First food justice

The impact of our food industry and the growing movement to restore native food sources.

WIKICOMMONS

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Portland is widely regarded as a city for foodies and a hot-bed of farmers markets and food co-ops. Last year the *Washington Post* even ranked us the best food city in the country.

But who controls our celebrated food?

Oregon ranked No. 1 in the nation for food-insecure children in 2011, and despite farms and ranches covering over 16 million acres of the state, we remain among the most food-insecure states in the country today, with more than 210,000 children in 2014 unsure of where their next meal was coming from, according to the non-profit group Feeding America.

Why? According to the Oregon Farm Bureau, about 80 percent of Oregon's agricultural foods leave the state, and 40 percent leave the country so that property owners can bring "new money" to Oregon. On the flip side of this abundance, the Oregon Food Bank reports that 270,000 people a month are eating from emergency food boxes – 92,000 of them children.

This was not always the state of affairs, and doesn't have to be today. In "Braiding Sweetgrass," the ethnobotanist Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, "For the greater part of human history, and in places in the world today, common resources were the rule. But some invented a different story, a social construct in which everything is a commodity to be bought and sold. The market economy story has spread like wildfire, with uneven results for human well-being and devastation for the natural world. But it is just a story we have told ourselves and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one."

In fact, the food right here in Portland did not always come from private landowners who sold wherever they wished. Not so long ago, the Portland area was an abundant food forest surrounded by a huge variety of berries, edible roots, fish and big game. And unlike today, the food was primarily held in common, not exported while people went hungry. Many of those food sources still exist, and could return to abundance with the proper care and attention.

"The salmon were very plentiful," says Wilbur Slockish, a Klickitat chief. "There was up to 30 million of those fish in the river, 'cause we only took what we needed. You had spring salmon, summer salmon, silvers, the coho, the sockeye, steelhead. They were all there. Steelhead's role was in the preservation of our powdered salmon. He would provide the oil so that it wouldn't spoil. They all had their roles."

Chief Slockish says that his people lived in temporary villages in and around Portland, and moved to harvest the best and most abundant foods as they became available through the seasonal rounds, while also traveling to higher elevations, away from Portland, in anticipation of the floods. Access to these foods diminished when settlers began building fences and establishing farms in the Willamette Valley, tilling up the fertile soils that had provided traditional foods to countless generations. Access diminished further with the establishment of the reservation system and the overharvesting of fish that came with the settler canning industry.

But Chief Slockish says the food in the region was originally very abundant. "The food was plentiful – we never, never went hungry."

"This land was a giant supermarket. The foods, like your supermarket now, they have different aisles for different foods, and that's the way the mountains and this area was. And that's why they called us migrants, but you know we follow the ripening of the seasons. High water fisheries, low water fisheries, all of the berries and the roots, they had their seasons and in different areas. That's why we just went, like going from one aisle to another aisle like we have now. But they don't call 'em migratory when they are going down their supermarket aisles."

Slockish says that camas, a blue flowering plant whose root bulb provided a staple food, grew in massive beds on both sides of the Willamette River, and that these massive patches extended all the way from Salem to Portland, and up to the mouth of the Columbia River past Sauvie Island (then Wapato Island) after the arrow-leafed food plant that grew in abundance in its shallow waters).

Today, the native peoples whose cultures grew up with these foods want to see their habitats restored so that the original bounty can return. And if their vision is embraced by other Northwest leaders, the result would not only be a healthy and ecologically sound food source that revitalizes native cultures, but a stronger and more diverse economy for the entire region.

Multiple tribal governments have begun initiatives to restore abundance and access to these traditional foods. The Puget Sound's Northwest Indian College launched the Traditional Foods of Puget Sound Project in 2008, which led to the Lummi Traditional Food Project in 2009, followed by the Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project in 2010.

In 2007, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Eastern Oregon went a step further, shifting its entire land management strategy towards the preservation and restoration of first foods – a transformation initiated and implemented by their Department of Natural Resources.

Eric Quaempts, the department director who crafted this strategy, says that his goal is to manage the land based on the lesson of foods served at religious and cultural events – a crystallization of tribal creation beliefs.

"In tribal creation belief there's an order in which the foods promised to take care of the people. Water is served first, then salmon, representing other fish, deer,