



Northwest Food Systems Initiative Lessons Learned

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Introduction

The Northwest Food Systems Initiative (NWFSI) was launched in 2021 as the culmination of three years of research, pilot projects, and community engagements. These were facilitated by a collective of community development and social change organizations who partnered with Ecotrust Canada's (EC) [North Coast Innovation Lab](#) (NCIL) in Prince Rupert, BC on Coast Ts'msyen territories. NCIL was a place-based initiative that ran from 2017-2020, that worked toward building a resilient and sustainable economy and community well-being.

Based in Prince Rupert, the NWFSI set out with the aim to strengthen food systems through three interconnected activities – a demonstration urban farm (Kaien Island Urban Farm), regenerative ocean farming, and a regional food trade network (Northwest Food Network). By weaving on-the-ground urban agriculture, mariculture, and regional sea- and agri-food supply chain development, the NWFSI worked to demonstrate how localized food production and procurement can act as a driver for economic development and community well-being in the Northwest, while informing policymakers of local and regional opportunities to alleviate food insecurity.

In 2023, Ecotrust Canada decided to transition away from leading the urban growing portion of the project. Going forward, we are focusing on marine food systems through [Regenerative](#)

[Ocean Farming](#) on the North Coast.

This report will describe the goals, activities, and lessons learned from the urban agriculture and regional food trade network components of the NWFSI as well as why and how we've decided to hand these activities to other organizations in the community.

What we set out to do

1. Learn with Northwest BC communities about the roles and importance of traditional and modern food systems.
2. Identify and enable ways to enhance affordable access to local, culturally appropriate foods.
3. Support and advance existing food security initiatives.
4. Pilot and grow food systems-centred projects, programs, and activities.
5. Champion regional and local economic development of sustainable food systems.



Activities

1 Urban Agriculture

Building upon the groundwork of the NCIL, the initial phase of the NWFSI was dedicated to highlighting urban agriculture as a means of addressing local food insecurity, which took the form of a highly visible demonstration urban farm in downtown Prince Rupert. The Kaien Island Urban Farm was built and **launched** in March-June of 2021 in partnership with the City of Prince Rupert and the Metlakatla Stewardship Society, with funding from the Northern Development Initiative Trust (NDIT).

The downtown farm site was chosen on a vacant lot in the heart of downtown owned by Metlakatla Development Corporation.

The urban farm had a difficult start in 2021 due to two related events: 1) the farm's launch in the middle of COVID-19 limited the team's ability to collaborate well with community partners, and 2) both project leads left the organization to pursue other opportunities right at the launch of the project, breaking continuity in partner and funder relationships. The resulting disconnection with our partners at Metlakatla Stewardship Society (MSS) had an especially

detrimental impact, as they expressed frustration and a feeling that they had lost trust in the project because it had gone ahead without co-development and reciprocal collaboration. The outcome of early conversations about repairing the damage was a written commitment to do better in our work to contribute to a more reconciled future and later development of our **Framework for Advancing Reconciliation**. Shortly afterward, our key collaborator at MSS also left their role, and they were not replaced.

Throughout 2021, the Kaien Island Urban Farm planted, grew, and donated 140kg of produce from a 3500 sq/ft lot; it worked with three food-focused community organizations to hold four workshops related to growing and food production and with the help of Gitwilgyoots Hereditary Chief Nistoix, Clarence Nelson and Velma Nelson, the urban farm was gifted the name “Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxtaxaala”, meaning “community garden of Lax Kx'een and Maxtaxaala” in Sm'algyax, the language of the Ts'msyen People.

Anecdotally, the urban farm did raise awareness

of the potential for small-scale urban food production in Prince Rupert. The garden saw hundreds of visitors in the summer and fall of 2021 and 2022, who joined in caring for and

harvesting produce. Some community members brought seeds and their ideas for specific crops to grow, and we offered space for them to grow their favourite crop varieties.



Local residents were encouraged to grow and harvest with us at the urban farm. In this photo, Eric is harvesting wheatgrass, which he used in his smoothies.

Lastly, a key activity of our growing program early on was coordinating a regular convening of community organizations, activists, and farmers who had an interest in food systems work. In partnership with MSS, we convened two round table discussions, which 15 to 20 people attended to share their work and learn from each other. Once our partner at MSS left their role, the project languished because we were not able to find another Indigenous convening partner.

