Northern Manitoba Food Culture & Community Collaborative 2016 Learning Trip

Opaskwayak Cree Nation and Sherridon
September 22-29, 2016
Every year representatives from our organizational partners and northern advisors of the Northern Manitoba Food Culture and Community Collaborative (NMFCCC) take the time to visit one or two of the communities we partner with.

The trip participants have the opportunity to meet with, share with, and celebrate with their community partners. We have the chance to observe first hand, and sometimes even partake in the work being done on the ground. And we have the privilege of sharing with and learning from each other.

A huge thank you to all of our community partners from Opaskwayak Cree Nation and Sherridon, Manitoba that welcomed us into their communities, shared their experiences with us, taught us and kept us busy for the week.

Cover Photo: Trip Participants and Opaskwayak Cree Nation community members gathered for a wonderful dinner in the main garden.
Top left: Ernie takes us fishing in Sherridon, Manitoba
Top right: Julie Price attempts to participate in the Moose-calling competition in Opaskwayak Cree Nation, Alex Wilson holds the mic.
Bottom: Rhonda Taylor and Joan Vanduzer practice their chicken processing in Sherridon, Manitoba
“Learning for me has been incredible. Seems to me that no one should be part of the Collaborative unless they have been to one of these meetings. Otherwise there could be a lot of damage done.”
Opaskwayak Cree Nation, Mino Pimatciwin Gardens

Opaskwayak Culture & Healthy Living Initiatives is a grass roots group of community members who are working together to build their community in a healthy and sustainable way that is rooted in the Cree culture. The main focus so far has been to build an active and inclusive gardening group and garden facilities. Featuring 4 garden sites (Big Eddy Garden, Raspberry Patch, Potato garden, and Main Garden) approximately 50 families work together to plant, tend and harvest the gardens. They have also established an outdoor kitchen and tool shed at the Main garden. Individuals and whole families participate. For more detail, see their short video about the garden
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Obd0lm4z1ts

Photo: Children plant the turtle herb mound in the spring at the main garden.

Sherridon, Chicken & Smoke House Projects

Sherridon has been working to build their local food sources for the past 5 years. In doing so they have added a community chicken coop, a community garden at the youth centre (dormant in 2016), a community smoke house, and a communal fishing program. Local food sourcing and production significantly increase the access to food in Sherridon, which has no grocery store.

Sherridon was founded in the 1930’s when the Sherritt-Gordon mine opened. For two decades the town was a booming northern mining town, but as the ore ran out the mine and many of the town buildings were moved to Lynn Lake and most people left town. The current population of Sherridon is approximately 80.

Photo: Broiler chickens in Sherridon, Manitoba
Trip Itinerary

Monday, Sept 19th
2:30 p.m. Perimeter Airlines charter flight departs from Winnipeg to The Pas
3:30 p.m. Flight arrives at The Pas Airport, travel to Kikiwak Inn, Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN)
5:30 p.m. Meet and Greet with OCN Garden Group and OCN Chief and Council, Kikiwak Inn
7:00 p.m. Dinner, Mr. Ribs

Iris Vaisman (left) and Todd Jaques (centre) practice some traditional skills.
At right, dinner with OCN community members in the main garden.

Tuesday, Sept 20th
7:30 a.m. Breakfast on own at Hotel
8:30 a.m. Kikiwak Inn Conference Centre, initial sharing
10:00 a.m. Tour of OCN ‘Plant Factory’ (Hydroponic vertical farm pilot)
12:00 p.m. Visit Raspberry Patch on way to Moose Park for lunch.
1:00 p.m. Canoeing, archery, games with students at Pike Lake, conversations around the fire with OCN garden project leaders and participants
6:00 p.m. Dinner with community members and Entertainment, OCN Mino Pimatciwin Main Garden

Trip Participants visit the OCN indoor LED plant production facility
Trip Participants enjoying themselves in Cranberry Portage, en route to Sherridon, Manitoba

