

A case study on a smoked fish product from Flathead Lake in conjunction with the food sovereignty movement of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

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Introduction

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) and their subsidiary Native Fish Keepers Inc. (NFKI) are engaged in an ongoing project to reduce the number of an invasive species of lake trout in Flathead Lake to enable the native species Bull Trout and Westslope Cutthroat Trout to make a comeback (Native Fish Keepers, INC., 2017). NFKI takes a multifaceted approach toward this goal; one major avenue is troll-netting the lake trout and then filleting and flash freezing the fish. This product is then donated to food pantries and sold to grocery stores and restaurants across Montana (Native Fish Keepers, INC., 2017). It is estimated that there were 1.5 million lake trout in Flathead Lake in 2014 when NFKI took on this project, and the goal was to remove at least 143,000 each year (Backus, 2017). While that goal has yet to be met, the tribes are taking a long term view on this project, counting both the process and the product to be valuable in the ecological upkeep of the lake (Backus, 2017). In 2017, the last year for which data could be found, NFKI published data suggesting that the troll netting is starting to have some effect on the population of lake trout (CSKT 2017).

In Fall 2019, Dr. Wan-Yuan Kuo led a class of Montana State University (MSU) students to collaborate with CSKT and NFKI to come up with a Native food product that could add market value to their frozen fish filet and further fund their goal of reducing the prevalence of lake trout in Flathead Lake. The product they came up with was a smoked fish filet. Dr. Kuo published a paper about her class and its impact last year in which she laid out the criteria and importance for community culture being integrated into food innovation (Kuo 2019). In her report of her work with NFKI, Dr. Kuo listed two questions NFKI had in regard to her project at the time; **One: can a food made from this invasive species be called Native? And two: how does this market product fit into the non-profit designation of the corporation, since the ongoing goal of the group is reducing the lake trout population, not profiting off the sales (Kuo 2019)? My goal in the proposed project is to work with Salish and Kootenai College to answer these questions in regard to the Smoked**

Fish Filet product within the broader scope of the food sovereignty movement. The findings from this project will shed light on future directions to further the tribes food sovereignty and resource stewardship.

Background

I am personally interested in this project because I grew up on the Flathead Indian Reservation and would like to move back to the reservation when I finish school. My career goal is to start a business in Polson on the reservation where I can support local growers and makers. This project will benefit me personally in learning how to work with the Tribes for our mutual benefit.

Shelly Fyant is the current chairperson for the board of the CSKT. She is highly interested in Native Food Sovereignty and investing in the Flathead Indian Reservation's quest for Food Sovereignty. She has been supportive of Dr. Kuo's work and has expressed interest in my future plans on the Reservation. Studies on the quest for food sovereignty amongst Montana's Tribes indicate that the Flathead Indian Reservation is one of the more food-secure (Radford 2016). This status positions CSKT well to explore the Tribal food sovereignty in the dimensions of food identity and food culture.

The questions posed to Dr. Kuo are vital to the continuation of this project, and also vital to the ongoing quest for food sovereignty on the Flathead Indian Reservation. The first question, can a food be called native if it is an invasive species, is one only the tribe can answer, but the underlying issue at stake is what does "Native Food" mean in this context and in the context of food sovereignty. Raster and Hill argue that Tribal Sovereignty includes not only the ability to govern in the political sense, but also the self-determination of resources including food (2017). This idea is further backed up in the modern definition of food sovereignty established in 2007:

"Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems." (DECLARATION OF NYÉLÉNI 2007)

The access to Native food systems as protected in treaties is vitally important in every level of governance and to each member of a tribe in their access to Native foods (Raster & Hill 2017). In the 1858 Hellgate Treaty the exclusive rights to fishing the lakes and streams on the reservation were granted to the Confederated Tribes. However, in this case it could seem tricky to define Native or Indigenous foods because the product in question

is an invasive species. The CSKT have taken it upon themselves as guardians of the waters of Flathead Lake to endeavor the safe removal of this invasive species. This presents an opportunity for continued demonstration of the Tribes' ability to manage resources adeptly, not only in an historic sense, but also in an ongoing and defining way. This the CSKT have been doing through NFKI. While this is obviously a Native project, the question of calling it a Native food still remains.

The second question about profitability, Dr. Kuo addressed in her paper when she stated that “success in food product innovation [is] not solely based on profit, but also the socio-cultural and environmental benefits” (Kuo 2019). NFKI has proven their ability to work with the resources they have and to include the community in their work in both sport fishing competitions and in making the fish filet product available to people in the community (Native Fish Keepers, INC., 2017). These steps have been true to their culture and have shown leadership and innovation toward defining what it means to be Indigenous food producers, utilizing the three pillars of sustainable production. We are also at a unique time in food security across the country as COVID-19 threatens food safety and transportation around the world (Shanks 2020). Now is the time to rethink where our food comes from and how we get it. Understanding the Tribal stakeholders' view on profiting from the smoked trout is critical to implementing the smoked trout product into the food sovereignty movement of the Tribe.