Toward the end of 2021 and early 2022, the NWFSI experienced difficulty securing funding to sustain project capacity (particularly for staff salaries), putting the long-term sustainability of Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxtaxaata in question. Most funders we approached preferred to fund infrastructure projects but did not allow wages as eligible spending. We believe this is a common barrier to starting up sustainable food security and sovereignty initiatives in rural and remote communities. Fortunately, Metlakatla Development Corporation generously waived the rental fees of the farm site

in 2022 to alleviate the financial pressure, allowing the farm to undertake a second growing season. Without this relief, the urban farm would not have been able to continue or to transition into its current iteration in a good way.

Building upon the practical skills learned and the relationships with community growing organizations established in the first year, **Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxtaxaata was able to increase produce grown by 100kg to a total of 240kg in the second year.**

80% of the produce grown was again donated to community organizations in need, with the remainder used for events as well as sale at the inaugural Seaside Pop-up Market.



The Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxtaxaata urban farm in June 2021.



Summer Community Worker, Caterina Cociani, and Food Systems Coordinator, Charles Gerein (right), in Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxłaxaata urban farm in August, 2022. Below left, Charles plants seedlings in the greenhouse in May 2022. Below, right, a late summer harvest in August 2022.



Unfortunately, funding continued to be an issue throughout 2022 and it became necessary for the urban farm to vacate the downtown lot at the end of the year. Efforts were made to engage the City of Prince Rupert to find vacant, city-owned property to house the farm, which was met with enthusiasm. However, the general shortage of suitable land in Prince Rupert complicated the municipal process and a solution was not found. Ultimately, at the end of 2022 much of the urban farm infrastructure was moved to École Roosevelt Elementary School to supplement their newly created garden space, with a portion going to the Metlakatla's greenhouse and garden.

Once the infrastructure was distributed, we continued to support our partners through a spring seedling program, growing seedlings at the Charles Hays Secondary School and distributing them to community gardens across the region. Ecotrust Canada also engaged a summer student to maintain the gardens at the schools and plan the fall garden for when students return to class in September. The seedling program has been a success with outlying communities, and we will consider continuing that program on a small scale in the future to continue to meet the need.



École Roosevelt Elementary School

2 Mitacs Project Placements

As part of the NWFSI's first year, through funding from the Mitacs program, four community-focused food projects were created with three Prince Rupert-based organizations; each project was led by a graduate student attending a Canadian university. The subjects of the projects were an [urban compost feasibility study](#) and a [food distribution network feasibility study](#) with the Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Society, [food distribution and marketing](#) with Fukasaku of Prince Rupert, and a food entrepreneurship program with the Hecate Strait Employment Development Society.

Here, we learned another valuable lesson. Mitacs students working on the food distribution

network feasibility project reported a high level of “research fatigue” from community members who participated in their study. After three years and 20 student researchers participated in the NCIL, participants felt that the research had become extractive. Additionally, students reported feeling a sense of displacement and discomfort in the “fly-in” approach where outside researchers arrived, stayed four months, and then left the community. The students' experience was powerful enough that our team decided not to reapply for Mitacs placements until we had the capacity to build and fund a decolonized approach to community-led research.



On the left, Chantalle Gervan demonstrates the layers of compost for her study with the Gitmaxmak'ay Nisga'a Society, and on the right, Andrea Yorovsky stands next to Dai Fukasaku, who she worked with to help bring local food producers and consumers at the heart of his new food market in Prince Rupert, BC.

Of the **20 Mitacs placements** hosted by Ecotrust Canada, **six students stayed on** long-term to continue working in the community and their area of interest. **Four even became long-term staff** with Ecotrust Canada. In the future, we will be looking to create conditions for students that will enable them to build long-term relationships and a sense of commitment with our collaborators and the larger community.



Mitacs placements who focused on food systems projects in Prince Rupert, BC, on Coast Ts’msyen Territory. Clockwise from top left, Mariculture Program Manager, Mary Williams next to Henry Clifton, Captain for Metlakatla Development Corporation’s Regenerative Ocean Farm; Carly Checholik, Food Security Project Coordinator in 2020; Morgan Sage, Food Security Project Coordinator in 2019; and, Taylor Reidlinger, Restorative Ocean Farming Project Coordinator in 2019.



3

Charles Hays Secondary School Community Garden Program

Part of the mandate of the NWFSI has been to seek out food-focused community organizations and individuals within Prince Rupert and from the surrounding area with which to collaborate on programming and knowledge-sharing workshops; on this front, of note, is an ongoing collaboration with School District 52.

The collaboration between School District 52 and Ecotrust Canada began on a small scale when, during the 2021 growing season, EC program coordinators were invited to hold workshops at several schools in Prince Rupert. Through this initial connection, EC approached Charles Hays Secondary School administration in early 2022 to request access and use of their heated greenhouse in advance of the growing season to sow long-season plants for Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxtaxaata, which lacked a climate-

controlled greenhouse for this purpose. This request was met with an enthusiastic response, and EC staff suggested that seedlings could be started for the CHSS greenhouse and garden as well.

