CROSS-BORDER DIMENSIONS OF VUNTUT GWITCHIN FOOD SECURITY

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Indigenous peoples in Canada are disproportionately vulnerable to food insecurity, diet-related illness, and lack of access to land and traditional foods.

“UN Food envoy blasts inequality, poverty in Canada”

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Food Security

Agency - the policies and processes that enable the achievement of food security

Acceptability - access to culturally acceptable food, produced and obtained in ways that do not compromise people's dignity, self-respect or human rights

Availability - sufficient food for all people at all times

Adequacy - access to food that is nutritious and safe, and produced in environmentally sustainable ways

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Governance and Food Security

- For northern indigenous peoples, land claims reflect their aspirations for self-determination and the preservation of their valued way of life, a life predicated in large part on the harvesting of wildlife resources (Doubleday, 1989).
- The policy and legislative environment created by these land claims agreements have had a major effect at the community level by influencing what forms of livelihood can be attained (i.e., bureaucratic maze of ANCSA or setting of Inuit Domestic Harvest Levels).
- Land Claims are capable of either reinforcing subsistence rights or producing additional food insecurities.
The Vuntut Gwitchin

- This project stems from the January 2009 workshop held in Old Crow, Yukon – What Do Our Changing Homelands Mean for our Health?
- Recommendation #5 called for research to examine how the enforcement of the US-Canadian border has affected food sharing between Old Crow and Gwich’in communities in Alaska (friends and family).
- Identify ways in which food sharing can be strengthened in times of need.
METHODOLOGY

- Household Food Sharing Survey (87 out of 102 households surveyed)
  - Over the past year how much country foods did your household receive and/or give to other Old Crow households and other communities?
  - What species of food were shared?
  - What was the personal relationship of the exchange (i.e., family, friends)?
  - What barriers have you encountered when trying to share food?
METHODOLOGY

Key Informant Interviews (25)

- Elders.
- Knowledgeable Experts.
- VGFN Leaders.
- Renewable Resource Council.
- Territorial, Federal and US Government Agency Representatives
METHODOLOGY

Youth Training

• Conducting and Transcribing Interviews.
• Administering Surveys.
• Presentations.
• Ethical and Respectful Community-Based Research.
Food Sharing with Other Communities
Food Sharing with Whitehorse
**FOOD SHARING (GIVING)**

- A total of 16,173 lb of country foods were given.
- A total of 246 instances of food sharing were reported.
- 172 (70%) were between family members.
- 63 (26%) were between non-related friends.
- 11 (4%) were given for a range of community events.
**FOOD SHARING (RECEIVING)**

- A total of 1,889 lb of country foods were received.
- 22 Old Crow households reported receiving food from friends and family from 6 other communities.
- A total of 57 instances of food sharing were reported.
- 33 (58%) were between family members; 24 (42%) were between non-related friends.
NOTED BARRIERS AFFECTING FOOD SHARING

- Costs
- Risks associated with travel.
- Demand (personal need).
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- Risks associated with travel.
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- Import\Export Permits and RCMP involvement.
Yukon Territory Wildlife Act, 2002, Export Permit

The Right to Share

• In some Land Claims areas, for example the Gwich’in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement 1992), permits are not required for sharing food.

• In the case of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Final Agreement: “The necessary legislation has not yet been amended … and legislative amendments must be made before export can occur without a permit (YTG Official)
• “In order to amend this, the VGFNFA would have to be changed. As you might imagine, this isn’t a simple thing to do” (YTG Official)

• “If we amended our legislation to meet the spirit of the Final Agreements, and stopped issuing Wildlife Export Permits, USDA might then not let that product into the US, because now there would be no documentation as to it's origin” (YTG Official).
Legalities of Food Sharing

• In cases where the necessary permit is not received, the Vuntut Gwitchin can now find themselves in violation of:

• subsection 6(2) and 105(1) of the Yukon Territory Wildlife Act Yukon Act (S.C. 2002)

• sections 6(3) and 7(1) of Wild Animal and Plant Protection and Regulation of International and Interprovincial Trade Act (WAPPRIITA – 1992).
Traditional Territory of the Vuntut Gwitchin is Administered by:

- 1 territorial government (Yukon)
- 1 state government (Alaska)
- 2 federal governments (US and Canada),
- 3 comprehensive land claims (ANCSA, 1971; GLCA, 1992; VGFNA, 1993).

Arguably the Vuntut Gwitchin now find themselves with more territorial restrictions upon their lives and livelihoods than any other Aboriginal group in North America.

“I make a few trips down to Fort Yukon by boat, but I am scared to take meat from here down over the border for my relatives.”
“Hard Times Are Coming”

• “These laws are wrong for us up here, because we are families and families take care of each other in every way and we always have and always will. We must look at these concerns right away, we need to make sure our people get the food they need.”

• “Today we face the hardship of global warming and climate change and how do we secure and prevent our young generation for the future hardship? How do we do that and how do we share with our neighbors? And how do you get rid of that cross border issue. It’s a big problem .... hardship is coming.”
Sovereignty Over Customary Food Systems

• “We should not feel afraid to go across that border and shake hands with a Gwich’in person you know for along time without fear. We had that freedom long time ago... but now there are restrictions and people pay a penalty for it because of regulations.”

• “Our strength comes from our Nation, not individual villages. The only way it will work is to make a Nation across two Nations, one people, one voice. That’s the only way it will work. We belong to the Gwich’in Nation and it must be recognized by both Canada and the US - all governments.”
Conclusion

• The practical significance of maintaining customary food systems is being determined by how those rights and interests are reflected in very institutions designed to empower indigenous peoples - land claims.

• While the issues are complex, and there is no single answer to address food insecurities in the north, an effective starting point is to recognize and support the customary food systems that have long existed in indigenous communities, and ensure they are not adversely affected by over-reaching political bureaucracies.
Thank You

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