



FOOD SECURITY PROJECT

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Introduction

In 2019, Morgan Sage, who was the Food Security Project Coordinator for the North Coast Innovation Lab (NCIL) and the Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Society, piloted a local food production project to improve the food security of Nisga'a members by increasing their access to fresh, local, produce. The project was focused on growing various vegetables in container gardens in an unused greenhouse at Rupert Lawn and Garden. The project produced approximately \$300 worth of food per week and engaged with Nisga'a members through volunteer positions in the greenhouse, a container garden workshop, and a pickle-making event at Nisga'a Hall.

Throughout the 2019 Food Security Project,

Morgan worked with an Agricultural Consultant to conduct a feasibility study on the project. The outcomes of this revealed that small-scale food production, such as the greenhouse container garden, was not sustainable as a profit-generating enterprise. Furthermore, the feasibility study revealed that for an urban farm to be successful, a social component focused on building community capacity is necessary.

In both Morgan Sage and the consultant's final reports, the use of a hydroponic growing system was recommended for its ability to generate consistent revenue in a small space. This work directly influenced the 2020 iteration of the food security project.

Context



Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Society

The Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Society is a non-profit organization that serves Nisga'a citizens in Prince Rupert and Port Edward by offering important programs and services that aim to increase the well-being of their members. In addition to their programs and services, they own several social enterprises such as Rupert Lawn and Garden (a garden centre in Seal Cove), the Pop-up Plant Shoppe (located in downtown Prince Rupert), the Port Ed General Store (a small convenience store and gas station in Port Edward), and the newly acquired Bob's on the Rocks (a Fish and Chips stand at Rushbrook Floats).



A priority for the Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Society is addressing the high level of food insecurity that is known to exist among Nisga'a citizens. The Nisga'a Nation Household 2018/2019 Survey conducted by the Nisga'a Lisims Government, found that the rate of food insecurity among Nisga'a citizens living in Prince Rupert, Terrace, and Vancouver far exceeded the national and provincial averages.

The standard definition of food security by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations is that “*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.” Based on the findings of the survey, food cost and transportation were identified as major barriers to “physical and economic access.”

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Project road map



Based on the results of the 2019 Food Security Project and the feasibility study, the Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Society decided to move forward with acquiring a hydroponic container farm from a Canadian company called, The Growcer. The hydroponic system is situated within a shipping container at Rupert Lawn and Garden and allows fresh produce to be grown and sold year-round, providing healthy and reliable vegetables to citizens of Prince Rupert and Port Edward.

The purchase of the hydroponic container farm created a need for research on how the Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Society could leverage their assets to maximize their impact on food security in the community.

Preliminary research revealed the clear need for programs that balance increasing food literacy and improving food access through local food distribution programs. Food literacy

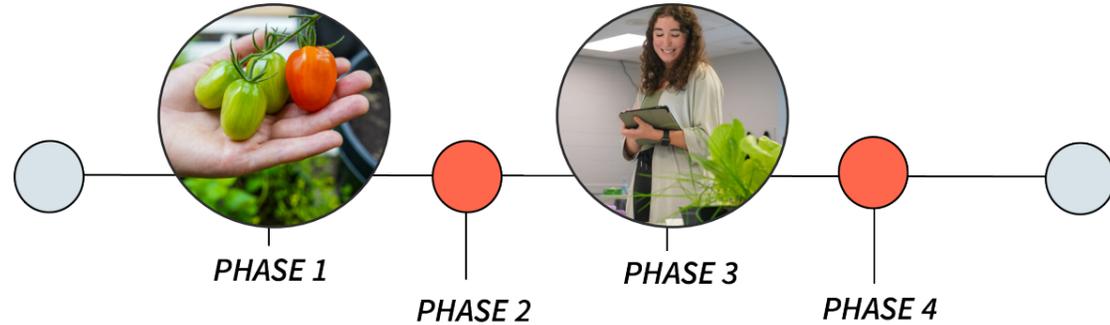
can also be thought of as food education, and focuses on increasing knowledge of food production, food systems, nutrition, and food skills, with the goal of empowering individuals to make informed food choices. However, improving food literacy, without improving food access, will not make someone food secure. Arguably, the opposite is also true. For instance, products grown in the hydroponic unit may be new to some members, so a food literacy component is essential to ensuring that the products are wanted and used.

