**Briefing Paper: Exploration of Indigenous Food Sovereignty and the Climate Crisis in T’Sou-ke First Nation, British Columbia**

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**Introduction**

The concept of food sovereignty was created in 1996 by a group of Latin American land-based farmers, peasants and Indigenous Peoples, collectively referred to as La Via Campesina, in protest of the globalization of their local food system (Wittman et al. 2010). In practice, this term represents increased autonomy and control over a food system, often increasing food security through culturally relevant and ecologically sustainable practices (Cidro et al., 2015; Kepkiewicz & Dale, 2018). Food sovereignty looks different for every community as it mirrors the need for local solutions to local problems. Land-based ethics are critical to the success of food sovereignty at the local level because they incorporate justice, respect for life and democratic values, ultimately prioritizing ecologically sound food production (Nyéléni, 2007).

Indigenous food sovereignty (IFS) is a specific type of food sovereignty that aims to reconnect Indigenous peoples with their traditional food systems, which have been destroyed by colonial acts throughout history. The four principles that support IFS include the recognition that food is sacred; community participation in food systems; self-determination; and supportive policy (Morrison, 2011; Kepkiewicz & Dale, 2018). IFS acknowledges the ongoing impact of colonialism and offers an alternative to food security methods by rooting projects in human rights, land reform and self-determination (Matties, 2016). Participation in harvesting and hunting practices associated with traditional food systems fosters transmission of cultural values that align with community well-being more so than the prioritization of individual nutrition often focused on by food security (Power, 2008). Generating an understanding of strategies that facilitate traditional food systems is unique to IFS; a revitalization of cultural practices promotes local control over community health and culture (Grey & Patel, 2014). IFS efforts require a food system rejuvenation, as well as a more general local cultural, social and political resurgence (Grey & Patel, 2014). Therefore, these layered dimensions require additional attention within any discussion of IFS, including the impacts of the changing climate.

Restoration of food systems requires an understanding of traditional food sources and practices. Indigenous food systems include all traditional food sources that are available from the traditional environment, resources that are culturally accepted by a community and considers the sociocultural relationships, acquisition methods and composition or nourishing components identified with these food sources (Kuhnlein & Receveur, 1996). Indigenous food systems are rooted in social and economic factors, cyclic in nature and support biodiversity that encompassing the full spectrum in life in ways modern food systems fail to (Kuhnlein, Erasmus & Spigelski, 2009). Further, Indigenous food systems are connected to components of nature and culture that contribute to community health on not only a physical level, but also on emotional, mental and spiritual levels (Kuhnlein, Erasmus & Spigelski, 2009).

An exploration of T’Sou-ke First Nation’s history, current IFS efforts in the province of British Columbia and in the community, the impacts of climate change on traditional food systems and community response to these challenges will enable this paper to set the stage for the research project Four Stories About Food Sovereignty. This paper will focus on the impacts of the climate crisis in T’Sou-ke First Nation and the future of IFS efforts in this community.

**T’Sou-ke First Nation Context**

T'Sou-ke First Nation is an Indigenous community located on Vancouver Island’s southern coast, home to approximately 120 residents, with memberships, on and off reserve, totalling over 300. Historically, Coast Salish communities in the Pacific Northwest, including T’Sou-ke First Nation, had some of the highest population densities on the North American continent because of the abundance of resources from the land and the water (Olson & Steager, 2015).Due to T’Sou-ke First Nation’s geographical location on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, they were one of the first Indigenous communities in Canada to have considerable contact with colonial settlers. Colonial settlement began in the 1840s, even though T’Sou-ke had not ceded their traditional lands for settlement. Under the Douglas Treaty, on May 1 1850, T’Sou-ke received forty-eight pounds, six shillings, eight pence and fifty-two blankets for all of their land, except for sixty-eight hectares, which comprise the community’s two current day reserves (Olson & Steager, 2015). This treaty not only took the majority of T’Sou-ke’s territory but also enabled settlers to hunt and fish on the community’s remaining lands (Olson & Steager, 2015). The Douglas treaty effectively destroyed the community’s ability to rely solely on the traditional resources their ancestors had depended on for many generations. These historic events are prime examples of the direct effects of environmental dispossession the community has faced, and continues to feel the effects of to this day. The community’s coerced displacement from their traditional lands, limited access to food sources, completely disrupting T’Sou-ke First Nation’s traditional food system.

