

PLACE-BASED FOOD SYSTEMS KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Syilx perspective on original foods: Yesterday, today, and tomorrow

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We're a part of this land, and a necessary part of it. The land needs us, and the planet loves us, and we don't know how to be a part of that anymore, in a real sense, in a physical sense. A coming back to that is something that we as humans have to figure out together.

—*Lax̓lax̓t̓k̓w*, Dr. Jeannette Armstrong
(quoted in Hall, 2007)

Note

This paper is selected remarks from a keynote plenary entitled *The Food System Imperative: Shifting Ideologies to Meet the 21st Century Challenges* at the Place-Based Food Systems Conference, hosted by the Institute for Sustainable Food Systems at Kwantlen Polytechnic University on August 9, 2018. The conference brought together community and academic leaders to share research and practice and to foster effective collaboration. More information is at <https://www.kpu.ca/pbfs2018>

Where It All Begins

What is your first memory of being on the land? Is it picking berries? Digging up carrots in the

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garden? Maybe it's fishing with your dad. Take a moment and let the memory fill your senses. This is what "place-based" means. It means remembering where we come from so that we may understand more fully where we are today.

I come from the Okanagan Nation. My people, the Syilx/Okanagan, are a transboundary tribe separated at the 49th parallel by the border between Canada and the United States. Our Nation comprises seven member communities in the Southern Interior of British Columbia and the Colville Confederated Tribes in Washington. We share the same land, the same *nyilxan* language, culture, and customs. We are a distinct and sovereign Nation. We are deeply rooted in our land and waters. Our territory is a diverse and beautiful landscape of deserts and lakes, alpine forests and endangered grasslands that extends over 17 million acres (69,000 square kilometers) from just north of Revelstoke, BC, south to the vicinity of Wilbur, Washington. Today we continue to assert our jurisdiction and responsibility over the stewarding of our lands. Our *nyilxan* language and our Syilx/Okanagan culture respectfully honor the natural laws of the *tmix'*¹—that which gives us life.

A Sacred Responsibility

Land. Food. Family. Community. For us, they are all interwoven.

K'wālncutn, the Creator, put us here and gave us a sacred responsibility to care for the land. From time immemorial, our knowledge institutions were based on being out on the land: developing a relationship with, being sustained by, and becoming one with the land. We have been—and continue to be—nourished by a wealth of biodiversity, including fish, game, berries, roots, and medicines. Hunting and gathering these resources require a localized knowledge that is dictated by the seasonal cycles of the land. We pick *siya* (saskatoon berries) in the early summer, then huckleberries, and soon afterwards it is time for salmon fishing.

Syilx/Okanagan families and community systems are united by the gathering of foods. This traditional gathering on the land is ceremony itself

and demonstrates honor and respect for the *tmix'*. Values come from this: reciprocity, responsibility. As caretakers of the land, it is our responsibility to use the land and water such that future generations may gather from these same places. **To care for the land is to care for the people.** Our people do not think in terms of five years, ten years, or retirement. We think in terms of those who are yet to be born. That is the lens. We are thinking that far ahead.

As my friend Denisa Livingston, a representative with Indigenous Slow Foods International, recently said, "We are the ancestors of our descendants." So, with that comes responsibility and the need to see that the decisions we make today affect our children, grandchildren, and all the children yet to be.

How Food Was Given

Our cultural ways of knowing are passed from one generation to the next through our *capitkwł*, our stories. Within these stories we find our values, protocols, and laws. They share a worldview that understands the reciprocal nature between Syilx/Okanagan peoples and our territory. Our *capitkwł* tell us how to live on the land. They serve as a reminder of natural laws and protocols that need to be followed in order for future generations to survive in harmony with the *tmix'*. These stories are embedded in our culture and language and are important to cultural renewal and revitalization.

Our origin *capitkwł* is grounded in foods that emerge from these lands. In it, *K'wālncutn* sends *Senklip* (Coyote) to tell all the plants and animals that new people are coming and that the *stelsqilcw*, the people-to-be, will need help to survive. The chiefs of the plants and animals gather together to discuss what to do. Chief *Skmxist*, or Black Bear, is the oldest. He is chief of all the animals that walk on the earth and he brings the perspective of wisdom and culture. Chief *Spitlem*, or Bitter Root, is chief of all those who grow below the ground. He brings the perspective of community and interconnectedness. Chief *Siya*, or Saskatoon Berry, is chief of all who grow above the ground and brings creativity and innovation. And finally, Chief *N'titx'*, or

¹ *tmix'* is the sacred life force of all living things.

