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On food security and access to fish in the Saugeen Ojibway Nation, Lake Huron, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study offers insights to the complex relationships between accessing local fisheries and food security in the traditional territory of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation (SON), Lake Huron, Canada. Based in qualitative research, including focus groups and key informant interviews conducted in the SON community in summer 2016, we identify the inter-related structural and relational mechanisms influencing the ability of SON community members to derive food security benefits, including culturally appropriate and nutritious diets and sustainable livelihoods, from local fisheries. There is, however, a need for ongoing efforts to better link the fisheries management, economic and cultural development, and traditional food access objectives of the community, ideally through better connecting and managing existing social networks.

Introduction

Re-establishing traditional or 'country' foods is becoming a key pillar of food security and sovereignty for many Indigenous communities in Canada (Food Secure Canada, 2011). In Ontario, the Saugeen Ojibway Nation (SON) manages diverse natural resources throughout their traditional territory on the Saugeen (Bruce) Peninsula and the waters of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay (see Fig. 1). SON is the collective name for two communities that share this traditional territory: The Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation and the Saugeen First Nation. Since time immemorial, the Saugeen Ojibway peoples have engaged in wild harvest activities in their traditional territory for food, ceremony, and trade (LaRiviere and Crawford, 2014). Fishing is of special importance 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 (R vs. Jones, 1993).

This paper explores the complex relationships between accessing local fisheries and food security in SON. More specifically, we aimed to better understand some of the key inter-related legal, structural, and relational mechanisms shaping the ability of SON community members to derive food security benefits, including culturally appropriate and nutritious diets and sustainable livelihoods, from fisheries within their traditional territory.

Background

Food security is often understood according to the 1996 definition from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which states: "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." Following this definition, food security can be further broken down into the four dimensions: 1) accessibility (physical and economic access to food), 2) availability (adequate supply of food), 3) utilization (food that is safe and meets nutritional needs and cultural preferences), and 4) stability (a stable food supply) (FAO, 2008).

While we used this definition as a starting point for our study, we also recognize that food security-related definition and framework have continued to evolve since 1996, coming to include a greater emphasis on the role of community well-being, sustainable livelihoods, and food security as a human right (Council of Canadian Academies, 2014). For example, the idea of community food security emphasizes that food security depends on the development of sustainable food systems that can support community well-being in the inter-related areas of society (equitable access to nutritious and culturally-appropriate food), economy (sustainable livelihoods), and environment (sustainability of natural resources) (Garrett and Feenstra, 1999; Hamm & Bellows, 2005). The idea of community food security illustrates a broader trend in the food security literature over the past two decades towards a greater consideration of the role of place and community-based assets in influencing food security capabilities (Loring and Gerlach, 2015).

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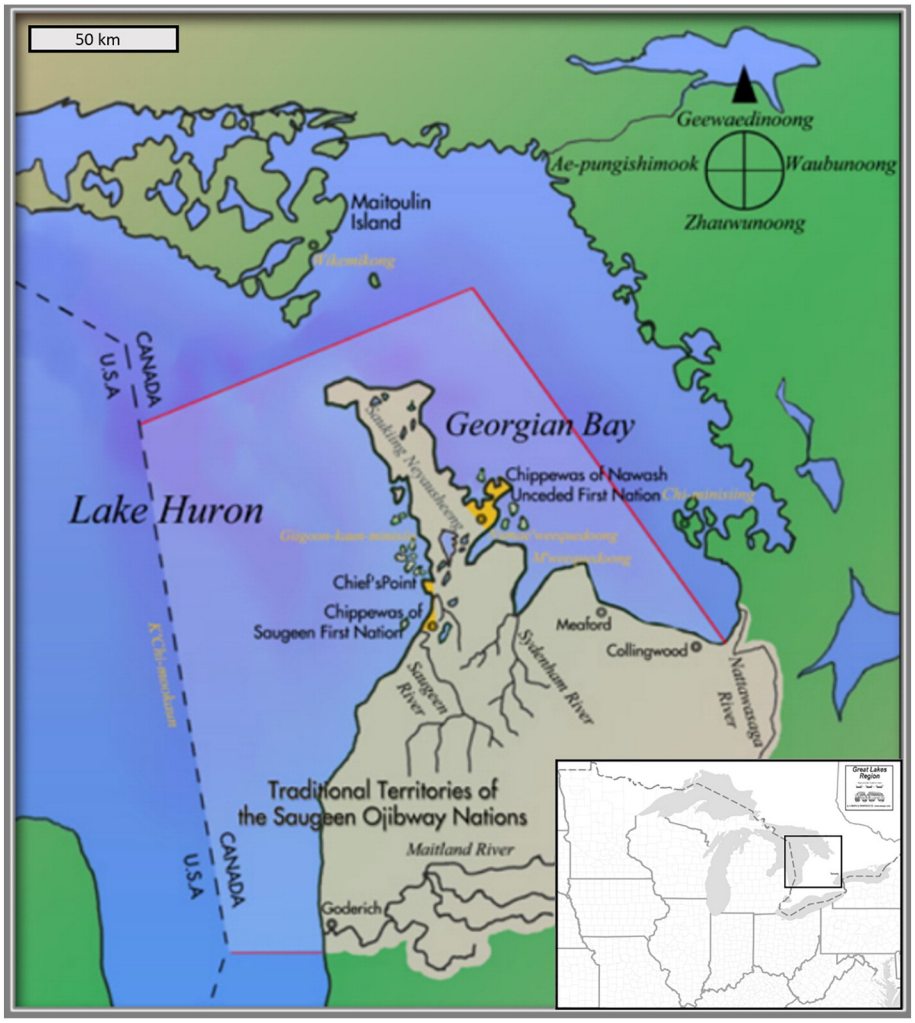