**Wednesday, Sept 21st**

7:30 a.m. Breakfast on own at Hotel  
8:30 a.m. Kikiwak Inn Conference Centre, review NMFCCC Theory of Change  
10:30 a.m. Check out and depart to Sherridon  
12:00 p.m. Lunch, Cranberry Portage Coffee Shop  
2:30 p.m. Arrival in Sherridon, check in at Kenanow Lodge, exploration of Camp Lake  
3:30 p.m. Meet in Kenanow Lodge Hotel, FMM leads discussion of intermediary partners  
6:00 p.m. Dinner, Kenanow Lodge Hotel at Camp Lake  
6:30 p.m. (optional) Boat ride to set net  
7:00 p.m. Sherridon Mining History and Manitoba Mines attempts to clean-up Camp Lake under the National Orphaned and Abandoned Mines Initiative (NOAMI)
Thursday, Sept 22nd

8:00 a.m. Breakfast, Kenanow Lodge Hotel
8:30 a.m. (optional) Boat ride to lift net
9:00 a.m. Walking tour of Sherridon and old mine workings
10:30 a.m. Meet in Kenanow Lodge Hotel, Evaluation sub-committee discussion
12:00 p.m. Lunch, Kenanow Lodge Hotel
1:00 p.m. Visit smoke shack and chicken co-op, learn to filet pickerel, pluck and clean chickens
6:00 p.m. Fish-fry with community members, Community Hall

Friday, Sept 23rd

8:00 a.m. Breakfast, Kenanow Lodge Hotel
9:00 a.m. Meet in Kenanow Lodge Hotel, Closing reflections and good-byes
10:30 a.m. Travel from Sherridon to The Pas
1:30 p.m. Charter flight from The Pas to Winnipeg
Trip Participants

The 2016 Learning Trip had the largest group of all the trips to date with 17 participants. Participants on the trip came from as far away as Toronto and Montreal, and as close as Thompson and The Pas.

Top row from left:
1. Sigrid Isford, HRJ Consulting, Calgary
2. Andi Sharma – Northern Healthy Foods Initiative, Winnipeg
3. Jennell Majeran – Northern Healthy Foods Initiative, Thompson
4. Joan VanDuzer, Harbinger Foundation, Toronto
5. Beth Hunter, J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Montreal
6. Ervin Bigheady – Northern Advisor, Leaf Rapids
7. Jane Rabinowicz, USC Canada, Montreal/Ottawa
8. Tim Stevenson, Food Matters Manitoba, Winnipeg
9. Monca Sinclaire – Northern Advisor, Winnipeg
10. Becky Cook – NMFCCC, Thompson
11. Todd Jaques – Tides Canada, Hamilton

Middle row from left:
12. Sara Hsaio – Tides Canada, Toronto
13. Rhonda Taylor, Canadian Feed the Children, Winnipeg
14. Daniel Kanu, Food Matters Manitoba, Winnipeg
15. Iris Vaisman, The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security, Edmonton

(Bottom row: Steven Colomb, Sherridon)

Missing:
17. Louanne Beaucage, Northern Healthy Foods Initiative Management Committee, The Pas
18. Hilda Dysart, Northern Advisor, South Indian Lake, Ithinto Mechisowin Program
Trip Summary

We arrived in Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN) on Monday evening. We were welcomed by the garden group, community Elders and some of the newly elected Chief and Council at the Kikiwak Hotel. We kicked off our trip with a cleansing smudge and opening prayer before the introductions. We also learned how the many members of the OCN Garden Group spread out the workload of caring for the gardens in the community. The main garden, raspberry patch, Big Eddy garden and Umperville plot are all overseen by different families that can put out a call to the larger group when work needs to be done. We had a fun dinner together at John & Jesse’s, a restaurant owned by OCN members.

On Tuesday morning we had our first round table discussion that was supposed to focus on the NMFCCC Theory of Change but we only made it through introductions before we had to head off to the ‘Plant Factory’ for our tour. The highly technical operation uses specialised LED lights and nutrient supplements to grow vegetables inside on vertically stacked shelves, and was brought to Opaskwayak through a partnership between Opaskwayak Cree Nation and South Korean businessmen.

