

“Food Security is what is Indigenous to Our People”: Colonization, Camas, and the Diet of the Coast Salish People of British Columbia

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Abstract: Here the complex relationships between culture, power and landscape are explored through the social history of blue camas (*Camassia quamash*). This bulb was once recognized as ‘the number one vegetable’ of the Coast Salish People of the Northwest Coast and a primary source of carbohydrates, but is now remembered only by a few. The role of camas in Coast Salish society, however, extended well beyond simple nutrition; it was a cultural keystone species. Activities surrounding camas—harvest, preparation, and consumption—were vital sites for Coast Salish knowledge and cultural transmission between generations. After a discussion of the ecological knowledge, social practices, and technologies associated with camas, the paper moves to examine why, only a few generations following the arrival of Europeans, camas all but vanished from both the cultural and physical landscape. European attitudes of racial superiority, the introduction of new crops, land appropriation, the integration of First Peoples into the wage economy, and the imposition of colonial laws, that eroded Coast Salish self-determination, and with it food sovereignty and security, will be discussed. Recently, the right to harvest camas, from which the Coast Salish have long been alienated, has become focus of emancipation because of the important place of camas as a cultural keystone species and because of the growing awareness of the health impacts of introduced foods on First Nations communities. The paper concludes by highlighting the recent successes of indigenous food sovereignty advocates in reviving, at least symbolically, camas harvest on Southern Vancouver Island.

Introduction

The arrival of colonial powers, and with them, European crops and cultural attitudes, had a profound and complex impact on the First Nations peoples of British Columbia. One area where this was most felt, and until recently, least appreciated outside First Nations communities, was in diet and cultural practices relating to food production, preparation and consumption. This paper will examine the social history of blue camas—formerly the “number one” vegetable on the Northwest Coast¹—in order to explore the dietary changes, and some of the factors contributing to them, experienced by the Coast Salish people of southern Vancouver Island. It will be shown that, through a complex interplay of colonial pressures and policies, camas (*Camassia quamash*, and *C. leichtlinii*) was marginalized within the diets of the Coast Salish, and, as a result, their food sovereignty² and food security³ were undermined. Recently, however, camas has once again taken root in the cultural landscape of the Northwest Coast. Indeed, some

such as Lekwungen (Songhees)⁴ Lands Manager Cheryl Bryce,⁵ are looking to the re-adoption of traditional foodstuffs, including camas, as one way to combat some of the many health problems facing indigenous populations across Canada and around the world today.⁷ Furthermore, rebuilding food sovereignty is also being recognized increasingly as an important step in the ongoing struggle to overcome some of the most negative socio-cultural impacts of colonialism.

Pre-colonial Social History of Camas: A ‘Cultural Keystone Species’

In order to understand the magnitude of the loss of camas as a staple food for the Coast Salish, and thus the implications of its revival, this paper will begin with a brief social history of this bulb. For thousands of years, before contact with Europeans, the Coast Salish had sovereignty over their food system and derived their food security through a rich knowledge of their environment, passed down through oral tradition and longstanding land stewardship and plant cultivation practices.⁸ A hundred and fifty years ago, camas was the “queen root” and the “number one vegetable” according to

1 Beckwith, quoting Tsartlip elder Christopher Paul, from 1967 interview with anthropology student Marguerite Babcock. [Brenda R. Beckwith, “The Queen Root of this Clime”: Ethnoecological Investigations of Blue Camas (*C. leichtlinii* (Baker) Wats., *C. quamash* (Pursh) Greene; Liliaceae) and its Landscapes on Southern Vancouver Island, British Columbia (Ph.D. diss., University of Victoria at Victoria, 2004), 4.]

2 Food sovereignty is defined as the ability to make substantive choices about food consumption. This includes, what types of foods are eaten, and where, how, and by whom they are produced.

3 Food security, as defined at the World Food Summit in 1996, exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to safe and nutritious food, which meets dietary needs and food preferences, in sufficient quantity to sustain an active and healthy lifestyle. [World Food Summit, *Declaration* (Rome: Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, 1996).]

4 The Lekwungen (or Songhees) First People, whose traditional territory encompasses the municipality of Esquimalt in Great Victoria, Southern Vancouver Island, are part of the larger grouping of Coast Salish Peoples.

5 Anon, “Camas harvest celebrates ecocultural history,” *The Ring. University of Victoria’s community newspaper*, (June 2005: 31-6) <<http://ring.uvic.ca/05jun09/news/camas.html>> (May 25, 2006).

6 Cheryl Bryce, *The Pit Cook – Some Call it Indian Summer* (Victoria: Songhees Band, n.d.).

7 Health Canada, “First Peoples and Inuit Health” <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnih-spni/diseases-maladies/index_e.html> (May 25, 2006).

