

Feasting for Change: Reconnecting with Food, Place & Culture

Abstract

This paper examines and shares the promising practices in promoting health and well-being that emerged from an innovative project, entitled “Feasting for Change”. Taking place on Coast Salish territories, British Columbia, Canada, Feasting for Change aimed to empower Indigenous communities in revitalizing traditional knowledge about the healing power of foods. This paper contributes to a growing body of literature that illuminates how solidarities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities can be fostered to support meaningful decolonization of mainstream health practices and discourses. In particular, it provides a hopeful model for how community-based projects can take inspiration and continual leadership from Indigenous Peoples. This paper offers experiential and holistic methods that enhance the capacity for intergenerational, land-based, and hands-on learning about the value of traditional food and cultural practices. It also demonstrates how resources (digital stories, plant knowledge cards, celebration cookbooks, and language videos) can be successfully developed with and used by community to ensure the ongoing process of healthful revitalization.

Keywords

Food, medicine, experiential learning, intergenerational, health, wellness, resilience, revitalization, feasting

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Introduction

To take the territorial lands away from a people whose very spirit is so intrinsically connected to Mother Earth was to actually dispossess them of their very soul and being; it was to destroy whole Indigenous nations. Weakened by disease and separated from their traditional foods and medicines, First Nations Peoples had no defence against further government encroachments on their lives. (Fred Kelly, Anishinaabe Elder, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

We commence this paper with the poignant words shared by Anishinaabe Elder and residential school survivor Fred Kelly in his testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015). These words are part of a living archive that speaks to the grave violence inflicted upon generations of Indigenous people across this country. As this opening quote reveals, one of the damaging impacts of Canada's colonial policies and practices is that they aim to disconnect Indigenous Peoples from their land, their foods, and their medicines, which feed not only the body, but the heart and spirit.

The TRC reported that within Canada's residential schools, food policies played a particularly violent role. In fact, this process of culinary acculturation was a key feature of colonialism (Turner, 2014). In addition to being separated from their families and their land, children were denied access to their traditional diets. In their home communities, many students were raised on food that their parents hunted, fished, or harvested. These meals were very different from the European diets served at the schools. Porridge every day, hardtack biscuits, and powdered milk; these were some of the foods that were served in residential schools, replacing rich traditional diets. As indicated in the TRC (2015) this "change in diet added to the students' sense of disorientation" (p. 91). As well as being denied traditional foods, in many cases children were denied food to the point of severe malnutrition and starvation. Indeed, the TRC affirms that thousands of Indigenous children died of malnutrition as a result of such colonial policies.

While Canada's last residential school closed in 1996, it has been widely acknowledged that the legacy of these schools has had lasting traumatic impacts. The colonial food practices

enforced in residential schools did not end when the doors of the last residential school were shut. In part as a result of being disconnected from traditional foods and subjected to severe malnutrition, Indigenous people continue to face disproportionately high rates of dietary illnesses such as Type 2 diabetes and heart disease (Turner, 2007). For instance, Indigenous people aged 45 and older have nearly twice the rate of diabetes as the non-Indigenous population. As the TRC and various scholars have asserted, closing the gap in these health inequities must remain a priority if reconciliation is to be achieved (Bisset, Cargo, Delormier, Macaulay, & Potvin, 2004). A key question that emerges from the TRC is: How can health agencies in Canada support Indigenous communities in reconnecting with and revitalizing traditional food systems that hold the possibility for healing?

In keeping with the teachings shared by Cheryl Bryce of the Lekwungen, we believe that this type of revitalization starts with “protecting the land, reinstating traditional roles, and practicing everyday acts of resurgence” (Corntassel & Bryce, 2012, p. 158). This paper explores how a project entitled “Feasting for Change” has modestly contributed to this ongoing process of healing. Feasting for Change took place on Coast Salish territories and was inspired by the knowledge of traditional food practices among Indigenous Peoples of this land.

Drawing on Indigenous research methodologies, this paper is written in a conversational, storytelling format and attempts to privilege the voices of communities who participated in Feasting for Change. As some Indigenous scholars have suggested, it is vital that we expand academic spaces to include modes of knowledge exchange, such as story, that continue to play a vital role in many Indigenous communities (Kovach, 2009; Kulnieks, Longboat, & Young, 2010). Embedded in this narrative are photographs taken during Feasting for Change events so as to situate this project within its Coast Salish context.

