

Growing North:

Connecting people, place and food production to improve food security in the Yukon

By Meaghan Brackenbury

Food: the common denominator of human existence. It's an undeniable need and inalienable right that unites us all, essential to health and happiness, safety and security, peace and productivity.

The United Nations made the fight against hunger and food uncertainty among its top priorities. Ending "all forms of hunger and malnutrition" by the year 2030 is the second of its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. First brought into existence at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, the Sustainable Development Goals act as universal calls to action in eliminating poverty and injustice in all its forms.

The specifics of the second goal – "Zero Hunger by 2030" include ending all forms of malnutrition, protecting the genetic diversity and accessibility of seeds, and ensuring "sustainable food production systems and...agricultural practices."

The immense scope and utter importance of this issue not lost on Yukoners.

The North has long been a place where geographical inaccessibility, high costs of living, a short growing season, limited soil depth and nutrients, a rapidly changing climate, and continued legacies of colonialism all work together to create a particular fragility in the food system that might not exist elsewhere.



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SDG #2 : Zero hunger

The specifics of the second goal – "Zero Hunger by 2030" include ending all forms of malnutrition, protecting the genetic diversity and accessibility of seeds, ensuring "sustainable food production systems and...agricultural practices," as well as ensuring "access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations... to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round."

For more information on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) and the second goal, zero hunger, specifically, visit www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/hunger/

Kristina Craig is the executive director of the Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition, an organization that works to eradicate poverty in the territory and engage the wider Yukon community, in working towards this goal – which includes achieving food security. She says there are a number of challenges the territory faces when it comes to achieving a sustainable and just food supply. In the past year, all of these challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We have seen a huge increase across the territory of just the need for food,” Craig says. “People who maybe were getting by one way or another all of a sudden weren't ... there are clearly some needs that are not being met not just in Whitehorse, but in the communities as well.”

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Whitehorse, YT

Heather Finton and her husband, Andrew, are the owners of Sundog Retreat near Whitehorse, a tourism business. With Covid-19 making food vulnerability more visible in the community, the Fintons decided to turn the tourist resort into a vegetable farm in the summer of 2020 and donated nearly all the produce to the local food bank.

“We were ourselves pretty shell shocked. The impact [of Covid-19] on the tourism industry meant that we were giving money back to our customers rather than earning money. That was scary. Then border closures highlight the fact that it doesn't take much to change our local economy, and you're so dependent on food coming up the [Alaska] highway. We wanted to do what we could to try to mitigate some of that dependence and reliance on the highway.”

“Part of our idea was – and we successfully were able to do this – to raise funds that would allow us to grow vegetables that we would then give to the food bank to feed Yukon families. That worked out really well, and we also ended up taking vegetables to share with the Ta'an Kwäch'än Elders, because we're on their traditional territory, as well as the Kwanlin Dün Elders. When we started out, we were just hoping we might get a crop. We were able to successfully produce potatoes, carrots, beets, and turnips, and then some peas and beans as well.”

“I think what was unique about our project is that we wanted to make sure that not only were we creating food for families that couldn't afford to eat the vegetables, but that we would be helping to mitigate a bit of the access issue for families that you know, struggle to buy fresh vegetables that they would be able to access through places like the food bank. We're hoping that we will keep growing on this land, for sure. We're definitely in a season right now where we're looking at our options moving forward, but we're certainly passionate about the idea of supporting more local firms.”



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At the UN World Food Summit in 1996, food security was defined as “existing when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet dietary needs for a productive and healthy life.” **So, what exactly could this look like in the Yukon?**



For Léona Watson, a Yukon farmer, scholar, and international keynote speaker, it's the local farmers, growers, and food producers who lead the charge towards a food-secure North. “They're the ones responsible for it,” she says.

At the end of the day, if we're going to achieve food security... there is going to need to be an effort from everybody and anybody that grows food.”

says Léona Watson, a Yukon farmer, scholar, & international keynote speaker

The Farm Gate

Marsh Lake, YT

Cain Vangel is the owner of The Farm Gate, a certified organic poultry farm and processing plant near Marsh Lake, Yukon. It's the only poultry plant in the territory that provides local meat to grocery stores, alongside maintaining a regular booth at the Fireweed Community Market in Whitehorse. As Vangel sees it, local and, ideally, organic food production is vital to the territory.

“When the highways get washed out, there's nothing on the shelves; or if there's a snowstorm, the shelves get pretty bare...it's nice having fresh stuff. I can have the chicken to the grocery store less than 24 hours after they're killed. The whole food system [in the Yukon] depends on things coming from so far away. Having stuff in your backyard and building up the systems that work together before you have a crisis is pretty important, so that if there's something where the food's not coming up the highways, we have the systems in place to feed people and work together. You know where you can get the feed from someone who grows it up here, you can get the bedding or the shavings from whoever's milling lumber. You have to have all those connections in place to do things efficiently. Having stuff close by is always good in my mind.

“We like having [the chickens] outside on the green grass, or on the pasture so you have fresh access to the greens and lower densities than other places. It's kind of like a respect for the animals; we're not catching them by the feet, we're holding them by both legs and putting them gently into the crates. Just sort of raising them with our values.

“We go to the farmers market every Thursday, and you can see a lot of people who are buying your chickens and get feedback right away... it's nice being able to sort of know who you're growing the food for and be proud of it.

Of course, as any farmer in the Yukon can attest, the challenges to sustainably producing healthy foods in the territory are varied and plentiful.

The Northern growing season is short and intense, with frost in both the late spring and early fall. Land, especially a land-base big enough to farm on, can be extremely expensive for new farmers to purchase and access, and there are large swathes of agricultural land in the territory that go unused. This is even before the costs of transportation and shipping supplies, which are often astronomical.