My hypotheses are that while the tribal members who live on the Flathead Indian Reservation do not have any specific cultural ties to the lake trout, it is a valid “Native” food in that the tribe has taken on the responsibility of managing the fish populations as part of their historic right to the lakes and streams. Furthermore, the environmental and social aspects of this project have importance alongside the economic gains. Native peoples have historically utilized as much of an animal as possible and the Tribes desire to be ecologically responsible in this matter remains strong. The smoked fish filet project could be taken on by a different entity within the Tribes so there is still a strong opportunity for further development of the smoked fish filet product.

Methods

I have met with Dr. Kuo of Montana State University and SKC Business Program director Rachel Andrews-Gould and Professor Dacia Whitworth to lay groundwork for my proposal and will work with

them to execute this project. First we will prepare the Internal Review Board (IRB) application for the approval by both SKC and MSU. Then I will work on the following aims:

Aim 1 - Business study. Navigating the status of potential markets for tribally-created smoked fish products: determine what markets currently utilize the lake trout fillets and what other native foods are on the market by utilizing collected data of NFKI's list of outlets (NFKI 2020) and other internet listings and calling or emailing the entities to establish relationship and ask questions pertaining to the frozen fish fillet and other potential products. My plan is to focus on twenty venues around Flathead Lake and twenty in Gallatin County (Table 1). I will determine which markets think there would be a desire for a tribally-created smoked fish product and what form of packaging/delivery would be preferred. This study will help to answer the second question of this project, particularly, in what way the Tribes can benefit from the smoked fish product.

Aim 2 - Community study- Assessing the stakeholders' perceptions of tribally-created smoked fish products in the scope of the three pillars of sustainability (people, planet, and profit): I will conduct surveys and focus groups to find a working definition of Native or Indigenous foods on the Flathead Reservation, and determine community feedback among three demographic categories: Tribal members on the Flathead Indian Reservation, Non-Tribal members who live on the Flathead Indian Reservation, and residents of Gallatin County who are interested in travel to the Flathead Indian Reservation for vacation purposes (Table 1). The survey will assess the general interests and perceptions toward Native value-added foods and the result will help inform the in-depth topics for the focus groups. I plan to conduct double groups of 6-8 people in each demographic category, split fairly evenly between male and female and younger (traditional college age), and older (non-traditional age students and faculty/staff) (Table 1). I will use Paul LaChapelle's recommendations for focus groups to conduct the focus group discussions (LaChapelle 2008). My main topics for the focus group are as follows: What is Native food in your perception? (Sold on the Reservation? Comprising native and traditional ingredients? Produced by tribal members?) How can this product benefit the tribes? (Economically, Environmentally, and Socially). What is your perception of this product? (Taste, market appeal, health).

Table 1. The number of participants and replications for the business and the community studies.

| Aims | Studies | Flathead Reservation | | Gallatin County |
|------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | | Tribal | Non-tribal | Non-tribal |
| 1 | Business study | 10 restaurants; 10 grocery stores | | 10 restaurants; 10 grocery stores |
| 2 | Community survey | 50 stakeholders | 25 stakeholders | 25 stakeholders |
| | community focus group | 2 groups of stakeholders | 2 groups of stakeholders | 2 groups of stakeholders |

Timeline: This project will span across two semesters, starting with communicating with local businesses first, continuing with the survey at the end of this semester and focus groups next semester (Table 2).

Table 2. Timeline of the proposed project.

| Aims | Activities/ Studies | Aug-Sep 20 | Oct-Nov 20 | Jan-Feb 21 | Mar-Apr 21 |
|------|-----------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| | Obtain IRB approval | x | | | |
| 1 | Business study | x | x | | |
| 2 | Community survey | | x | x | x |
| | Community focus group | | x | x | x |

Collaboration with Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Wan-Yuan Kuo has agreed to be my mentor in this project.

Additionally Rachel Andrews-Gould, Director of SKC Business Program and Dacia Whitworth, professor of Marketing classes at SKC have offered to collaborate with me on this project which will provide the foundation for an MSU-SKC course collaboration being developed by the above three faculty members. My project addresses the marketing aspect of the Indigenous food research project in the Food Product Development lab, which will complement the other two studies in the lab, the legal aspects of Tribal Sovereignty in Intellectual Property rights, and the health and ecology of Native foods. Dr. Kuo plans to hold biweekly meetings and host progress presentations monthly throughout the scope of this project. She is working closely with other students and the Tribal Council on more collaborative work this coming year, and my work will help to advance her work and the work of other students.

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