
The growing movement to restore native food sources

COMMENTARY | Hunger-plagued Oregon still has an abundance of food, but much of it is being exported

by Stephen Quirke | 23 Jun 2016

Portland is widely regarded as a city for foodies and a hot-bed of farmers markets and food co-ops. Last year, The Washington Post even ranked us the best food city in the country.

But who controls our celebrated food?

Oregon ranked No. 1 in the nation for food-insecure children in 2011, and despite farms and ranches covering over 16 million acres of the state, we remain among the most food-insecure states in the country today, with more than 210,000 children in 2014 unsure of where their next meal was coming from, according to the non-profit group Feeding America.

Why? According to the Oregon Farm Bureau, about 80 percent of Oregon's agricultural foods leave the state, and 40 percent leave the country so that property owners can bring "new money" to Oregon. On the flip side of this abundance, the Oregon Food Bank reports that 270,000 people a month are eating from emergency food boxes—92,000 of them children.

This was not always the state of affairs, and doesn't have to be today. In "Braiding Sweetgrass," the ethnobotanist Robin Wall Kimmerer writes: "For the greater part of human history, and in places in the world today, common resources were the rule. But some invented a different story, a social construct in which everything is a commodity to be bought and sold. The market economy story has spread like wildfire, with uneven results for human well-being and devastation for the natural world. But it is just a story we have told ourselves and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one."

In fact, the food right here in Portland did not always come from private landowners who sold wherever they wished. Not so long ago, the Portland area was an abundant food forest surrounded by a huge variety of berries, edible roots, fish and big game. And unlike today, the food was primarily held in common, not exported while people went hungry. Many of those food sources still exist, and could return to abundance with the proper care and attention.

"The salmon were very plentiful," says Wilbur Slockish, a Klickitat chief. "There was up to 30 million of those fish in the river, 'cause we only took what we needed. You had spring salmon, summer salmon, silvers, the coho, the sockeye, steelhead. They were all there. Steelhead's role was in the preservation of our powdered salmon. He would provide the oil so that it wouldn't spoil. They all had their roles."

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Chief Slockish says that his people lived in temporary villages in and around Portland, and moved to harvest the best and most abundant foods as they became available through the seasonal rounds, while also traveling to higher elevations, away from Portland, in anticipation of the floods. Access to these foods diminished when settlers began building fences and establishing farms in the Willamette Valley, tilling up the fertile soils that had provided traditional foods to countless generations. Access diminished further with the establishment of the reservation system and the overharvesting of fish that came with the settler canning industry.

But Chief Slockish says the food in the region was originally very abundant. “The food was plentiful—we never, never went hungry.”

“This land was a giant supermarket. The foods, like your supermarket now, they have different aisles for different foods, and that’s the way the mountains and this area was. And that’s why they called us migrants, but you know we follow the ripening of the seasons. High water fisheries, low water fisheries, all of the berries and the roots, they had their seasons and in different areas. That’s why we just went, like going from one aisle to another aisle like we have now. But they don’t call ‘em migratory when they are going down their supermarket aisles.”

Slockish says that camas, a blue flowering plant whose root bulb provided a staple food, grew in massive beds on both sides of the Willamette River, and that these massive patches extended all the way from Salem to Portland, and up to the mouth of the Columbia River past Sauvie Island (then Wapato Island) after the arrow-leaved food plant that grew in abundance in its shallow waters).

Today, the native peoples whose cultures grew up with these foods want to see their habitats restored so that the original bounty can return. And if their vision is embraced by other Northwest leaders, the result would not only be a healthy and ecologically sound food source that revitalizes native cultures, but a stronger and more diverse economy for the entire region.

Multiple tribal governments have begun initiatives to restore abundance and access to these traditional foods. The Puget Sound’s Northwest Indian College launched the Traditional Foods of Puget Sound Project in 2008, which led to the Lummi Traditional Food Project in 2009, followed by the Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project in 2010.

In 2007, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Eastern Oregon went a step further, shifting its entire land management strategy towards the preservation and restoration of first foods—a transformation initiated and implemented by their Department of Natural Resources.

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Eric Quaempts, the department director who crafted this strategy, says that his goal is to manage the land based on the lesson of foods served at religious and cultural events—a crystallization of tribal creation beliefs.

“In tribal creation belief there’s an order in which the foods promised to take care of the people. Water is served first, then salmon, representing other fish, deer, representing other big game, and then the roots and the berries,” he says. “In tribal creation belief there’s an order in which the foods promised to take care of the people. Water is served first, then salmon, representing other fish, deer, representing other big game, and then the roots and the berries,” he says.

According to Paul Lumley, executive director of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, the oral tradition is that the first foods made a promise to care for the people forever as long as the people cared for them in return. For Quaempts, this teaching is more relevant than ever.