To address these multiple facets, the Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Society became interested in the creation of a local food hub, a centralized location that aims to holistically improve food security through facilitating food distribution and offering a variety of food-related workshops. The concept of the food hub guided the direction of the 2020 Food Security Project.



Timeline

The most effective way to demonstrate the timeline of events is to break the summer down into overlapping phases that each yielded a specific outcome.



Phase 1: Research and program development

This phase of the project was spent researching distribution models for the food hub and templates for food literacy activities. Some models considered include community food markets, mobile produce stands, and healthy corner stores. A short research report was compiled outlining the benefits of each of these models.

During this phase, some guiding principles for the project were also determined:

1. True food security includes being able to choose preferred and culturally relevant foods,
2. sustainable solutions must engage the community and focus on systems change, and
3. the root cause of food insecurity is poverty. Initiatives that don't target poverty do not sustainably affect food security.

Phase 2: Community contacts and asset mapping

The second phase of the project consisted of reaching out to community members and compiling a list of community assets. Connections with community members were slightly limited due to the nature of all contact being online, however, overall, this phase was a success.

The goal of getting in touch with the community was to identify the wants and needs of Nisga'a citizens in Prince Rupert (through conversations with board members), to understand what the Gitmaxmak'ay

Nisga'a Society is already doing to impact food security (through conversations with staff at the Society), and to determine what resources already exist in the community (through conversations with local individuals and organizations).

Information compiled from these conversations, and from extensive online research, was then organized graphically and on a Google Map that can be manipulated to reveal areas with many assets/strengths, and conversely, areas where gaps exist.

Phase 3: Community contacts and asset mapping

The third phase of the project entailed planning the **Food Security and Container Garden Workshop** that occurred on Monday, August 10. This was an essential aspect of the work done this summer because it allowed for community engagement and feedback. It also contributed to the important goal of improving food literacy, as a means of improving food security. The workshop was attended by 10 participants and was well received. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, special considerations were taken to ensure the safety of participants.

The Food Security and Container Gardening workshop consisted of a discussion on food security, led by the Food Security Project Coordinator, followed by an information session and planting demonstration led by Mona Troberg, a staff member at Rupert Lawn and Garden. Mona had a wealth of knowledge that was greatly appreciated by participants. Some topics that came up were what to do with your plants/soil over the winter months, and how to compost. It seemed like the majority of participants had gardened before, but struggled to maintain their gardens over time. This provided useful information and ideas for future workshops.

All participants were able to take home three plants. They had the option of cucumber seeds and mustard wasabi seeds, as well as chives, parsley, or lettuce, which had already been started. These foods were selected by a staff member at Rupert Lawn and Garden, based on their ability to be grown late in the season and to potentially survive on a balcony, because it was frequently mentioned that not everyone has ample backyard space. Participants also left with informational sheets consisting of care instructions and recipes that utilize the plants.

The goal of the workshop was threefold:

1. To educate members about gardening and food security, and get/keep people interested in local food production,
2. to survey participants to find out what kind of workshops they are interested in for the future, and
3. to set an example for the kind of food literacy workshops that could occur moving forward. By partnering with local experts such as Mona, ideally, these kind of workshops will continue after the completion of the 2020 project.



Phase 4: Grant research and project sustainability

The final phase of the project was spent researching possible avenues for grant applications and taking steps to ensure the sustainability and longevity of food security initiatives. For the Food Security Project Coordinator, this primarily included researching the possibility of having a Farmers' Market in Prince Rupert, and of the Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Society potentially hiring a more permanent Food Security Coordinator.

Future directions: Farmers' Market

First, a Farmers' Market presents a unique opportunity to sell local, subsidized healthy food to participants through participation in the BC Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program (BC FMNCP), an opportunity identified during *Phase 1: Research and program development*. The BC FMNCP is a provincial subsidy program where the government subsidizes up to \$21 in Farmer's Market Coupons per week for low-income families, pregnant people, and seniors. Various market formats have been attempted in Prince Rupert, but there has not been a successful, or consistent, local food market despite casual conversations with various community members revealing a desire for greater local food access.

