

Vancouver Learning Circle New Grease Trails Initiative

The Vancouver Learning circle met on March 19 to discuss the evolution of the project in Vancouver

The basic inquiry for this circle has to do with changing the view of urban Aboriginal economic development from a program model to a social enterprise model. Most economic development in urban Aboriginal communities come through government programs and initiatives which makes them vulnerable to cuts, politics and short term funding arrangements. Instead of an economic infrastructure, we get a project infrastructure that cannot create enough weight to catalyse a self-organizing system of economic activity.

The Vancouver circle has chosen the domain of food as it's field of practice and inquiry. Food is a powerful organizer for a number reasons:

- Food connects people to their cultures
- Getting healthy traditional foods in the city is a difficult proposition
- Reserve-based food gatherers, hunters, ranchers and others need a market for their foods.
- Foods have traditionally connected communities in BC through the grease trail system.
- Food systems are currently the leading edge of new social enterprises, green business and locally focused production and consumption. There is added value in food that is harvested, hunted, fished or grown locally, sustainably and in a small scale way, making small scale food production an accessible economic opportunity.
- Aggregating food business creates a secondary market opportunity in distribution, processing and storage for medium sized enterprises.
- Many different organizational structures can be employed in the food sector, including coops, community owned businesses, social enterprises, sole proprietorships and more traditional corporate structures.

Present at our circle was Cease Wyss, a food activist, artist and traditional plants specialist, Stuart Anderson who has long experience being involved in social enterprise development with VanCity Savings and Credit Union and Dawn Morrison from the Indigenous Food Systems Network which supports individuals and groups involved with Indigenous food related action, research, and policy reform to network and share relevant resources and information.

We began our conversation by looking at the mindsets that currently prevail in the food sector and in the economic development realm. When it comes to Aboriginal economic development, whether in the city or on-reserve, the program mindset prevails. Communities and organizations look to government to have a role in funding programs, providing capital or supporting training. While this infrastructure does serve to provide equity in terms of employment, startup and access to capital, it also develops a reliance on sources of funding that are tied to policy objectives (rather than market realities) and unstable in the long run.

On the other hand, the industrial economy model, especially when it comes to food, has generally been unkind to Aboriginal communities, First Nations territories and employment prospects in urban areas. With respect to food, industrialization and mass commercialization has led to an erosion of traditional values around subsistence and community practices of hunting, gathering and sharing food. Creating a linear process that takes food from production to distribution to processing to retailing and consumption closes the awareness of the impacts of food, socially, culturally and economically on communities. It removes the gift economy, and does not reflect the flows of social and financial capital that flow two ways in a traditional food exchange system

It was felt that social enterprise was a model that combined business practices and community values that honours food and provides economic opportunities within the food system while enhancing traditional values and building on the notions of shared subsistence and community wellness. We call this approach **The New Grease Trails Initiative** which acknowledges the traditional role that food trade played in bringing communities together in British Columbia, to share abundant harvests, distribute wealth and ensure the survival of thriving and resilient communities in times of variable abundance. Connecting urban centres to activity on the territories is the core mechanic that drives this initiative. Discovering opportunities, needs and gaps in establishing New Grease Trails is the new work that catalyses community effort and shifts economic activity to a sustainable social enterprise model.

When New Grease Trails appear many benefits flow. Individuals can find employment or start businesses. Communities can come together to support abundance and share their food with relatives in the city. Urban residents can become food growers, processors or distributors in the city. Marketing opportunities appear, connecting people who want food with people who can grow it, hunt, it, fish it or gather it. And with the food movement in North America moving towards small scale, local and value added, there are multiple opportunities for growing the urban Aboriginal economy by partnering with people living within the territories.

How New Grease Trails appear

In our learning circle meeting we exchanged many stories and examples of New Grease Trails appearing. Some of these include:

- The First Nations Agricultural Association who is developing a social enterprise model for food distribution and supporting community food systems.
- The Kamloops Indian Band using the old residential school kitchen to produce frozen meals using traditional and First Nations sourced products. These meals are sold through Thrifty's.
- The Potluck Cafe in Vancouver uses ingredients sourced in the territories for their meals.
- The First Nations Agricultural Lending Association is investigating a portable abattoir for First Nations ranchers, representing a processing opportunity that comes from diversified and abundant production.
- Feasting for Change on southern Vancouver Island has been bringing together communities to discuss food and the local food economy. From these gatherings there has been an increase in social capital, awareness of traditional food, and a business opportunity for a community cold storage to create a shared use facility for fishers on south Vancouver Island.
- Farm Folk/City Folk are pioneering the use of shared processing facilities for farmers to process goods that they are bringing into urban markets.
- In Hazelton, the community priced out it's annual expenditure on food for community events and determined that by producing and growing their own, they could save money and turn food dollars into community economic activity. This could be replicated in an urban environment.