Salmon, who is chief of all those who live in the water, brings the perspective of action.

After *Senk'lip* tells them about the people-to-be, the chiefs hold a council. They consider how they can help the people-to-be. They talk about what the people-to-be will eat. Finally, the oldest among them, Chief *Skmxist*, says, *All those who walk on the earth will give our bodies so that the people-to-be will survive*. The other chiefs say, *Surely if Chief Skmxist gives himself, then we can do no less*. So one by one, they gave themselves and all those they represented to help the people who were coming. So when *K'w'elncutn* put the Syilx people on Syilx territory, the agreement was that the Four Food Chiefs and all those who they represent would lay down their lives, but we, in turn, would always take care of them.

I get emotional about this because every one of those Four Food Chiefs are suffering right now. Our four-legged ones. Our plants in the earth. Our fish in the waters. They are all we need to sustain ourselves: *skmxist*, *spitlum*, *siya*, and *n'titx'*. And the agreement was that we would take care of them.

Today

In a contemporary context, what does it mean to honor this reciprocal relationship with the Four Food Chiefs and all they represent? It means returning to the land and to our original foods. It means bringing our children to the land so that they know the territory and the territory knows them. It means actively recovering from the colonization that alienated us from our lands and displaced us from our foods. It means that we talk about Indigenous food sovereignty. It means that we talk about food security.

From a more global perspective, organizations

around the world are beginning to affirm what we have always known, that our original foods are essential to the health and well-being of our communities.²

The movement toward Indigenous food sovereignty has a longstanding history within BC, with many champions working to further a sustainable food system for everyone. The BC Food Systems Network was formed in 1999 to foster dialogue and action and has been a strong partner with Indigenous peoples.

In our territory, Dr. Jeannette Armstrong and others at the En'owkin Centre have been at the forefront of working to rejuvenate Syilx/Okanagan foods and their ecosystems for decades.³ The En'owkin Centre and the Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA) have taken a leadership role and collaborated in making a systematic effort to research, document, and transmit the knowledge that our communities still holds, while documenting traditional ecological knowledge with new scientific methods and understandings.

Many of our people have been raising awareness and doing advocacy on Indigenous food sovereignty. The ONA contributes to a wide range of traditional food initiatives, including on-the-land camps to ensure that our food systems continue despite ongoing challenges.⁴ Harvesting is grassroots. It is so important to acknowledge that our community members are out there doing this informal, unseen work of connecting with the land and sustaining their families.

Internationally, the discourse around Indigenous food sovereignty has emerged from multiple international forums that bring leaders from around the world together to advocate for rights and raise awareness on a global scale, where poverty and sustenance are recurring themes.⁵

² See the BC-based Traditional Foods Fact Sheet prepared by Syilx/Okanagan scholar Suzanne Johnson:

http://www.fnha.ca/Documents/Traditional_Food_Fact_Sheets.pdf

³ See <http://www.enowkincentre.ca/departments-ecommunity.html>. The En'owkin Centre has hosted several key meetings promoting Indigenous food sovereignty on the territory in partnership with the BC Food Security Network. See

<http://bcfsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Gathering2016Report.pdf> and <https://bcfoodsecuritygateway.ca/2503-2/>

⁴ See <https://www.syilx.org/natural-resources/>

⁵ The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is a key document in asserting indigenous rights to first foods. See http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf. Slow Food International has become a global movement involving millions of people in over 160 countries working to ensure everyone has access to good, clean, fair food. See <https://www.slowfood.com/>

Yesterday

Colonization impacted our Food Chiefs badly—and these impacts continue today. The work of honoring our reciprocal relationship within the reality of these impacts is immense and pressing. Let me tell you about what honoring Chief *N'titx*^w has meant for the Okanagan Nation.

For time immemorial, salmon runs on the Okanagan River were so plentiful that our way of life was based on them. Our biggest villages were built beside the best fishing spots. The hot winds of summer, quickly dried salmon into durable protein that sustained our people through the winter. Our fish camps drew other tribes from as far away as the Great Plains, who brought horses and buffalo robes to trade for dried fish. Thousands gathered and the festival atmosphere carried on for weeks. *N'titx*^w were not only sustenance, they were our relative, and an essential part of the continued resilience of the *tmix*^w.