Methods

Setting the Table

On a foggy day in late May 2007 invitations were delivered to Elders across south Vancouver Island. They were invited to a feast, prepared and hosted by the T'Sou-ke First Nation in collaboration with Island Health, Lifecycles, and Vancity. As the smell of freshly steamed halibut and crab lifted in the air, guests came together around a large table to share foods prepared in time-honoured ways. Over this feast, people shared stories about both the loss of their food and the value of revitalizing their food practices (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Feast prepared and hosted by T’Sou-ke First Nation, 2007.

This 1-day event hosted by T’Sou-ke First Nation was also supported by Aboriginal health dietitian Fiona Devereaux, from Island Health, in an effort to nourish a space for dialogue about food and its role in community. During this feast, it became apparent that there was an appetite to host future events like this one. In particular, participating communities articulated a keen desire to promote feasting as a platform for Elders to share their knowledge with youth and their community.

Given the vibrant support articulated by Elders and the wider communities at this initial event, a collaborative project called “Feasting for Change” was envisioned. Feasting for Change, it was collectively imagined, would create opportunities for First Nations across Vancouver Island to continue to host feasts and engage with people about the food and nutrition needs in their community.

A key question emerged in the early planning of this project: How exactly do Island Health and others play a “supportive” role in this process? The goal of the project was, after all, to create opportunities for Indigenous people to reconnect with and revitalize their *own* knowledge. Given the deep colonial legacies of health services in Canada that position Indigenous people as recipients and settler health practitioners as providers (Kelm, 1998), what place, if any, should Island Health have in this project? Indeed, this question connects to broader issues raised by Indigenous scholars, such as Glen Coulthard (2014), who asks: How might non-Indigenous allies work in solidarity with Indigenous struggles for decolonization and self-determination?

A series of conversations between Indigenous communities and Fiona Devereaux took place in order to identify how—or indeed whether—to move forward with this as a joint project. It was determined that a “solidaristic” (i.e., undertaken in unity) project could be possible if all events associated with Feasting for Change took leadership from First Nations. In particular, it was determined that Elders would play a leadership role, identifying proper protocol for all activities. Respected Tsawout Elders, such as Earl Claxton Jr., had a strong leadership role

throughout the duration of the project. Additionally, it was determined that youth should play a role in facilitating and guiding the overall project. Raven Hartley played a significant role as youth advisor, and her gentle community-building energy provided meaningful direction for Feasting for Change.

Based on community consultation, a diverse working group grounded in the protocol of local First Nations was also formed. The working group comprised Indigenous communities, Island Health, community groups, individuals, and students from the University of Victoria. The structure of this group was based on the principle of reciprocity and was aimed at creating a caring environment where ideas could be freely shared. As testament to the success of this vision, Raven Hartley stated at the end of the project: “Although we might call this a ‘working group,’ it is really more the Feasting for Change family.” It was collectively determined that the working group’s role would be to “set the table” and let the community create their feasting vision. Part of this role would also involve the working group securing funding to allow these feasts, and associated events, to become possible.

As an active member of the working group, Fiona Devereaux reflected on this method of engagement:

There is so much knowledge and story in the communities. Many people just need a venue to share this with their community. And the youth are just as excited to learn how to pick berries, harvest seafood, build a pit, barbecue salmon, and celebrate their families, culture, and foods.

Really it is about “setting the table” and letting the magic of community happen (Figures 2 and 3). The role of the working group, in other words, is not to impart knowledge about food or healthy eating but to create space—set the table—for meaningful exchange, engagement, and experiential learning within and between Indigenous communities to revitalize their own knowledge systems. In order to share the findings of this process more widely, Feasting for Change also collaborated with a community-engaged researcher based at the University of Victoria (Jennifer Bagelman) to facilitate the documenting of this project. The method underlying Feasting for Change is thus one defined by an intercultural, interdisciplinary collaboration that brings together Indigenous Peoples, community organizations, Indigenous health agencies, and the university. This relationship is rooted in First Nations protocol.



Figure 2. Feast in Pauquachin, 2010.



Figure 3. Feast in Malahat, 2007.

