

Harvesting Hope in Northern Manitoba

Can Participatory Video Help Rebuild Aboriginal Food Sovereignty?

By Shirley Thompson and Vanessa Lozecznik

The video "Harvesting Hope in Northern Manitoba Communities" explores issues of food sovereignty in Canadian Aboriginal communities. Thompson and Lozecznik report on a participatory video project that empowered First Nations communities in northern Manitoba to articulate food security concerns and develop strategies for addressing these issues.

Community members in northern Manitoba collaborated with researchers on a participatory video to tell their story of the challenges to, and the possibilities for, food sovereignty. The story became richer and more accurate after repeated community showings. The iterative process ensured the participatory video valued local knowledge of traditional food harvesting, providing a rich history of food sovereignty in Manitoba. Feedback from community members was very positive — people loved sharing their stories and seeing northerners represented in media. They pushed to have it distributed to all schools. The result is a video that explores the challenges and solutions from grassroots experts and a video that teaches and inspires.

First Nations Food Security in Canada

People should be able to both make a living and eat according to the definition created at the Forum for Food Sovereignty: "Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems." This definition links food security with sustainable livelihoods.

Historically, First Nations food secu-

rity rested on people's relationship to the land and its productivity. Traditional economies, governments, social and spiritual practices of Aboriginal peoples were systematically disrupted by the imposition of the Indian Act, and the reserve and residential school systems by settlers.

In 1996, Canada rated first in the world on the United Nations Development Index; however, First Nations communities in Canada were rated 63rd. The same inequity exists today; many households in First Nations communities are food insecure, as well as lacking running water and sewer systems.

Researchers at the University of Manitoba conducted a survey in 14 First Nations communities in northern Manitoba in 2009 and found household food insecurity rates of 75% in northern Manitoba, which is eight times the Canadian rate. These findings were the impetus for a participatory video project.

Participatory Video

Participatory video is a set of techniques to involve a group or community in shaping and creating their own film to tell their own story. Participatory video is credited with enhancing individual and community confidence, self-esteem, creativity, and capacity to communicate with others. According to the Society for People's Education,

Empowerment and Development Trust, participatory video is able to amplify the voice of the underprivileged.

Production of "Harvesting Hope in Northern Manitoba"

Filming in northern Manitoba, we found video to be a door opener in most of the communities we visited, with many people, particularly elders, wanting to tell their stories. Participatory research and Aboriginal culture both focus on oral transmission of knowledge. One woman elder says in the video, "I am not going to go to the grave with what I know." While we trained community members and provided cameras, most footage in the video was filmed by researchers who interviewed community members about their own stories and issues.

There were repeated community viewings of the footage at various stages of production as part of the participatory process. During these viewings, community members identified four key themes: 1) the importance of country foods; 2) factors undermining food sovereignty; 3) high rates of food insecurity; and 4) food-based community economic development.

1) The importance of country foods

In the past, fishing, hunting, gathering and gardening in Aboriginal communities provided an abundance of food. A female elder said, "Growing up as a child, my father and mother did a lot of gardening, and so did my grandparents... Dad did a lot of fishing and trapping and hunting, it was the way to feed the family... muskrat, beaver, ducks, chickens, moose, whatever he could get, and that's what we grew up on, and we were healthy!"

Elders described diverse and plentiful food sources and lamented the fact that young people were no longer hunting,

fishing, and doing traditional activities to the same extent. A woman from South Indian Lake (SIL) said, "My big wish would be to see our young people doing the traditional ways of preparing meat and hunting, gardening and berry picking — everything to do with our food chain in the north."

In the video, past National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Ovide Mercredi points out that treaty rights stipulate food sovereignty with agriculture, hunting and fishing clauses and outline funding supports for sustainable livelihoods and food security. "We have a treaty right to agriculture," says Mercredi.

Mercredi continues, "When it comes to the idea of food sovereignty we do have that as treaty people. What is an obstacle is the perception that the treaty rights cannot be used for commercial purposes... These are not only curtailing our treaty rights but also restricting the sharing of that food with other communities." Regulation prevents the sale of wild meat, and commercial fishing is under restrictive quotas and regulations preventing public sale.

2) Factors undermining food sovereignty

Participants talked about environmental and regulatory issues that undermine food sovereignty. Many northern communities experience the impacts of water level regulation from hydro-electric damming, as well as the consequences of logging and mining activities.

Hydro-Electric Dams

The Nelson River now flows faster and in the opposite direction due to Manitoba Hydro's damming. After the displacement and relocation of the SIL First Nation due to the permanent flooding from the hydro-electric dam at their community site, the quantity and quality of fish fell and was no longer considered the highest grade for the best price.

"The flooding of the lake really affected us. It affects our food chain and everything that we get off the land. It really damaged a lot of our hunting areas and our fishing areas and even our berry pick-



Northern students learning participatory video storyboarding techniques.

ing areas. It's a terrible thing to live with on a day-to-day basis," explains one woman from SIL.