Currently, the major food retailers in Prince Rupert are Safeway and Save-on-Foods. Based on personal observations, both of these retailers sell primarily imported fresh produce and healthy foods are also relatively expensive. Furthermore, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a period of time where limited fresh fruits and vegetables were available in the local grocery stores, revealing the need for a more resilient local food system. In Prince Rupert, there are backyard gardeners who may produce enough food to supplement the odd meal, however there are no large-scale food producers growing food for sale.

The hydroponic unit, recently acquired by the Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Society, addresses



this problem by providing citizens with the option of purchasing locally produced healthy foods from a reliable and sustainable source. However, this raises the question of how to get these foods out to consumers. Additionally, the hydroponic unit is limited to producing leafy greens such as kale, lettuce, spinach, herbs, and microgreens. A Farmers' Market addresses both of these areas because it sells the hydroponic products directly to consumers and has the potential to bring in diverse food producers from the North-Western Region to sell complementary products.

Future directions: Food security full-time

Second, hiring a full-time Food Security Coordinator was the recommendation of contacts at the local First Nations Healthy Authority, who were identified during *Phase 2: Community contacts and asset mapping*. Intern positions are great to pilot projects and conduct research, however they do not ensure the longevity needed for sustainable and effective food security projects. A permanent Food Security Coordinator could work with future interns while strengthening the networks between different social enterprises, planning workshops, and coordinating the Farmers' Market.

Key learnings

Challenges

The main challenge stemmed from the COVID-19 pandemic making it impossible to travel to Prince Rupert until July. This meant that the Food Security Project Coordinator only spent a total of five weeks in the office. The separation from the community, and working virtually for the first 2.5 months, made connecting with community members difficult. Building strong relationships with community members is essential to creating sustainable and relevant food security initiatives. The shorter (four-month) duration of the internship

was also a barrier, as it limited the amount of time that could be spent piloting a project and building relationships.

The longer eight-month internship model may be more conducive to having a meaningful and lasting impact in the community. That being said, a substantial amount of work was still completed by Cohort 3 during the short internship period, and measures were taken to ensure the impact of the projects would continue into the fall and onwards.

Community involvement

Essential to any successful and sustainable project is meaningful community engagement. Cohort 3 was able to share their findings at one community presentation at the end of the internship. These presentations were done via the local television network and

broadcast online, which makes it hard to fully gauge the impact on the community. Moving forward, it will be essential to continue finding accommodations that allow information to be shared and feedback to be gained without having large in-person gatherings.

So what?

My experience as a Food Security Project Coordinator had a profound impact on the way I think of local food security. As an anthropology student coming from a highly theoretical and academic field, going out into a community and working on a hands-on project was a unique and valuable experience. My master's research is focused on federal, top-down approaches to improving food security, so having the experience of working first-hand with a local organization focused on grassroots, bottom-up approaches was invaluable.

However, this experience has also shown me the importance of being able to work at

multiple levels, as funding and support from higher levels of government can help local organizations be able to implement initiatives that ensure long-term and sustainable food security. Furthermore, a large part of ensuring food security in Canada is the decolonization of food systems, particularly as they relate to maintaining Western market structures and the promotion of Western diets as superior to traditional, land-based food practices. Initiatives that meaningfully prioritize and promote Indigenous voices and ideologies are the way forward and it may be beneficial to incorporate ideas of Indigenous food sovereignty into future food security projects.



Project Coordinator

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As a graduate student in medical/ evolutionary anthropology, Carly Checholik considers how biology and culture interact to impact health and well-being. Carly's Master's research examines how barriers to accessing healthy, preferred, and culturally relevant foods negatively impact the holistic health and wellbeing of Indigenous communities in Canada, particularly in remote communities in Northern Ontario. Outside of academia, Carly enjoys reading, hiking, and of course, eating delicious food. Carly is in the last year of her Master's and plans to continue working in the realm of food security after graduation.



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