Fig. 1. Map of the traditional territory of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation.

Food security is also fundamentally a political issue, leading to the emergence of food sovereignty thinking, which brings dimensions of governance, policy and human rights to the forefront of discussions about food (Loring and Gerlach, 2015). In this context, food sovereignty asserts that all people have the right to food and that democracy is fundamental to this realization (Patel, 2012; Fairbairn, 2010). More specifically, food sovereignty argues that decisions about food systems, including markets, forms of production, food cultures, and landscapes, should primarily be made by the local people who depend on them (Wittman et al., 2011). Increasingly, food sovereignty is being seen as key to realizing food security for Indigenous communities in Canada (Council of Canadian Academies, 2014; Power, 2008), particularly because of the substantial disruptions that have occurred to traditional economies, forms of government, cultures, ceremony, and food systems through colonial attitudes and practices (Fieldhouse & Thompson, 2012).

Building on this discourse, there remains a need to better understand the embeddedness of food security within larger social and economic systems and their governance (Council of Canadian Academies, 2014; Loring and Gerlach, 2015). Such an approach is particularly appropriate in Indigenous contexts, where food security issues often involve complex interplays between peoples and their cultures, rights, resources, environment, health, and livelihoods (Brinkman et al., 2016; Council of Canadian Academies, 2014; Loring and Gerlach, 2015). From a public health perspective, the main food security issues facing Indigenous Peoples in Canada include rates of household food insecurity that are much higher among Indigenous than non-Indigenous Canadians, and high rates of diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including obesity and diabetes. In many cases, rising NCD rates are the result of a growing consumption of market foods in place of traditional foods (Power, 2008). Such dietary shifts are often attributable to environmental dispossession, in terms of constrained access to natural resources through government policy or environmental contamination by industry (Tobias and Richmond, 2014), along with social changes towards Western culture (Fieldhouse & Thompson, 2012; Power, 2008; Rudolph & McLachlan, 2013).

Increasingly, policy efforts to support household and community access to affordable and nutritious foods in Indigenous communities are focusing on the importance of traditional foods (including wild-harvested fish, game, birds, berries, and other plants), along with the ability of communities to harvest, share and consume them (Fieldhouse & Thompson, 2012; Islam and Berkes, 2016; Willows, 2005). Traditional foods are gaining increasing policy and research attention not only because they are often nutrient-dense (Elliot et al., 2012), but also because they may contribute to what Power (2008) calls "cultural food security" due to their pivotal role in maintaining cultural identity, health, and survival (p. 95).

In Canada, formal policy commitments have been made to support traditional food access for Indigenous Peoples. Canada's Action Plan for Food Security (1998) identifies traditional food acquisition methods for Indigenous communities as being a top priority. This plan also affirmed that Indigenous peoples have an important role to play in the

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