New Grease Trails are structures for sharing food, trading currency and other goods and building social capital. It is worth thinking about what it would take to support these trails over the long term. Traditionally grease trails started as tracks from one region to another, thin lines that connected peoples through shared need and mutual benefit. Over time these trails became more physically important on the landscape and more socially important to the Nations involved. Songs were created, potlatching firmed up the relationships into formidable political alliances and codified and structured the work done by people trading food.

In the reiteration of New Grease Trails, we need to find ways to identify and map the nascent beginnings of a new indigenous food system and recognize the role it plays not only in economic viability but in generating social capital as well, connections that tie city dwellers to the territory.

What we need to do

As we talked more in our meeting it became clear that a few simple actions could catalyse an illumination of the New Grease Trails and possibly help them to grow into viable and indigenous economic activity that would connect and benefit urban Aboriginal people and First Nations communities. We identified several actions in the area of research, practice and policy, aligning nicely with the domains that the KIS project is seeking to link.

Research

There are a few areas in which good research would serve the question of shifting to a social enterprise model of economic development around food. These include:

- Researching the market in urban areas for native foods. This could be a broad economic analysis or something as specific as how much money urban Aboriginal organizations spend on food and seeing if this money can be diverted to community agriculture initiatives or New Grease Trail connections to First Nations.
- Research some of the stories and social enterprise experiments around local food production and producing handbooks for community members and organizations to develop food production.
- Researching the economic viability of social enterprises to support New Grease Trail infrastructure such as processing, distribution and marketing infrastructure that would make it easier for small scale food producers, hunters and fishers to enter the field.
- Research to support the establishment of food coops, urban Aboriginal growing and harvesting opportunities, farmers markets and other small scale initiatives that could be run by communities or organizations as profitable social enterprises.
- Research on the viability of indigenous food coops for a variety of foods, including wild meats, berries and plants as well as cultivated crops and ranch raised meat.
- Research on policy questions that need to be answered to bring wild foods to urban Aboriginal people, and what it would take to shift those policies to make access to indigenous foods possible for urban Aboriginal people in markets, schools and other institutional settings.

Convening

The best way to link people in the food system together is to convene a gathering and build on the efforts that many have already undertaken. Feasting for Change provides the best model for connecting people.

- Convening a gathering in Vancouver of Aboriginal people, practitioners, researchers, policy people, business people and others in a Feasting for Change event to initiate the conversation for developing new models of economic activity around food and social enterprise in Vancouver.
- Illuminating our efforts to tell the story broadly: a Feasting for Change event needs to have a film made of it and a website supported to connect people on these issues.

Policy

There are numerous policy issues involved in moving food around and creating the conditions for economic activity in this sector. Specific policy work can help strategic create leverage for new models and new connections to emerge.

- Examining policy implications for working with the food system and social enterprise.
- Involving policy people from provincial and municipal governments to engage in policy shift to create the conditions for economic activity around New Grease Trails.
- Examining government policies that would allow for and encourage different types of business models to exist, especially at the very small scale.
- Analysis of policy barriers and opportunities that would allow First Nations food producers and harvesters to get their products into institutional settings, such as creating a “Sea to School” program.

Concluding

As we wrapped up our gathering, we determined that the way forward is to create an event by planning a series of upcoming meetings to organize and deliver the event. Timing is important, and fall would be good to allow time to raise interest and to serve food in the harvest season. Dawn Morrison, Cease Wyss, Stewart Anderson and Chris Corrigan committed to extending and continuing the conversation.

Vancouver Learning Circle Update:

The Vancouver Learning Circle has met a couple of times. The Circle is conceptualizing a project to look at creating a social enterprise based economy around the food system, see notes below. The group is considering hosting a community forum in the fall to bring the food system together.

In Vancouver we have had the following number participating:

Academics: 3

Practitioners: 8

Policy: 0 (have had regrets from City and planning on involving the province)

Update: Chris Corrigan, 18 April 2010