Exploring Food and Fishery Systems in the Lake Superior Region

Background

Fisheries make vital contributions to the health, well-being, and livelihoods of people across the globe. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization, fish provide over one-third of the world's population with nearly 20% of their animal protein intake. Many studies have documented the contributions of fisheries to healthy ecosystems, including their central role in supporting food security and nutrition and maintaining traditional foodways and local economies.

Too often, governance and policy focus on managing fish stocks for efficiency and profit, to the neglect of local food and livelihood needs.

Project Objective

Focusing on the Lake Superior region of Canada and the United States, this research aims to support social and ecological sustainability in the region's fisheries by better understanding and mapping their connections with local food systems.

Why Lake Superior?

Lake Superior (*Anishnaabe Gichgamiing*) is the largest of the five Great Lakes. Its expansive coastline and over 2,500 islands supports a diversity of wildlife, along with over 30 native species of fish.

Politically, the Lake's borders are split between the Canadian and United States Federal Governments, the Province of Ontario, three states (Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan) as well as the traditional territories of numerous First Nations and Indian tribes, all with varying jurisdictions and levels of authority for fisheries management.

For many Indigenous and settler communities, the lake is part of their identity and cultural heritage. Indigenous peoples are increasingly asserting their rights to the land and water, attesting to the importance of fisheries to their communities, cultures, and food systems. There are also non-Indigenous commercial fisheries that supply local and international markets and an active recreational sport fishery.

Lake Superior is an important research area as it shares commonalities with other transboundary environments along with unique features that can be extrapolated to understand relationships among food and fishery interactions in other places.

Reseach to Date

In the of summer 2017, we completed a preliminary round of approximately 25 interviews with various food and fishery actors in the Lake Superior region, including Indigenous and settler government agencies, academics, fish harvesters, and fish processors. These exploratory interviews helped to understand Lake Superior fisheries dynamics and gauge the interests of participants in this research project. The positive response to our interview requests and suggestions for more substantial research around questions of sustainability and food-fishery system connections is the primary impetus for this project.

Next steps

This research will use two main approaches to explore the relationships in the Lake Superior food and fishery systems. It is our aim that these results will be relevant to communities and policy-makers in the region.

Social Network Analysis

We plan to undertake a social network analysis (SNA) to help place Lake Superior fisheries within a larger food systems context, specifically by looking at the food-related organizations, markets, and communities in which fisheries are embedded. Data collection for the SNA will involve surveys and interviews with fish harvesters (e.g. commercial, Indigenous, and recreational fishers), distributors and processors, retailers and restaurants, non-profit organizations, and government agencies (both Indigenous and settler).

Case Studies

Recognizing the distinct perspectives and relationships that Indigenous people have to Lake Superior fisheries, we are planning to take undertake case study research with Indigenous communities to understand questions of fisheries governance and food sovereignty within their traditional territories. We have begun to establish partnerships with Indigenous communities on Lake Superior and elsewhere in the Great Lakes region to explore decision-making in relation to food and fishery systems, and to support t efforts towards self-determination and food sovereignty.

Contact Us

If you have questions about this work or would like to be involved, please contact Dr. Kristen Lowitt, Department of Geography, Brandon University, lowittk@brandonu.ca or Dr. Charles Levkoe, Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Food Systems, Lakehead University, clevkoe@lakeheadu.ca, 807-346-7954.

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