Results and Discussion

From 2007 to 2012, Feasting for Change led 51 feasts and 10 other events inspired by the diversity and wisdom of the Knowledge Keepers and Elders in the nine South Island Coast Salish communities and a large urban community served by the Victoria Native Friendship Centre. These events reached over 5,000 people. First Nations communities primarily across southern Vancouver Island revived their traditional food practices through a host of activities, which included traditional salmon barbecue, pit cooking, berry picking, cleaning fish and crab, plant walks, and making tea.

During one such event in August 2011, Elder Earl Claxton Jr., J. B. Williams, and Fiona Devereaux collaborated with leaders in the community to host a workshop in Pacheedaht on how to traditionally can salmon, smoke clams on oceanspray sticks (ironwood), and make scow bread with fresh blackberries. During another event on a beautiful day later in August, the SCIA'NEW First Nation prepared a feast for 60 people to experience a traditional pit cook, and shared their method and technique along the way (Figure 4).



Figure 4. SCIA'NEW First Nation leads a pit cook, 2007

Meanwhile, as food steamed in the pit, a group of children were led by a Knowledge Keeper, Pakki Chippis, on a nature walk to view and learn about the “vast plant people” that grow and thrive in their community. In July 2007 the Pauquachin First Nation hosted a 2-day

community event that included a plant and berry gathering day and a huge feast. People ages one through 90 shared stories, skills and delighted in baked fish, clam chowder, fresh berry crumble, as well as traditional tea made by a local Elder, Elmer Henry. The Pauquachin feast sparked energy within the community to serve more traditional foods at their weekly community lunches, and to start a community fish cleaning and canning day. As Feasting for Change was gaining momentum, across the island other key food programs were emerging. For instance, Tsawout First Nation hosted its first Seafood Festival, attracting 800 people. Uu-a-thluk Fisheries was creating its community capacities program that hosted community food events. In addition, the first Traditional Foods Gathering took place in Nanaimo. Throughout this gathering, the Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities Indigenous Food Network (VCCIFN) was established. A revitalizing of Indigenous food, land, and culture was palpable.

Based on verbal feedback gleaned from the 51 hosted events, three key experiences were expressed as meaningful impacts of this project: revitalizing, intergenerational exchange, and community building. The testimonies below were shared by participants and speak to these outcomes.

Revitalizing

Many community members reflected on how Feasting for Change allowed them to reconnect with traditional foods (Figure 5), and the emotional and physical impact this had:

This is the first time I have tried these foods or seen food cooked in the ground.

I feel proud about how the old people used to do things.

I miss these foods; it is so nice to have them; my body always feels better when I eat them.



Figure 5. Lenore Jones enjoys barbecued clams in Pacheedaht First Nation, 2011.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer and Education

Many community members identified that one of the measures of success of this project was that youth reflected on a deepened sense of traditional knowledge after events (Figure 6). Participant Sandy George of Songhees First Nation stated:

I know my dad and family know a lot about food, but they don't do it anymore. Spending time at these feasts and seeing the vast knowledge and skills around food has inspired me to go home and ask more questions and see if my family will teach me.



Figure 6. Earl Claxton Jr. sharing how to clean crab at Pauquachin feast, 2009.

Community and Relationship Building

Reflecting on the community-building role played by Feasting for Change (Figure 7), First Nations community members shared the following statements:

It was so nice to have the families and friends together and having good times around our food.

People don't really get together a lot anymore as a community, but everyone was together that day. We usually only see each other at funerals.

I have never seen Indigenous people showcased in such a loving and family-focused way. The media never does that.



Figure 7. Elmer Henry teaches Sue Schaefer (diabetes nurse) how to cut fish, 2007.

In addition to the events themselves, which helped reconnect people with traditional foods, promoted intergenerational exchange, and stimulated community building, Feasting for Change also produced three sustainable resources: (a) a celebration cookbook; (b) digital stories, including SENĆOŦEN food and language videos; and (c) plant knowledge cards.

Feasting for Change Cookbook

“This book shares stories, teachings and tips on eating food through the seasons. Through Spring, Summer, Winter and Fall this book provides an opportunity to learn more about salmon, plants, teas, clams, mussels, gooseneck barnacles, BBQ fish, bread and more!” These words are written on the back cover of the *Feasting for Change* cookbook (front cover shown in Figure 8).



Figure 8. *Feasting for Change* cookbook, published in 2011

This book celebrates some of the Indigenous foods of Vancouver Island. Created through the teachings and learnings from Feasting for Change’s many events, and inspired by the diverse

wisdom of Elders and Knowledge Keepers, it provides a tangible resource for community to engage with these teachings in an ongoing way.