In the afternoon, we got out on the land and visited some of the areas around the community. We had a slightly wet lunch at Moose Park before heading off to Pike Lake. At Pike Lake we got the chance to hang out with some of the students from Joe A. Ross School canoeing and target practice with the bows and arrows and sligshots. After the students left we sat around the fire, getting to know some of the garden group leaders (Stan and Alex Wilson) a bit better and learned more about their plans for the future, now that the gardens are well established. One thing was loud and clear, even if they did not apply for another grant they still want us to visit and maintain the relationship.

A highlight of our visit to Opaskwayak was the dinner we had on Tuesday evening at the Garden. The garden group has done a lot of work at the site and it was a truly beautiful setting to get together and share food. The newest project, the summer kitchen, was put to good use by Red Seal local chef, Clinton Whitehead. On the menu were fresh carrots and beets from the garden with roast bison, followed by delicious fresh rhubarb and blueberry pies for dessert.
Many of the garden group members, most of the Chief and Councils, and other people from the community joined us for the dinner and it was a great opportunity to get to know many of the partners. The entertainment was provided by Councillor Omar Constant who got us all laughing with his story telling and moose calling contest. Everyone had the chance to show off their pipes and although the locals put up some stiff competition, three of the visitors from our group, Ervin Bighetty, Daniel Kanu and Andi Sharma placed winning fresh pumpkin and squash from the garden.

We ended the evening with a photo for the local paper, and a round dance to close.
On Wednesday morning we sat down in the conference centre again to finish our discussion on the NMFCCC Theory of Change. We had deep discussions about relationships and breaking down the transactional and sometimes dysfunctional relationships many funders have with the programs and people they support. We also decided that decolonization, of both northern communities and the Philanthropic Sector, needs to be part of our Theory of Change. One suggestion was to evolve the Theory of Change from a linear model to a circular or cyclical model to more closely reflect traditional knowledge systems. The problem-focussed nature of the Theory of Change was also questioned and it was suggested that we need to adopt a more-positive, asset-based rhetoric while still communicating that there is a need to do work in Northern Manitoba. Thank you to all who participated in this important conversation and helped to make the conversation space safe and open.

After our discussion we packed up and started on our journey to Sherridon. We had lunch on the way at the Cranberry Portage Coffee Shop and took a bit of time to stretch on a short walk to Athapapuskow Lake.

On arrival in Sherridon we stopped at the council office to meet Wendy, the town administrator and learned a bit about Sherridon’s history. Sherridon was founded in the 1930’s when the Sherritt-Gordon mine opened. For two decades the town was booming, thousands of people lived and
worked there until the mine shut down in 1951. Since then some mining activity has taken place in new locations near to the community. Sherridon today is a community of about 80 people with very little services in the community.

We stayed at the Kenanow Lodge Hotel where we had a bit of time to explore the area including the shores of Camp Lake before getting down to business. We were warned by our hosts Chris and Cheryl Matheson that we should not touch the water in the lake because the tailings that were dumped in it during mine operation have caused the water to be very acidic.

Before dinner we had a group discussion about the role of intermediary partners (such as Food Matters Manitoba) in our work. Due to recent regulatory changes at Canada Revenue Agency, the NMFCCC cannot grant directly to most northern Manitoba communities because they are not currently on CRA’s list of ‘eligible or qualified donees’. This regulation means, if we want to partner with communities, we need to work with intermediary partners that are eligible to receive charitable donations. We had two representatives on our trip from Food Matters Manitoba which is one of our intermediary partners and a regional partner under the Northern Healthy Foods Initiative. Food Matters Manitoba works with many northern communities (including Sherridon) and in addition to administering the grants, they provide in-kind support through knowledge sharing, purchasing support, reporting supports, and manpower for projects. Food Matters Manitoba is the only one of our intermediary partners who does this extra work and we are always looking for good intermediary partners so all communities in the north can partner with the Collaborative.