Hydro-electric damming decimated fish populations. "They now have to use forty nets to catch as much as in four nets before. It is a lot of hard work," says another woman from SIL.

Negative Impacts of Regulation

Fishers from SIL, Barren Lands First Nation and the Four Island Lake First Nation blamed the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation (FFMC) monopoly for their poverty. Despite the high cost of gas for boats and freight, FFMC pays northern fishers a very low rate. In the mid-1970s, with the opening of the large FFMC processing plant and increased regulation, the local fish processing plants in most communities closed, which took jobs out of the communities and increased freight costs as whole frozen fish had to be shipped.

Now, fishers are not allowed to sell to local institutions. For food to be either given to the public, through a school, hospital or other institution, or sold locally, meat and fish must be inspected in a federal food

facility according to the Manitoba *Public Health Act's* Food and Food Handling Establishment Regulations; however, a federal food processing facility is unavailable in northern Manitoba.

A cook at St Theresa Point First Nation secondary school said that she would have preferred to serve moose stew or other wild game and fish to extend the limited food budget and provide culturally appropriate foods: "Our budget is limited to the \$15 students pay each month for lunch, making it difficult to serve healthy food at the expensive prices found here."

Government treaties signed between Canada and First Nations did promise hunting, trapping and fishing rights. However, Manitoba Conservation, a provincial government body, has jurisdiction of all waterways in Manitoba including those adjacent to First Nation reserves. Researchers videotaped a net being set by community health representatives at Garden Hill First Nation as part of a health program to feed 20 families or about 150 to 200 people. Later that day, the net was pulled up and confiscated by Manitoba Conservation. This heavy-handed regulation contributes to food insecurity.

3) Food security

In the food security survey conducted through the University of Manitoba, household food insecurity rates in northern Manitoba First Nations communities were highest typically in communities lacking road access. The lowest rates were in Nelson House First Nation (47%), which community members attributed to their country food program.

Many participants complained about lack of access to a healthy diet due to the cost and quality of food at the Northern Store, which is often the only grocery

store in First Nations communities. Thirteen of the 14 communities in this study have no store or only one store. A common complaint was: "The existing Northern Store selection is very limited and costly. After shipping, the produce is often damaged." A price survey of all the stores in these communities found that the cost of fruits and vegetables was two to three times higher in the northern communities than in southern communities.

The only grocery store serving both Wasagamack First Nation and Garden Hill First Nation, where several thousand

people reside, is located on adjacent islands. To reach their food store, community members take boats in the summer, skidoos in winter, and helicopters during ice break-up. As a result, transportation costs in accessing food are extremely high. Similarly, a number of very small communities along the Bayline Railroad, including Thicket-Portage, Ilford and War Lake First Nations have neither a grocery store nor all-weather roads. Without a commuter train, travel to the nearest grocery store in Thompson requires at least one night in a hotel, taxi and train expenses, which adds up to about \$250 in travel expenses per trip.

4) Community economic development *Nelson House Country Food program*

The Nelson House Country Food Program is an innovative project that provides community members with access to healthy foods, while creating jobs and building community. The program employs seven community residents who hunt and fish year-round and distribute free food amongst community members, prioritizing elders, the sick, and low-income, and single-parent families.

Charlie Hart, the past program coordinator says, "We are providing food to 1500 people out of 2500 [people in the community] and all of them are happy getting fresh meat and fish. It's a good way to maintain traditional culture in a healthy manner and others should try to implement that too."

Ron Spence, a councillor with Nelson House First Nation was very aware of the need for wildlife conservation. "With the growing human population and industry we have to protect our own resources. By doing that we can regulate and govern ourselves internally and locally and still work with [Manitoba] Conservation. They are a part of setting up the policies," he said.

The program works around the many systems that restrict country food use, to create sustainable livelihoods and to build traditional cultural awareness in a way that is statistically significant and related to improved food security.



SHIRLEY THOMPSON

Interviewing Shirley Ducharme and her husband regarding smoking fish the traditional way.



Women taking a lead role in teaching children about gardening in Granville Lake First Nation.

Northern Healthy Food Initiative

The Northern Healthy Food Initiative (NHFI) is a provincial program that provides limited funding to NGOs to run workshops on gardening and cooking and to buy materials, including seeds, soil amendments, a rototiller and shovels.

“Definitely these folks for transportation reasons can’t go to town to a plant or grocery store because of economics,” says one resident. The gardening activities increased community cohesiveness, community capacity and healing. An elder says, “The program is really popular in the communities... I think that it brings a lot of community development.” However, without permanent policy, infrastructure change and capacity building NHFI’s impact could be transitory.

The video identifies policy as creating food insecurity. However, the video’s impact on policy is unknown. Invited showings and discussion were held at two Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs conferences, provincial and federal government offices and international conferences. The participatory video is not only a tool for community building but also sustainable change, as nobody should go hungry in a rich country like Canada.

The video may be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-dk2cu>
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