, and just food systems.

Locally Focussed Food and Farming

Cliff Stainsby opened the second plenary by flagging the incipient crisis of climate change as the context for an increased emphasis on localism. Agriculture is currently part of the problem, but could become part of the solution, he said, and added that we will not be able to affect climate change unless we change our food system. The key to this, as the following speakers emphasized, is the establishment of infrastructure that is scale-appropriate to serve the local market. Kathleen Gibson from the Meat Industry Enhancement Strategy talked about the struggle to get regulators to even recognize the validity of such a focus, particularly at the moment in the case of meat. Interpretation of the Meat Inspection Regulation tends, despite the efforts of the Network and processors, producers and people working within the system, to default to scales of operation that are unworkable and unaffordable for local food systems. Candice Appleby of the Small-Scale Food Processors described ways in which small-scale operators are beginning to work cooperatively in terms of marketing and distribution and Heather Pritchard discussed some of the new cooperative approaches she is involved with through FarmFolk/CityFolk. in terms of land. The sky-rocketing price of land is one of the most important impediments to farming in BC. Some form of public or collective ownership, she said, is the only alternative.

Brent Warner reminded the group that it was in 1944 that the first refrigerated truck went down the highway, profoundly and perhaps irrevocably changing the food system. He spoke eloquently about the need to get agriculture back into the schools. We have to concentrate our energy on local, as organic has moved offshore; Chinese organic garlic, for example, is being sold in BC at a fraction of the price of the local garlic. Brent also noted that there are allies – many institutions want to support local food but find it costly and difficult. As for the Land Reserve, he is more concerned about the fact that despite preservation of agricultural land, we are losing farmers – only 20% of the ALR is being farmed. A participant commented that while slogans such as Eat Local can be helpful to raise awareness, the important thing is the conditions of production and minimizing food travel. Nature's Path, for example, located in the Lower Mainland, has to face the fact that for their grain supplies they have to go to the Prairies.

Learning and Action

These panels were interspersed with a wide variety of workshops and round-table discussions which moved the keynote themes into practical action. Several sessions were led by local Indigenous traditional teachers who addressed the spiritual and physical disciplines required to

live at home on the land. Other workshops discussed effective strategies for outreach to diverse communities; strategies to establish healthy food policies in schools (this one was co-led by a nutritionist and a high-school student) and in institutions and community programs; the use of tools such as Food Charters and community mapping to consolidate a base for community action for food security /sovereignty; research needs for the community food security movement; community economic development with food. There was a session in which the provincial government's Act Now initiative was analyzed in order to identify the opportunities that might emerge for the grassroots voices represented by the Network to engage in food policy at the provincial level.

Other workshops addressed specific issues of relevance to local food systems. A roundtable looked at the Good Food Box as a link between local farmers and low-income consumers; the results of this discussion were carried forward to a workshop at the subsequent bi-national conference in Vancouver in October, Bridging Borders Towards Food Security. There was a spirited discussion with Paddy Doherty about the new national organic standard and its effects on the local organic organizations, and another following Heather Pritchard's presentation in the plenary on ideas and initiatives to make land accessible to farmers, particularly new farmers. Brewster Kneen gave an update on genetic engineering in food and agriculture. Specific skills training workshops included "Boots-on Grant-writing", fundraising ("Show Me The Money"), food dehydrating, canning, "Kids In The Kitchen", and gourmet vegetarian cooking (with chef Heidi Fink), as well as an alternative media youth-led session in which the teens created their own 'zine' expressing their perspectives on food issues.

Strengthening the Network: Evaluation

The Sorrento Gathering was not, however, merely a conference where people share information, experience, and ideas. As the annual gathering of the BC Food Systems Network, its central purpose and focus was on strengthening the Network, a particularly important goal because Cathleen Kneen, the founder and Executive Director was moving out of the province shortly after the Gathering. It is perhaps not surprising that this was the aspect which was referred to most frequently by participants in their evaluations.

They commented on the inclusion of children, both in the children's program and in the evening party (where a local band led a toe-tapping slap-dash assortment of round and square dances as well as general hopping about which got nearly everyone in the assembly on their feet). They commented on the recognition of needs other than intellectual, through exercise breaks and Tai Chi, along with a roundtable called "Do as I say, not as I do – Activists Avoiding Burnout" and a walking tour to the Sorrento Farmers' Market. They appreciated the quality of the food and that it was local and organic, and they were particularly appreciative of the traditional feast of salmon, vegetables, wild rice and bannock which was prepared for the Gathering by the Lakes Secwepemc people on whose territory the Gathering was held.

The vast majority of the participants indicated that their goal in attending the Gathering was to 'network' – to make meaningful contact with others working in the field, and to gain a better understanding of food security issues and how others were addressing them. Some were interested specifically in food policy, others wanted to learn about GMOs or to learn new skills

such as canning and vegetarian cookery, and a large number wanted to learn more about the challenges facing local farmers. Many spoke of a desire to get ‘rejuvenated’ and ‘inspired’ and their evaluations indicated that one of the key outcomes of the Gathering was a renewal of energy and enthusiasm.

Next Steps

In terms of action in their own communities, participants listed a broad spectrum of ideas, resources and tools. Many will use the information (and energy) to enhance the work they have already started in local community food security endeavours. For others, though, Sorrento provided a new lens or focus, particularly on farm issues and food policy. In response to the question “Did the Gathering demonstrate the links between agriculture, food security, and local food systems?” everyone said “yes” and one participant commented, “Yes, but the links are what gathered people in the first place. This conference looked at how these links can be strengthened.” Coupled with the Food Forums and other local initiatives being funded one way or another through the Act Now initiative throughout the province, we anticipate that one important result of the Gathering will be the development of a broader base for the community food security movement (and the Network) over the next year.

Food Policy

The evaluation also asked the question “How does discussion of policy and process at the Gathering affect your thinking about how you function in your local community?”. Several participants commented on the continuing difficulty of thinking about policy. Others were more positive. One commented that it “completely changed my way of thinking. Prior to this, all that mattered to me was access to food. How close is the store, parking, operating hours, but now I feel that I have to look to food in a totally different way.” Another reflected that it “reinforces my belief in practice informing policy. The inclusive, democratic way the Gathering works is always inspiring. I use it as an example of how a cooperative collaborative system can work.”

The Value of the Network

One important piece of this Gathering was to say farewell to Cathleen and to celebrate her work in founding and nurturing the Network. As people told stories of how they had been enticed into food security work and challenged to think more broadly and deeply about the issues, it became clear that the real genius of the Network has been its insistence on diversity and respect – creating a context in which people old and young, Native, white, and immigrant, poor and middle class, welfare moms and ‘professionals’, all felt encouraged to speak from their own perspective. “Networking” in this context is not exchanging business cards but gaining a deep understanding of how our visions and goals are inter-connected. While Cathleen may be credited with instigating this culture, it is clearly firmly rooted and will continue to grow.