ONA is dedicated to restoring our Indigenous food systems and ensuring food sovereignty for the well-being and resilience of our community members. Salmon is central to connections between generations, communities, humans and non-humans, terrestrial and aquatic species, and trans-boundary watersheds along the Columbia River system.

But first, we had to bring our Chief *N'titx*^w back from the brink of extinction. The Okanagan River sockeye population is now one of only two remaining populations of sockeye salmon in the international Columbia River Basin. Historically, chinook, coho, chum, and steelhead were also indigenous salmon species in the Okanagan Basin, but today they are either extinct or found in very low numbers.

Brink of Extinction

Overfishing due to colonization was already an issue by the late 1800s. Logging and farming destroyed the gravel bars and clear streams where salmon lay their eggs. Then, in the 1930s, came the hydro-electric dams on the Columbia River, making fish passage impossible and devastating the annual salmon runs.

Any salmon that wants to spawn in the Okanagan River must first get there by swimming

up one of the most dammed rivers in the world. The Columbia has more than a dozen dams from the estuary at Astoria, Oregon, to the headwaters near Invermere, BC. The waters of the Okanagan River join the Columbia just south of the legendary Kettle Falls. In 1940, Kettle Falls was destroyed by the Grand Coulee Dam, which stopped all salmon migration to more than a thousand kilometers of spawning river, much of it in Canada. That same year, at the Ceremony of Tears, 10,000 Native Americans mourned the loss. Soon our fishing grounds at Okanagan Falls disappeared, too. In the 1950s, the Okanagan River was channelized for irrigation and flood control to better serve the needs of agriculture and urban sprawl. The winding riverbed and wetlands that make ideal salmon habitat were reduced to less than 10% of their original size. By the 1990s, the Okanagan sockeye were almost extinct.

But the Syilx/Okanagan people had made a commitment to the Food Chiefs. Our Elders and leaders started talking about their collective vision. “Let’s bring the salmon back,” said the late Chief Albert Saddleman, and our Chiefs remain determined and resolute in this work up to the present day, including the assertion and practice of our Aboriginal title and rights. Indigenous peoples are finally gaining recognition by our respective governments. First Nations are taking the government to court and winning. The playing field has shifted. The ONA represents this collective action with a Fisheries Department that began working with tribes and governments in Canada and the U.S. to save the sockeye under the mandate of our Chiefs.

Our Prayers Brought the Salmon Back

ket cp'elk' stim^w is an nsyilxcen term that roughly translates as “to cause to come back.” With the guidance of our Elders and sacred teachings, all seven Okanagan Nation member communities and the Colville Confederated Tribes were determined to see the sockeye salmon return.

The recovery of our salmon was a 20-year process of initiatives undertaken together with other tribes, governments, and agencies. It wasn’t easy. A number of elements were essential, including creating partnerships, optimizing flow levels, restoring

habitat, and re-introducing salmon into the extended Okanagan River system.

Our ceremonies are built into everything we do. Our obligation was to protect our salmon and bring it back, to call it home. So while our salmon struggled, the Syilx/Okanagan people continued to pray for our relative. Our Salmon Feast was held at our traditional fishing grounds each year, to honor the sacredness of the river, while we sang and prayed for the return of the sockeye.

Finally, in the summer of 2010, the salmon came back in numbers not seen for 100 years. They were three times more numerous than even the most optimistic estimates. At the annual feast, our people offered prayers of thanks and sat down together around tables laden with the food of our ancestors.

Tomorrow

In 2014, the ONA opened the *kel'qəlk'stim'* Hatchery — a testament to the perseverance of our people to realize the dream of restoring *n'titx^w* to their original habitat and rightful place in our territory. This conservation hatchery represents a critical stage of our Nation's restoration initiative and is part of a long-term program to restore the historical range of sockeye in the Columbia River Basin.⁶

Alongside revitalized salmon are rejuvenated indigenous fishing practices. Beliefs and traditions are very important parts of indigenous culture and often reflect a deep understanding and respect for nature. ONA honors our roots by using holistic traditional practices—handed down from our ancestors. The Okanagan Nation has a dedicated group of fishermen committed to these methods who harvest for our artisanal fisheries. During fish harvest, certain parts of the salmon are returned to the river of origin. Portions of fish are also offered to eagles and owls, reinforcing strong reciprocal bonds within the broader ecosystem.