We also took some time to discuss ‘food sovereignty’ and what it means to each of us. The majority of trip participants believed that ‘food sovereignty’ is the ability of a community or Nation to feed its members from local food sources without relying on outsiders or imported foods.
Supper was at the Kenanow Lodge where we were joined by our main community contacts, Larry Alm, Pearl Colomb, Michelle Reimer and her partner Ernie Lapensee. Afterwards, Iris, Rhonda and Tim went out to set a fish net with local guide Ernie Lapensee while the rest of us talked with Chris and Cheryl about the work the Manitoba Mines Branch is doing to clean up Camp Lake under the Mine Site Rehabilitation program. We heard about unsuccessful attempts to neutralise the lake with lime which ended up blowing around the community shutting down the school for several weeks. The worst part was that after the liming, the lakes pH dropped down to 2-3 again after a short period of neutralisation. Becky complimented what community members shared with a short talk on Orphaned Mines in Manitoba, showing us where they are across the province, and by explaining some of the processes that mines use and how they can cause environmental damage.

On Thursday, Cheryl took us for a morning walk after the fog cleared to check out some of the old mine workings. We saw tons of old drill core and a large open pit that was an old opening to the mine. It was an interesting walk and we heard a bit about the ongoing exploration work mining companies are doing in the area, including a potential new gold mine a little farther up the road at Puffy Lake.

After our walk, a couple more of us got to go lift the net and bring in the catch for our dinner while the rest of us sat down to have another group discussion about the work done by the Evaluation Sub-Committee. Currently, our community partners to do their reporting in their own way, more consistent with a story-telling narrative, the only specific things we ask for are pictures and a financial report. What we really want to get at through evaluation is to show that communities are growing stronger and healthier, but we still need to figure out the best way to identify these changes over time. Quantitative metrics (e.g. pounds of produce harvested) are used by some organizations, but it was decided that this type of reporting is not consistent with the decolonizing approach and can’t be directly translated to community health. Our group had a great discussion, but we did not come to a final decision. It was decided that we need to include our community partners in the
discussion and the Theory of Change needs to be finalized so that it can guide the work of the sub-committee.

We spent Thursday afternoon checking out some of the projects in the community like the community smoke shack and the chicken coop. We didn’t get the chance to smoke any fish but we did catch enough for just about everyone to try filleting pickerel. Ernie was a patient teacher! After the filleting, Larry started to slaughter the chickens for us to pluck and clean. The fish we filleted was cooked up for supper at the community hall where we all pitched in the cooking and clean-up. We had a classic shore-lunch of fried pickerel, bannock, corn and beans. The dinner was open to everyone and it was another great chance to meet community members. Approximately 50 people in total attended the dinner.

Friday morning we had a bit of time for a closing circle before we headed back south. Everyone was asked to share what they liked best about the trip and what key issues we feel we need to move forward on as a group. The answers about best experiences ranged from meeting community members and partners to the evaluation discussions. Everyone enjoyed the trip and had positive things to share. It was sad to be parting ways but we did all have to get back to our day-to-day responsibilities. We replicated the greeting circle we had been introduced to in Opaskwayak Cree Nation after our dinner there, which quickly morphed into a hugging circle.
Top left: Steven demonstrates how to use the plucker. Top right: Rhonda, Joan, Pearl, River and Jennell process chickens. Middle left: Todd and Jennell. Middle right: Pearl teachers Julie the art of Bannock making. Bottom left: Rhonda cooks the corn for the community dinner. Bottom middle: Ernie cooks the fish. Bottom left: Larry cooks the bannock.

Dinner with community members and trip participants in Sherridon.
Learning Opportunities

**Grass roots community building:** Opaskwayak Cree nation has been utilizing a grass roots approach to their garden, orchard and food program. They shared why it is important for them to work as a group; why they value community-led evaluation; and how to be a good partner and support of indigenous communities. The Opaskwayak Garden Project is one of the great projects that the Collaborative supports, it has been very successful in bringing many members from the community together to work towards the end goal of accessing affordable healthy food. With so many people working on the project it does not become an overwhelming undertaking for the project leaders.