Despite a history of tremendous loss, T’Sou-ke First Nation is an inspiration of resilience, working towards sustainable programming and sovereignty in a number of areas. In 2008, T’Sou-ke undertook a large project to create a vision for the community which all members were committed to, through this process they identified four pillars: energy autonomy, cultural renaissance, economic development and food security (Moore, 2013). After completing this process, T’Sou-ke raised money from sixteen sources, both private and public, and began building a solar intensive community (Moore, 2013). T’Sou-ke’s move to solar has been successful, all meters on reserve are running backwards and excess energy is sold back to British Columbia’s provincial utility (Moore, 2013). Decreased energy costs, increased energy autonomy, creation of jobs and development of eco-tourism have resulted from this shift to transition to solar energy (Moore, 2016). The national and international recognition T’Sou-ke Nation has received, in relation to solar energy, reflects the power of Indigenous ways of knowing.

**Indigenous Food Sovereignty**

*Indigenous Food Sovereignty in British Columbia*

Food sovereignty is not an aspiration for Indigenous communities in British Columbia, but a remembered reality that lives on through the sharing of traditional food practices (Morrison, 2011). Elders and activists across the province have responded to the ongoing effects of colonization through creating space for the sharing of Traditional Knowledge and in turn, affirming the relevance and importance of Indigenous food systems; various projects in British Columbia have been successful in supporting communities in this process (Bagelman, Deveraux & Hartley, 2016; Elliot et al., 2012, Morrison, 2006; Muller, 2018). For example, the *Feasting for Change* research program united Elders from across Vancouver Island to share stories about the loss and revitalization of traditional foods while enjoying a feast. The collaborative project led by Elliot et al. (2012), explored obstacles and facilitators in accessing traditional foods in Vancouver. Participants identified increased access to the sea and land, food-related community-based programming, increased education on traditional food practices and participation in cultural traditions as facilitators to accessing traditional foods (Elliot et al., 2012). Kamal et al. (2015) utilized a community-based food program as a basis for their research project, wherein they identified the participation of youth and Elders in land-based activities as a critical component in cultural resurgence. Participation in traditional food customs including the harvesting and preparation of meals, as well as the cultural protocols around these practices, have been recognized as an antidote to the health, social and environmental issues facing Indigenous peoples in British Columbia (Davis & Twidale, 2011; Kamal et al., 2015). All of these research projects have been successful in uniting communities and people in the sharing of knowledge and skills through meaningful experiences around food systems revitalization. However, the literature does not identify what is needed for sustained food sovereignty efforts in communities, outside of these research programs.

*Indigenous Food Sovereignty in T’Sou-ke First Nation*

T’Sou-ke First Nation was heavily involved in the aforementioned *Feasting for Change* project, hosting and preparing food for the first gathering with fresh produce from the community garden (Bagelman, Deveraux & Hartley, 2016). During this initial assembly, participants voiced that they had a desire for more opportunities to share Traditional Knowledge and engage in the process of food system revitalization with one another (Bagelman, Deveraux & Hartley, 2016). This finding directly aligns with the results of the 2008 Comprehensive Community Planning (CCP) T’Sou-ke First Nation completed with all community members.

