



HEALTHY ABUNDANT WILDLIFE – A FOUNDATION FOR NORTHERN & RURAL FOOD SECURITY

SUMMARY

A northern and remote Canada food security strategy cannot be separated from a wildlife health management strategy. Northern and rural food security strategies depend on accessible fish and wildlife that communities are confident can be safely consumed. With resource development, climate change and new analytical techniques, more and more food-borne hazards are being detected in fish and wildlife. There is a gap in access to food safety programs and expertise in remote and northern Canada, creating inequities in health protection. New partnerships are needed to promote novel approaches to education, surveillance, assessment and risk communication of food safety threats associated with fish and wildlife.

BACKGROUND

Country foods are healthy, rich in essential nutrients and low in sugars and unhealthy fats. The Canada Food Guide includes a guide for First Nations, Inuit and Métis, integrating traditional food from the land and sea. Hunting and fishing contribute significantly to our food system. For example, Statistics Canada reported that 68% of Inuit adults in the Arctic harvested country food and in 2/3 of Inuit households, at least half the meat and fish eaten was wild harvested. A 1990 study estimated that the food replacement value for wildlife hunting for Cree community of 6500 was \$7.8 million for one year. Many remote, aboriginal and especially northern communities are struggling with a food insecurity crisis. Declines in wildlife populations, elevated levels of certain contaminants in some country food, and increasing awareness and concern about microbial food contaminants are contributing factors to the serious decline in food security. Northern and remote communities are likely to see great changes in their environment; some will ease food security concerns while others could exacerbate already decreasing country food accessibility and safety.



THE FOOD SAFETY GAP

With increased attention to country food as part of Canada's food security plan and improved diagnostic and analytical methods, there is an ever-expanding list of potential food-borne hazards being associated with fish and wildlife: Yet food safety assurances are not equitable for those who purchase versus harvest their food. The list of potential foodborne hazards will expand as climate change affects the distributions of pollutants in nature and facilitates the introduction and emergence of new microbial hazards. A Council of Canadian Academies report noted significant cases of zoonotic diseases in people in northern Canada, with an increasing number of zoonotic diseases reported in wildlife, including: tularemia in muskrat, beaver and rabbits; rabies in foxes; brucella in ungulates, foxes, and bears; echinococcus in rodents or canine species; trichinella in walrus and polar bears; cryptosporidia in both marine and terrestrial mammals; and toxoplasma in beluga whales. Resource development will continue to create new opportunities for real or perceived food contamination.

WILDLIFE HEALTH IS PART OF THE FOOD SECURITY STRATEGY

Food security "exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." Strategies to combat food insecurity will require holistic approaches that consider the local food culture and the ways in which people acquire their food. The Council of Canadian Academies' report noted that data gaps on the health of key traditional/country food species complicated their attempt to identify strategies and contingencies to reduce the vulnerability of northern Canada to a suite of anticipated food security transitions. The report went on to say that climate change can be expected to be a major driver of these transitions due to its effect on wildlife abundance and distribution and on the introduction of new and invasive species. A northern and remote Canada food security strategy cannot be separated from a wildlife health and management strategy. Food safety is a public health priority but domestic animal food safety programs lack the capacity, community connections or expertise to provide ongoing advice and assessment of endemic and emerging food safety risk in fished and hunted foods.

PUBLIC HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

New bridges need to be built between people managing and assessing wildlife health and public health professionals charged with providing advice and assurance to country food consumers in order to reduce inequities for food safety and security assurances between people buying their food and those relying on fish and wildlife for to meet their nutritional needs. New ways to exploit local and community capacities for food safety extension and for wildlife disease surveillance will need to be championed to ensure a watchful eye for emerging hazards as well as to help communities link to the necessary expertise in a timely fashion to evaluate specific food safety concerns.

REFERENCE MATERIAL

Aboriginal Food Security in Northern Canada: An Assessment of the State of Knowledge. The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada. 2014 Council of Canadian Academies. Ottawa, ON

Diseases You can Get From Wildlife. A Field Guide for Hunters, Trappers, Anglers and Biologists. http://www.environment.gov.sk.ca/wildlife_diseases

Food Safety for First Nations People of Canada: A Manual for Healthy Practices. 2012. Health Canada. https://www.gov.mb.ca/ana/pdf/pubs/nhfi_food_safety_for_first_nations_people_of_canada.pdf

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