**Relationship building:** On our trip, we had deep discussions about relationships and breaking down the transactional and sometimes dysfunctional relationships many funders have with the programs and people they support. Within the Collaborative a lot of time and energy is spent on getting to know each community, sharing stories and learning from each other, all with the goal of empowering community members to be the change they want to see in their communities. To achieve this goal, we provide non-monetary support with our grants in the form of networking, problem-solving, friendship, story-sharing and peer-to-peer learning exchanges. It was very encouraging to hear that the OCN Garden Group would like to continue as part of the NMFCCC even though their project does not require ongoing financial support.

**The role of Intermediary partners:** Due to recent regulatory changes the NMFCCC cannot grant to some communities in the north so we need to rely on intermediary partners that are eligible to receive charitable donations. Sherridon, our partner for 3 years now, has worked closely with Food Matters Manitoba (FMM) for the past 5 years. In addition to administering grant money, FMM provide in-kind support through knowledge sharing, purchasing support and manpower for projects. They (FMM) are a trusted partner and ally in the community-led work. Our intermediary partners are extremely important in our work; without them we cannot currently partner with a large portion of northern communities. However, not all intermediary partners are created equal and we are continuously learning how to best work with intermediaries.

**Lasting impacts of resource extraction:** In O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (2014 Learning Exchange) we were able to learn about the effects of hydro damming and development. In Sherridon this year we learned about the closure of the Sherritt-Gordon Mine in the 1950’s and how that mine site has been polluting and challenging the community ever since. The Provincial Government has spent millions (~$55 million) in attempted reclamation of the mine site but the environmental mess is still there and a significant concern for community members. The impacts of the abandoned mine site in Sherridon and the hydro-electric development in O-Pipon-Na-Piwin, and the challenges they pose for the respective communities can only truly be understood when you visit these places and listen to the stories of the people.

**Pace and Diversity:** Our community partners in Sherridon are working at their food, health and Community Economic Development issues through a multifaceted approach. A community chicken coop, a community smoke house, and a community garden are all part of the approach and are all elements that we have helped with. The low population in Sherridon, the departure of one of our partners from the community and a long-standing divide in the community means that our remaining partners struggle to find support. Despite this struggle they have put in a lot of work into their projects, but they ask for our understanding and the flexibility to work at a slow but steady pace.
Participant Quotes

“I totally enjoyed the trip, meeting people, sharing, visiting other communities and coming together as a collaborative. It was awesome.”

“I’m always honoured, humbled and excited to spend time in communities learning, listening, sharing and making new friends...I wish more people had the opportunity to have these experiences.”

“Our group was special – each brought something different to the mix and there was an open, sharing feeling”

“I have been thinking a lot about the trip over the last week, and thinking about the importance of slowness, relationships, and reciprocity in my other work and projects. The trip shifted my worldview a little, and I like that.”

“It was also nice to visit two communities who were quite different, to get a sense of challenges and opportunities for different communities”

“Both two years ago and this year, I really appreciated the inclusion of both success stories and difficult situations (...) it’s really useful to have this range, both to understand the very different challenges that different communities face, to see what is making projects shine or struggle.”

“There is no one specific important project, they are all important (...) We can’t compare a chicken farm to a community garden, they are different, but they are the same in context of feeding your community. That’s how I feel about that.”

“I think it is important to have future learning experiences around engaging community – other than relying on champions, (who may) burnout/leave community”

“I like to hear from the community, to understand what they find encouraging, challenging. I do not want to burden a community with our presence – The large group works well if there is work to be done – harvesting, planting cleaning”

“I definitely agree working in a relational way is the right way to move forward, I think it empowers communities much more than just handing out money because there is a sort of support system there to help them succeed.”

“I believe the collaborative can be so much more than a funding operation, there is so many communities that need our help and need our support, even if that support isn’t money.”

“Being on the ground in the communities (...) brings the understanding of what is happening and who the people are to another level (...) It would be nice to spend more time with the community members, but I’m not sure how to do that because I think the time was used well.”

“The face-to-face makes the project come to life in a different way than a report does.”

“My overall feeling is of gratefulness for having been able to take the time, and have the resources, for this experience. It feels like a rare privilege – not simply to go to these remote places with their natural and human beauty, but to have doors opened and connections made in a way that tourists often can’t.”