

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Engaging communities in sustainable food systems research

By Kristen Lowitt, Ph.D.



Why this research is important

I led a partnership-based study (2015-17) with SON to look at the relationships between access to fisheries in their traditional territory and outcomes for food security in terms of access to sufficient, nutritious and culturally appropriate food. The research sought to contribute to the community's efforts to better link fisheries management, economic development, and local food needs in their policy and programming.

How the research was conducted

Working closely with staff members from SON, I undertook four focus groups involving 28 households to

What you need to know

For Indigenous communities across Canada, re-establishing access to traditional foods (sometimes also called 'country foods') is recognized as a key pillar of achieving food security and [food sovereignty](#). For the [Saugeen Ojibway Nation \(SON\)](#) in Ontario, engaging in wild harvest activities throughout their traditional territory on the Saugeen (Bruce) Peninsula and the waters of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay has long been vital to their food systems, culture, and trade. Fishing is of especial significance to the Saugeen Ojibway peoples, with the Ontario Supreme Court reaffirming in 1993 that SON has an Aboriginal and treaty right to fish for commercial and sustenance purposes within their traditional territory.

understand their experiences in accessing local fish, as well as 16 interviews with Elders, fish harvesters, and decision-makers to gather their perspectives on traditional food practices, sustainable livelihoods, and fisheries management.

What the researcher found

A key finding is that while access to fish for food security depends on SON's legal rights to the water, these are not

sufficient to deriving food security benefits. Due to the disruptive impacts of colonialism, more attention needs to be placed on strengthening the social mechanisms that are important to SON making better use of their legal rights. These include enhanced transfer of inter-generational fishing knowledge, rebuilding cultural identities tied to land and water, and strengthening community sharing and exchange networks. As an Elder explained, “A lot of people have lost their language. You can’t translate what the Ojibway say into English and get the feeling of how it’s attached to the cycle of nature.”

Beyond the community level, we also found that environmental change is impacting SON’s fisheries. Some participants were concerned about the introduction of non-native fish species to the lake, particularly when these prey on native fish important to the local culture and food system. For example, a community decision-maker said: “What happens if whitefish die off, and they stock something else? You will lose that connection to the clan system, the spirits of those fish.”

How this research can be used

The full results of our study are available in the [Journal of Great Lakes Research](#). We hope this research may be useful to other Indigenous communities engaged in similar struggles to assert governance over their fisheries and obtain food security and food sovereignty.

About the researcher

Dr. Kristen Lowitt is Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography at Brandon University. Indigenous food sovereignty is one part of her larger community-engaged research program about sustainable food systems. Much of her current research is taking place around Lake Superior, looking at connections between sustainable fisheries and food systems in this region as a member of the [Food: Locally Embedded](#)

[Globally Engaged](#) research network. Moving forward, she is excited about the prospect of developing new relationships with communities in Manitoba to build capacity for just and sustainable food systems.

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Keywords

Food sovereignty; sustainable food systems; participatory research

Publications based on this research

Lowitt, K. & Neis, B. (2018). The retail food environment and household food provisioning strategies in the rural region of Bonne Bay on Newfoundland’s west coast. In Keske, C., (Ed.), *Newfoundland Food Futures Anthology* (pp.213–233). St John’s, NL: ISER Books.

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