As the growing season progressed and seedlings proliferated, additional school and community gardens were contacted with the offer of garden starts, which several schools, organizations, and individuals happily accepted.

After a growing season that featured many seedling donations, 340kg of produce grown, donated, and sold between the CHSS garden and Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxtaxaata, and six gardening and seed saving workshops with school classes and community growing programs, both sides were keen to see the project carry forward through the 2023 season and beyond.



Garlic planting at Conrad Elementary School



3 Seaside Pop-up Market

In early 2022, the NWFSI received a second grant from the Northern Development Initiative Trust to hold a series of pop-up markets to assess the viability of a permanent farmers' and artisan market in Prince Rupert. Other community organizations were engaged to collaborate on the project, and the final organizing committee was comprised of Ecotrust Canada, Hecate Strait Employment Development Society (HSEDS), and Tourism Prince Rupert.

The initial Seaside Pop-up Market was held on August 27, 2022, in the HSEDS garden in Cow Bay, Prince Rupert. The market received a **positive response** from vendors and market patrons alike, with 25 local vendors participating and over 270 locals and tourists taking part.

Based on feedback from vendors and market patrons, a second pop-up market was set for the following spring. Ecotrust Canada, HSEDS, and Tourism Prince Rupert reunited to hold the second Seaside Pop-up Market on April 29, 2023, returning to the HSEDS garden in Cow Bay. For the spring market, 23 vendors took part, with the number of visitors rising to just over 600 individuals.

Tourism Prince Rupert has now established a permanent market in Cow Bay, and we are thrilled to continue to collaborate as needed to ensure that local farmers and food producers can sell their products to the local market as well as cruise ship visitors in Prince Rupert.

4

Northwest Seed Library

In late 2021, Ecotrust Canada and the NWFSI were approached by Farm to School BC, who sought partners to build a seed library dedicated to growers in the Pacific Northwest. The [Northwest Seed Library](#) launched in the beginning of 2022 as a collaboration between Farm to School BC, operating out of Terrace, BC, Short Season Seeds located in Hazelton, BC, and Ecotrust Canada, representing Prince Rupert, BC. The Northwest Seed Library serves residents of the communities along Highway 16, from Prince Rupert to Houston.

The NWFSI's role within the Northwest Seed Library was as the host of the physical library, including seeds, equipment, and informational materials, working with school gardens in Prince Rupert to grow out and return seeds, as well as hold seed-saving workshops with students.

Due to funding constraints and the termination of the Food Systems Coordinator role within the NWFSI, the physical library was moved to the Terrace Public Library in early 2023, where it operates today.



Jolene Swain of Short Season Seeds gives a seed saving workshop to high school students at Charles Hays Secondary School in 2022.

Metrics Gathered

Below is a table of specific data collected throughout the growing season at Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxłaxaala and associated activities.

Activity	Result
Kaien Island Urban Farm/ Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxłaxaala	
Produce Grown - 2021	A variety of fruits and vegetables were grown both in a greenhouse setting as well as in outer raised beds during the 2021 growing season; producing 140kg in total weight.
Produce Grown - 2022	With the learnings from the initial growing season as well as the ability to prepare the garden from an earlier point in the year, the total amount of produce grown increased to 240kg.
Produce Donation	Over the course of 2 growing seasons at Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxłaxaala, approximately 80% of the 380kg of produce grown was donated to 7 different community organizations, as well as to many individual garden visitors.
Workshops	A total of 10 workshops were held over the course of the 2-year life of Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxłaxaala on the subjects of seed starting, growing in the Pacific Northwest, composting, and soil health.
Charles Hays Secondary School (CHSS) Community Garden Program	
Seedling Program	Since its inception, the CHSS seedling program has seen steady growth in participation. The 2022 growing season saw 6 total donations to 5 different schools and growing organizations located in Prince Rupert and surrounding communities.
Produce Grown	During the 2022 growing season, 100kg of produce was grown in the CHSS greenhouse and garden; of which 20kg was given to the CHSS foods program, 60kg was donated to local organizations, and 20kg being sold at the inaugural Seaside Pop-up Market.
Workshops	Over the course of the 2022 growing season, 4 individual workshops were held in the CHSS garden and greenhouse on the subjects of seed starting, soil amendment, out planting, and seed cleaning and saving.