Currently, T’Sou-ke First Nation has a community garden and greenhouse that supports some of the community’s food needs; produce is used for a biweekly needs-based meals-on-wheels program, Elder wellness days and nature walks, as well as the weekly community luncheons and culture nights (Ladybug Garden & Greenhouse, 2018). Additionally, the community holds a range of workshops, gatherings and hikes, providing opportunities for members to engage with traditional foods such as blackberries, camas potatoes and seafood. T’Sou-ke First Nation members rely on berries as a source of food to this day, often engaging youth in the harvesting process. Clam harvesting as well as oyster and clam collecting are still actively practiced in the community (Olson & Steager, 2015). While many efforts are made in the community to keep traditional food systems alive, the community garden lacks consistent financial and physical support to maintain the greenhouse, with reliance on annual funding application supporting the work at the garden (C. George, personal communication, March 12, 2019). However, Chief and Council do acknowledge the importance of the work being done at the community garden and when funding is not adequate, funds will be taken from the community budget to support the garden. Kuhnlein (2014) identified the importance of efforts to re-establish the utilization of traditional and sustainable food practices as central to revitalizing Indigenous identity due to the integral relationship between the health of the land and the health of Indigenous peoples; this finding reinforces the importance of projects such as the Ladybug Garden & Greenhouse.

**Climate Crisis and T’Sou-ke First Nation’s Food Sovereignty**

Impacts of the climate crisis and community member concern have been documented through one sharing circle and various interviews with individual community members. Poirier (2020) recorded community concern for the ecological environment, through the development of a community engaged project, noting the ramifications of climate change on T’Sou-ke First Nation’s food system, specifically the impacts of the forestry industry and pollution. Forestry impacts were discussed in terms of berry harvesting; community members detailed the destruction of the two largest berry fields. One member reflected upon the importance of one of the fields, Blueberry Flats, throughout her life: *“There’s nothing there anymore, because they took it away. That’s forestry, that’s taking the trees, that’s wrecking it- oh my god. There’s nothing out there anymore, it is really sad. It’s like wow, we went there for years and years and years, even when we were kids we went out there and now it’s gone”* (Poirier, 2020). When asked what the top food system issue is in the community, T’Sou-ke First Nation’s Chief articulated similar concerns citing private land ownership and timber companies’ harvesting rates as problematic for the community’s food system (G. Planes, personal communication, January 10 2020). Harvesting trees prematurely impacts the entire forest ecosystem, which the community views as a food forest rather than a commodity to be sold (G. Planes, personal communication, January 10 2020). The notion that humans have a right to extract resources for monetary profit is damaging the environment and only results in short-term gains; timber companies are not responsibly acknowledging their long-term ramifications on the local ecosystem or the resulting negative impacts that affect all living species within the forest, including plants and animals (G. Planes, personal communication, January 10 2020). Indigenous food systems acknowledge the cyclic nature of ecosystems, and as such, the Chief of T’Sou-ke First Nation believes that humans are not acting responsibly in terms of their relationship with living things, while the environment is trying to keep up with increasing consumption demands, harvest rates and climate change (G. Planes, personal communication, January 10 2020).

Poirier (2020) documented clear examples as to how the climate crisis is impairing the community’s ability to engage in traditional practices, sustain IFS efforts and spread knowledge amongst membership. Community members who are primarily responsible for the growing of foods at the garden as well as the harvesting of wild foods have noticed that native food sources are not as successful as even five years ago. Plants will flower and then they don’t bear fruit; if they do produce fruit it is often airy, lacking moisture and seeds; a lack of seeds means that no new plants will grow the following year (Poirier, 2020). Community members expressed that they are very concerned for the future of these native plants because they will eventually become extinct if they are no longer able to replenish themselves (Poirier, 2020). Community understanding of the interconnected nature of the environment led to a discussion of the impacts of disrupting natural, cyclic cycles, specifically through acts of overharvesting trees: “*“Yeah, the trees are what cleans the air and keeps our climate, it’s a system, everybody knows that … the system is stopped midway, we’re teetering, but they keep taking all the trees so that the air can’t do what it’s supposed to do, filter through the trees”* (Poirier, 2020)*.* Additionally, members called for an immediate end to plastic use, discussing the unnecessary waste as a threat to habitats and wildlife (Poirier, 2020). The desire to preserve T’Sou-ke’s traditional ecosystems was apparent throughout the entirety of the study, and the members’ awareness of human action’s influence on climate change was strong. One individual expressed concern for the stability of all food systems, not just T’Sou-ke Nation’s traditional food sources: *”You know there’s going to be one day when all those vegetables aren’t going to be in the grocery store because the… greenhouse effect, it’s all changing, it’s changing fast and a lot of people don’t know how to correct it, yet it’s all- everybody’s fault for wrecking it because they shouldn’t have been allowed to do what they did to wreck it in the first”* (Poirier, 2020).