“There’s ecological and spatial information in that serving order that we can use to inform our management,” says Quaempts. “And we use all of that to communicate our goals to people so that they better understand the tribe’s culture, and why we want to restore these foods the way that we do.”

Quaempts says that restoring first foods can help provide additional food security in light of climate change. His office is currently working to secure a water rights settlement in the Umatilla Basin that will provide significant in-stream flows for fisheries, while also working to restore river connections to their floodplains to create cooler water temperatures for the fish. Last July, high temperatures in the Columbia killed over 250,000 sockeye—the largest fish kill ever recorded in the American West. Quaempts says spilling more water from the dams can help address these high temperatures in the future, but that we will also need more extensive river restoration work that re-establishes the rivers’ connections with their floodplains.

In urban areas, Quaempts says, work can also be done to protect fish habitat and facilitate their safe passage. And in Portland there are other groups, like NAYA and Wisdom of Elders, who are working on native gardens to connect young people to traditional plants and medicines under the guidance of elders.

Chief Slockish shares that “in our way, when the animals were here, before the people were created, they all said what they would do. Every living thing, whether it was a rock, whether it was a tree, they said what they would do for us. The water was the first one, the most important one, ‘cause he was the one that took care of the land, kept it moist to grow our crops, and fed the people.”

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The loss of first foods

The destruction of the region's traditional foods followed the cultural and dietary pride of "land hungry" settlers. In 1912 the ethno-botanist Melvin Gilmore summarized, "The people of the European race in coming into the New Worlds have not really sought to make friends with the native population, or to make adequate use of the plants or the animals indigenous to this continent, but rather to exterminate everything found here and to supplant it with the plants and animals to which they were accustomed at home. It is quite natural that aliens should have a longing for the familiar things at home, but the surest road to contentment would be by way of granting friendly acquaintance with the new environment."

Instead of adapting to the local culture, settlers were angry-nostalgic—planting the aggressively invasive scotch broom, an ornamental plant from Western Europe, and filling the landscape with cows while forcing native peoples to give up their culture and become European farmers on the wrong landscape (documented extensively in Vine Deloria's "Indians of the Pacific Northwest"). Camas beds in the Willamette Valley were tilled for western-style farms, with people moving directly into the flood-plain and attacking the river in the name of "flood control." Eventually cows would compete with salmon as the region's major source of protein. One food anchored the region and made the forests grow; the other farted methane, but reminded settlers of home. In 1957 the federal government flooded Celilo Falls behind the Dalles Dam. Celilo was the oldest continuously inhabited village site in North America.

Due to hostility and neglect of the salmon – a keystone species for the Columbia River tribes—wild salmon currently return at less than 3 percent of their historical abundance.

"Nowadays it's very hard, where all of our bitterroots and other medicinal plants, the berries, chokecherries, are located along highways, and the highway department comes along and sprays them with weed control, so we can't eat them." "The roads go through a lot of our food gathering areas down in the lower part of the elevation," Chief Slockish says. "Nowadays it's very hard, where all of our bitterroots and other medicinal plants, the berries, chokecherries, are located along highways, and the highway department comes along and sprays them with weed control, so we can't eat them."

This loss of traditional foods has also taken a serious toll on people's health. A 2010 report published by the Coalition of Communities of Color and Portland State University reported that more than 20 percent of Multnomah County's Native community experiences hunger on a regular basis. A full 69 percent of Native American elders said they don't have enough of the foods they actually want to eat, and 11.5 percent said they often do not have enough to eat at all.

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The report also notes that diabetes is more prevalent among Native Americans than any other racial or ethnic group in the U.S., and its rates have been increasing.

This disproportionate burden of hunger traces back directly to the colonial policies that separated people from their traditional foods, which was also an attempt to replace the gift of food with commodities. This was accomplished both by attacking the food sources directly and by denigrating the cultural practices that bound people to them in mutual responsibility.

Paul Lumley of CRITFC emphasized that the right to all first foods, and the continued access to them, was reserved in the treaties “most explicitly. And it’s pretty clear in the negotiations that the tribes would never sign the treaties without reserving those rights. It’s a reminder that the tribes were not granted those rights—these were rights that the tribes already had.”

This month, the city of Portland is hiring a tribal liaison to work with urban Indian communities and fulfill consultation duties with local tribal governments. This marks the first time the city’s unique tribal consultation program will be continuously staffed. One critical issue that can be addressed through this program is the advancement of local food sovereignty—a critical issue to the health of both our native communities and of the general public. Committing to the restoration of First Foods would demonstrate collaboration and friendship with our local neighbors, and demonstrate that we are finally willing to adapt—not only to the local landscape, but to our rapidly changing and heating planet.

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