We continue to nurture our relationship with a small collective of inland Tribes whose work includes the economic aspects of salmon harvest approached with similar management practices. This work is presented through the River Select

brand.⁷

Prioritizing the distribution of fish for food, social, and ceremonial purposes is paramount to balancing the capitalist model of economic profit and respecting our Chief *N'titx^w*. The Nation is working diligently to ensure fresh fish is distributed, with equal opportunity, to Nation members. In 2016, over 13,000 fish were distributed for food, social, and ceremonial purposes to all Nation member communities.

Every new success raises new problems, but with those come opportunities to innovate and open new dialogues. The Okanagan Nation is transitioning to a fully participatory fishery. Fishing gear is made available to communities and our Nation donates rods at Winter Ceremonies to encourage and enable people to fish for themselves. Each year we see more Indigenous fishers at *sx^wəx^wnitk^w* (Okanagan Falls).

As a Nation, we continue to look at ways to sustain the thriving population of sockeye salmon in the Okanagan sub-basin and the Columbia River. There is never any certainty when it comes to restoring original foods, and, despite our successes, this remains an arduous task.

Memory and Transformation

In recent years, our Nation has received growing recognition for our efforts to rehabilitate salmon stocks. Increasingly, we find ourselves playing a role in public dialogues about Indigenous food sovereignty, food security, and sustainable fisheries.

We are tenacious in this work because our perspective includes the well-being of the people-to-be. Our Syilx leaders have been advocating for our Indigenous title and rights for a long time. We persist in the vision of these sacred responsibilities to care for our Four Food Chiefs. We carry on because of our memories of connectedness to the land—and our determination that the people-to-be must also have the opportunity to share in those same memories.

A paradigm change is needed, and Indigenous perspectives are essential. The Four Food Chiefs are a foundation for governance. The values that


⁶ See <https://www.syilx.org/fisheries/hatchery/>

⁷ See <https://www.riversselect.ca/>

are inherent in this form our civil society: reciprocity and responsibility. There must be an acknowledgment of our role as Indigenous peoples in restoring our Food Chiefs. We have longstanding experience protecting original foods from environmental challenges. We are here still and we will be here for a long time to come. We are here to lead, innovate, and perpetuate the values that sustain us all. We must acknowledge that we are in this together.

What does it mean to restore our Food Chiefs? It means we recognize the social and ecological values and importance of food is for all human beings on this very small planet. It means we talk about building relations with communities across cultures and across Nations. We work to build and

hold each other up, not to tear each other down by dominance, power, and greed. We would rather cooperate. We would rather share. We would rather be in this work together.

Making it happen means we have to take risks and step forward. We are talking about change and transformation. We are talking about a food system where no one goes hungry. Revisit those memories that ground you in this work. We can remember. We can dream. And we can act. I get excited about our ability, intelligence, and collective wisdom to find a solution for all those other species that we should be taking care of. We were thriving, sustaining communities once. We can be again. All of us together. There can be abundance wherever we are. There can be a sustainable future for all of us. 

Additional Resources

- *Our Salmon, Our People*. This short film covers both cultural and historical connections with *sc'win* and current efforts in regards to salmon restoration. <https://youtu.be/Fhr7Rv3sqkk>
- Syilx/Okanagan scholar Dallas Good Water completed a master's thesis on sockeye salmon and food systems. See *Okanagan Syilx Historical and Contemporary Salmon Distribution: Underpinning Social and Governance Structures* at <https://doi.org/10.14288/1.0365707>
- The Okanagan Nation Alliance has been involved in Thompson Okanagan Slow Foods since 2012 at local, international, and Indigenous events, and has collaborated on communication material, including a video entitled *Slow Fish sc'win Master* at <https://youtu.be/MgiH5nfWXB0>

Reference

Hall, D. E. (2007, October 21). Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Jeannette Armstrong [Interview]. Retrieved from http://www.nativeperspectives.net/Transcripts/Jeanette_Armstrong_interview.pdf