**T’Sou-ke First Nation Community Response**

As documented through discussions with community members and Poirier’s (2020) study, T’Sou-ke First Nation has responded to their climate concerns through the adaptation of sustainable practices. Evidently, the shift to solar energy provided a solution to energy autonomy in a manner that respected the community’s spiritual relationship with the land (Moore, 2013). Many other traditional practices reflect sustainable ways of living, respecting traditional lands and prioritizing the environment. In discussions with T’Sou-ke’s chief, he identified the necessity of planning at least 100 years in advance, thinking about long term impacts of development when making decisions (G. Planes, personal communication, January 10 2020). This notion aligns with the seven generations law from the great laws of the Iroquois confederacy, which takes into consideration the impacts of today’s decisions on later generations, ensuring sustainable decisions are made and sustainable practices are used (Moore, 2016). One community member directly articulated this concept when discussing continual efforts to push the community to be sustainable by always planning ahead (Poirier, 2020).

The move to solar energy has prompted a shift in the T’Sou-ke First Nation community’s mindset to actively seek out more sustainable ways of living (Poirier, 2020). A change in youth programming has resulted from the development of solar to incorporate more sustainable practices, with training provided by community members focused on teaching youth ways to transition to a more sustainable lifestyle such as foraging and monitoring water consumption (Poirier, 2020). At the community garden, employees practice seed collecting, which is a traditional practice, to ensure the future viability and sustainability of a range of native plants that may otherwise be lost due to changing environmental conditions as a result of the climate crisis. Poirier (2020) noted that when asked about the future of T’Sou-ke First Nation’s food and energy sovereignty, community members yearned for a return to a simplistic lifestyle which honours the planet and prioritize their traditional and sustainable ways of life.

The leadership of T’Sou-ke First Nation desires to continually better the community through restoring and healing their relationship with the land. The community is involved in a number of research and development projects which they hope will create a better future for their members. The Chief will continue to prioritize environmental enhancement over resource extraction by protecting traditional and native species and advocating for the end of overharvesting practices (G. Planes, personal communication, January 10 2020). For example, the community is currently instating the use of a Maritime Awareness Information System (MAIS) which will help document the state of the maritime ecosystem on traditional territories. This program will utilize T’Sou-ke First Nation traditional language for food sources and encourage youth and elders to spread knowledge amongst younger generations and community members. Specifically, the MAIS program will enable water quality testing, the monitoring of marine species, including the southern resident killer whales and oysters, and will house an inventory of data derived from a variety of ongoing marine research projects (G. Planes, personal communication, January 10 2020).

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored the ways in which the climate crisis is affecting the ability of T’Sou-ke First Nation to rely on traditional food sources and sustain IFS efforts as well as the community’s responses to their changing environment thus far. As the ramifications of the climate crisis continue to impact the community, traditional food sources will become increasingly unavailable, affecting not only the health but the wellbeing of the community due to the intrinsic link between the health of the land and of T’Sou-ke First Nations peoples. The continued political denial and inaction towards the climate crisis will only worsen these matters. T’Sou-ke First Nation is taking steps to increase the sustainable practices in the community, which they hope will offset some of the impacts of climate change; promoting energy and food sovereignty are key community-identified needs.

T’Sou-ke First Nation’s Chief and Council acknowledges the impact of bringing together Indigenous communities from all over the world to strengthen knowledge and share in ideas for a sustainable future (G. Planes, personal communication, January 10 2020). Learning from others is an important source of growing for the community, and the hope is that the Four Stories About Food Sovereignty project will provide an opportunity to further progress towards sovereignty goals. The community hopes to generate environmental, cultural and community development through their involvement in this project (G. Planes, personal communication, January 10 2020).

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