Seaside Pop-up Market	
Seaside Market - 2022	The 2022 Seaside Pop-up Market was held on Saturday, August 27 in Cow Bay, Prince Rupert. The market featured 25 local vendors with 250 locals and tourists attending.
Seaside Market - 2023	The 2023 Seaside Pop-up Market was again held in Cow Bay on Saturday, April 29. The second pop-up market featured 23 local vendors with over 600 patrons attending the event.
Northwest Seed Library	
Workshops	Short Season Seeds and Ecotrust Canada collaborated on and held two workshops during the 2022 growing season. The first was held virtually on April 27 on the subject of seed saving in the Pacific Northwest. The second workshop was held in the Charles Hays Secondary School garden on September 22 on the subject of end of season seed cleaning.
Seed Donation	5 school gardens, 2 community gardens, as well as 10 individual gardeners from across Northwest BC grew out and returned regionally adapted seeds during the inaugural season of the Northwest Seed Library.



Kale seedlings to share with the community.



What Worked

Since the program launched at the beginning of 2021, the Northwest Food Systems Initiative has achieved positive community impacts through several of its programs and initiatives, along with forming and strengthening relationships and collaborations with organizations and individuals working in food systems on Coast Ts'msyen Territory.

Acting as the jumping-off point for the program, Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxłaxaata, the urban farm in downtown Prince Rupert, achieved many of its goals, including growing 380kg of produce from a 3,500 sq/ft lot over the course of two growing seasons, approximately 80% of which was donated to local organizations and individuals in need. Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxłaxaata also held ten total workshops, and, anecdotally, made headway in its aim of demonstrating to residents the variety of food and medicinal plants it is possible to grow in the rainy climate of the Pacific Northwest.

Perhaps the greatest success of the program has been the NWFSI's collaboration with School District

52. Starting off as a simple growing collaboration with Charles Hays Secondary School during the 2021 growing season, the partnership has blossomed into a program that involves a seedling starting program, seed saving for the Northwest Seed Library, and capacity building for multiple school gardens in and around Prince Rupert. This collaboration continues to grow and is one that both Ecotrust Canada and School District 52 hope to continue and expand into the future.

Lastly, another initiative that has achieved a level of success has been the Kaien Island Seaside Pop-up Market. Envisioned as a pilot project to explore the feasibility of a permanent farmer's and artisan's market in Prince Rupert, the two pop-up markets that were held in the fall of 2022 and spring of 2023 were well received by the community. With strong support from local vendors, 28 unique businesses participated, as well as over 900 locals and tourists attending the two markets, showing positive indicators for the new permanent market in Prince Rupert.

The urban farm grew 380kg of produce from a 3,500 sq/ft lot over the course of two growing seasons, approximately 80% of which was donated to local organizations and individuals in need.



What Didn't Work

While the NWFSI has experienced several high points through its programming, alongside forming valuable community connections, it also suffered significant setbacks during its tenure, foremost among them being the inability to secure sufficient funding to sustain the program.

While several corporations and community organizations made private donations in 2022 toward maintenance and programming at Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxłaxaał, along with a second grant from the NDIT toward a series of pop-up markets, efforts to secure a sustainable funding stream to put towards a land lease as a permanent home for the urban farm, as well as the project manager's salary, were unsuccessful.

A second failure of the NWFSI was the uncertainty of the status of the home of Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxłaxaał, an issue that persisted throughout its life and ultimately led to its dismantling. This can be partly attributed to limited land options in downtown Prince Rupert due to the specific needs of the project, along with challenging negotiations leading to a one-year lease, causing the urban farm to stand on unsteady ground to start the project.

It's important for us to note that we failed to gather baseline community engagement data at the outset of the project, so we are unable to analyze our impact around community awareness, support for growing initiatives or other qualitative metrics around well-being that resulted from our growing

program.

Lastly, perhaps the biggest barrier to the success of the program was our failure to connect across and with Ts'msyen communities. In early conceptualizations of the project the motto, "if you build it, they will come" was held up as a way to overcome skepticism that project planners heard from the community. It's our opinion at this juncture that this mindset is not inclusive of, or considerate of, our closest and most important collaborators — Ts'msyen communities. Our experience with Sndoyntga Lax Kx'een ada Maxłaxaał tells us that we cannot and should not build any new projects without free, prior, and informed consent and without a clear governance and co-development process in place with the Nation on whose land we are operating. In our case, when our partner at MSS left their role, we had the opportunity to engage a broader cohort of collaborators and Indigenous partners, but we failed to do so.

The double challenges of our struggle to secure sustaining funding and our failure to co-design with Ts'msyen communities ultimately led to our decision to sunset the urban farming program. If we had one or the other in place — either the strong collaboration with Ts'msyen partners or a funder who was willing to invest in the resources required for deep and sustained community engagement — we believe that we could, in time, bring the project around.



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