To ignore these obstacles would result in an inaccurate and unhelpful portrait of the territory's food production landscape, many point out; but it doesn't mean there isn't cause for optimism. There is no shortage of farmers, producers, and entrepreneurs across the territory who are willing to take on those challenges and provide new innovations.



Carl Burgess is CEO of ColdAcre Food Systems, a corporation that specializes in hydroponic systems; plants grown using nutrient-rich water delivered through a closed-cycle trough, rather than outside, in soil. There is zero water waste, minimal food waste, and, with everything taking place inside, growing can happen all year.

"The philosophy was to occupy that year-round indoor growing space, basically create it in the Yukon," Burgess says.

ColdAcre grows leafy greens, edible flowers, and herbs in a containerized hydroponic farm and sells the products to local restaurants, directly to customers, and alongside imported foods at Whitehorse grocery stores, such as Wykes Independent Grocer, Save-On-Foods, and Riverside Grocery, among others. Though it only incorporated in 2019, the company has been a hub of experimentation including the creation of a microgreens farm and exploring the production of saprophytes, such as oyster mushrooms. Burgess and his team also help to sell and construct hydroponic systems for others in the Yukon and offer agricultural consultation services.

The company aims high: to quell the Yukon's reliance on imported food.

"We're competing against the stuff that's brought up the highway," Burgess explains.

"By not shipping food 3,000 kilometres, the carbon footprint is basically wiped out, the shelf life extended, the food waste is almost eliminated, the quality is better, and the variety we can produce is better. Those are a lot of checkmarks for just growing lettuce in the box."

says Carl Burgess, CEO of ColdAcre Food Systems

Meanwhile, further north in the Klondike Valley, selling fruit trees and sharing knowledge are a packaged deal within Kim Melton and John Lenart's business model at the Klondike Valley Nursery.

Alongside the sale of apple and pear trees, berry bushes, and grape vines, the pair educate customers on how to properly care for the plants and keep them producing healthily year after year.

To achieve true food security, Melton, who also serves as a co-chair for the Klondike Farmers Forum, believes the know-how of producing food needs to be accessible to everyone.

"Connecting people with their food ... involves all those pieces, with farmers markets and having local food available in the grocery stores and restaurants, but also encouraging people to produce their own food and to feel that connection," she says.

"I think it makes them more aware that food can actually come from not just their own backyards, but local farmers as well, and it tunes them into the fact that there's a lot happening in agriculture in the Yukon ... it's just been really delightful."

This is a point many within the Yukon's food world have repeated time and time again to varying degrees. Connecting to food is of the utmost importance, because it connects each of us to the wider world.



Klondike Valley Nursery

Miche Genest is chef and wild foods enthusiast who's lived in the Yukon for over 25 years. She has authored several cookbooks and writes a regular column about Northern cuisine, *The Boreal Gourmet*, in *Yukon, North of Ordinary* magazine. She refers to food as the "great community connector."

"Once you know where the food comes from and you know what it needs to grow, I think there grows in you a really strong desire to protect that," Genest says. "If you're feeling connected to your food, you're also feeling connected to the larger landscape and the environment, and to the people who live in it."

For Genest, this connection also necessitates gratitude towards the First Nations on whose territories the food is produced.

Kim Melton, of Klondike Valley Nursery & the Klondike Farmers Forum, believes the know-how of producing food needs to be accessible to everyone.

It's impossible to discuss true food security in the Yukon without acknowledging the role Indigenous Peoples have long played in stewarding the land.

Joe Tetlich, a member of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation of Old Crow, chairs the Porcupine Caribou Management Board, which monitors the whereabouts and well-being of the circumpolar herd that has been a source of culture and sustenance for the Gwich'in peoples for time immemorial.

Given the knowledge that has been passed down for generations and continues to thrive today, Indigenous Peoples are natural leaders on the frontline of food security, Tetlich says.



One of our cultural and traditional ways is that if we want the caribou to come back, then we have to respect the caribou. Any fish or wildlife, we have to respect it to make sure that it's going to come back.

If we can use that sort of teaching, and pass it down to the communities, and maybe even nationally or internationally ... I think we're going to all be on the same path."

Joe Tetlich, a member of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and chair the Porcupine Caribou Management Board

The goal date of 2030 for successfully reaching the UN Sustainable Development Goals is creeping closer, and Canada is still a long way from achieving true and equitable food security.

Yet, there is hope for the future.

Kristina Craig of the Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition points to the Sundog Retreat in Whitehorse. It started a vegetable farm on their property this past summer and donated the produce to the local food bank. This is just one of many examples of innovative solutions to food insecurity in the Yukon, Craig says.

"I do think that we have so much capacity here to ... build a better quilt of options that would allow people to be more food secure and to be worrying less about that, and more about other pieces – education, mental health."



Kristina Craig, Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition



YukonU.ca/innovation/SocialEnterprise

Watson, farmer, agricultural analyst, and eternal optimist, says she also sees that promise in the passion, dedication, and innovations of Yukon farmers.

“Since being here in the Yukon for just over five years [and] how far the Yukon has come ... I think that we're really gaining momentum, and it's really encouraging to see more young farmers and even more hobby farmers,” Watson says. “I see challenges as an exciting thing.”

“We need to keep on with the conversations, keep on trying new things, trying to learn. If you never try, you're never going to know.”



Sundog Retreat



About the writer

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#YukonBusinessesForGood

About this storytelling series

#YukonBusinessesForGood stories highlight some of the many Yukon businesses who create benefits for their communities and environment. The stories show how business can play a positive role in addressing shared values that have long been held by many Yukoners and now form the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs): global priorities from 2015 to 2030 for 192 countries, including Canada.

This series also showcases young writers in Canada's North and provides them paid experience as they begin journalism careers, thanks to funding from Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC).

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