Digital Stories and SENĆOŦEN Food and Language Videos

Many First Nations communities have identified that promoting a healthful reconnection to Indigenous food systems simultaneously requires revitalizing Indigenous languages (Corntassel & Bryce, 2012). As Cheryl Bryce has suggested, a healthy and diverse diet that is connected to language revitalization enhances environmental sustainability as well as emotional, spiritual, and physical health (Corntassel & Bryce, 2012). Recognizing this holistic revitalization process, Feasting for Change placed a strong emphasis on supporting knowledge about food in traditional language throughout all events and in all resources produced. As part of this vision, Feasting for Change partnered with Saanich Adult Education Centre and the SENĆOŦEN apprentices to create five videos in SENĆOŦEN language about local food and plant knowledge. These videos were shared during feasts, not only promoting connection to traditional modes of preparing and eating food but also enhancing the languages used to convey meaning about these culturally significant foods and rituals.

Feasting for Change Plant Knowledge Cards

Inspired by over 100 plant walks and talks, which were led by Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the forests of Pacheedaht, the tide pools of Tsawout, and other locations in southern Vancouver Island, Feasting for Change created a set of 66 different cards identifying edible and medicinal plants native to this region.

Beautiful photographs of the plants by John Williams and Nancy Turner capture the eye and stir a sense of place. In keeping with the effort to revitalize knowledge of traditional languages, accompanying these images, the names of these plants are presented in three different Indigenous languages: SENĆOŦEN, Hul'q'umi'num, and Ditidaht.

Each card describes traditional uses and ways of harvesting plants, featuring seasonal indicators and a legend to help quickly identify uses. These cards serve an educational purpose, noted Jen McMullen, who helped create the cards along with members of the working group: "It's important to recognize that these foods and medicines are still being used and we need to treat them with respect so they will still be available to our grandchildren's grandchildren."

The cards are designed to encourage engaged, experiential learning about plants in the region. The description printed on the sage-coloured card box invites people to

bring [the cards] out on walks to help identify plants, their uses and keep the old ways strong. Much of the plants and knowledge within these cards is focused on the Coast Salish Territory. Many of these plants have more uses and more stories attached to them than is featured here. Please use these cards as an inspiration to talk to an Elder or Knowledge Keeper.

Ongoing Challenges

We acknowledge that Feasting for Change is only one small part of a larger process to enhance understanding of the different uses and teachings around precious foods on Coast Salish territory. The resources produced through Feasting for Change are considered living documents that will be added to and reassessed over time. We see Feasting for Change as part of the reconciliation process identified in the TRC, as an ongoing process of decolonization that requires continued commitment.

A key question that community has identified for future work is this: How do we ensure youth can take a leadership role?¹ At present, Island Health is working with community on a follow-up project, entitled “Food Is Medicine,” that begins to explore how youth might play a leadership role in translating traditional food practices through arts-based projects. A challenge to future success of many community-based initiatives like Feasting for Change is building enough capacity to ensure ongoing momentum. In an effort to build capacity, Food Is Medicine nourishes relationships with existing Indigenous youth programs in the region. In particular, Food Is Medicine partners with the excellent community school garden and restoration project that was created by Feasting for Change, called PEPÁKĒN HÁUTW (Blossoming Place), at ŁÁU, WELNEW Tribal School (see <http://crdcommunitygreenmap.ca/location/pepáken-háutw-blossoming-place>).

Conclusion

Exploring the design and implementation of Feasting for Change, this paper shares a variety of methods for meaningful, culturally appropriate, community-engaged health promotion. Feasting for Change illustrates how First Nations can meaningfully play a steering role with a wider working group, comprising both Indigenous people and non-Indigenous allies, in an effort to promote health and well-being and cultural revitalization. This work directly contributes to the existing literatures that dynamically explore the importance of solidaristic relationship building (Corntassel & Bryce, 2012) and the revitalization of food knowledge (Manitowabi & Shawande, 2011; Turner, 2007), which help set the table for the wider goal of reconciliation.

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¹ Identified as a key question based on feedback provided by 57 Elders at the 39th Elders Gathering held hosted by the Tsawout First Nation and WŚÁNEĆ Nations, Panorama Recreation 2015.

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