8 Wayne Suttles, “Coast Salish resource management,” *Keeping it Living”: Traditions of Plant Use and Cultivation on the Northwest Coast of North America*, ed. by Deur and Turner (Seattle: University of Washington Press, and Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 181-193

Coast Salish elders.⁹ It filled a vital dietary niche in the West Coast diet as principal carbohydrate as well as a valuable source of dietary fiber, vitamins, minerals and protein.¹⁰ The role of camas in Coast Salish society, however, extended well beyond simple nutrition; it was a cultural keystone species.¹¹ Activities surrounding camas—harvest, preparation, and consumption—were vital sites for Coast Salish knowledge and cultural transmission between generations.

Harvest and preparation, mostly the responsibility of women and children, was a time to tell stories, to share the news, and for children to learn the skills they would need as adults. As Cheryl Bryce explains, “For us, harvesting wasn’t a chore; it was fun to interact with the other women and teach young ones.”¹² Camas was also a celebrated food at feasts and potlatches and so was an integral feature at these social, political and religious events. More over, the bulb served as an important winter staple, a travel ration and a trade item for the Coast Salish, who were known throughout the region as a camas-rich people.¹³

Furthermore, camas was the focus of a great deal of social organization, ecological knowledge and technology. It was the sophisticated management techniques of the Coast Salish that maintained and improved the crop’s productivity by creating broader habitat areas and enhancing growth and regeneration. Camas was grown in family-owned plots, demarcated by stakes or rocks at the corners, which were often passed down from one generation to the next.¹⁴ Harvest usually took place in late May through June—just as the purple flowers were fading and as the seeds matured. Bulbs, between three and six centimeters long, were selectively dug using a pointed digging stick made of fire-hardened yew, oceanspray or crabapple wood.¹⁵

Harvest also provided an important opportunity for plant tending. Soil was aerated through the digging process and weeds and rocks were removed from the fields. Planting camas seeds in the upturned soil has also been documented, as has the transplantation of bulbs from one area to another.¹⁶ Following harvesting the plots were sometimes fertilized using seaweed and finally, the meadows were burned over in order to make the bulbs bigger the next year.¹⁷ The practice of burning not only insured better harvest, but was also significant enough to “scalp the landscape,”¹⁸ creating the southern Vancouver Island’s open parkland, which James Douglas of the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) described as “a perfect Eden.”¹⁹

In order to transform the inulin (a complex indigestible sugar) in camas into digestible fructose, the bulbs were pit-cooked²⁰

9 Beckwith, “The Queen Root of this Clime,” 4.

10 Beckwith, “The Queen Root of this Clime,” 15.

11 Ann Garibaldi and Nancy J. Turner, “Cultural keystone species: implications for ecological conservation and restoration,” *Ecology and Society* 9(3): 1, 2004 <<http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol9/iss3/art1>> (May 25, 2006).

12 Songhees Lands Department, Kwetlal “Camas”: Camas Harvest and Pit Cook.

13 Bryce, *The Pit Cook*

14 Suttles, “Coast Salish resource management,” 186.

15 Beckwith, “Queen Root of this Clime,” 18.

16 Suttles, “Coast Salish resource management,” 181-193.

17 Suttles, “Coast Salish resource management,” 181.

18 Songhees Lands Department, Kwetlal “Camas”: Camas Harvest and Pit Cook.

19 Beckwith, “Queen Root of this Clime,” 1.

20 Pit cooking was a common culinary practice on the Northwest Coast. First a large pit is dug and a fire lit in the bottom. Rocks are then placed in the fire and heated until red-hot. Then, unburned materials are removed and the rocks spread over the bottom. On top of the rocks layers of

for approximately 24 to 36 hours, following which they were sometimes pressed to flatten them, dried and stored for winter or for trade.²¹ There is little doubt that the Coast Salish livelihoods were procured and sustained, and food security insured, through significant ecological knowledge and management systems governing resource extraction rights, and cultivation practices.²² Camas was a focal point for much of this activity and knowledge set, as well as a vital component of Coast Salish people’s caloric intake.

Dynamics of Loss

In spite of the central role of camas in Coast Salish society, it almost entirely disappeared from their diet only a few generations after the arrival of Europeans, whose influence began in earnest with the establishment of Fort Langley in 1827 and building of Fort Victoria 16 years thereafter.²³ Some of the reasons for this dramatic decline will next be explored, primary among them being European attitudes of racial superiority, introduction of new crops, land appropriation, integration of First Peoples into the wage economy and the imposition of colonial laws that eroded Coast Salish self-determination and with it, food sovereignty and security.

Colonization – and the subsequent marginalization of camas – began with the explorers, continued through the fur trade and concluded with settlement, when “ordinary people came into the province, took up land, made it into farms and called it home.”²⁴ At the most fundamental level, this process was enabled by a belief in European superiority. In order to support this presumption, Europeans largely and conveniently ignored the sophisticated and complex land and resource management systems of First Peoples, particularly with respect to the use and management of plants such as camas. Rather, it was vital to the success of the colonial project to construct an image of First Peoples as ‘primitive natives’. A critical characteristic of this image is that of the hunter-gatherer, non-agriculturalist. Using this construction, the appropriation of land by settlers in order to ‘put it to better use’ through ‘real farming’, and the colonial mission to ‘civilize’, or subjugate, First Peoples was framed as moral and rational.^{25 26}

plant materials, such as salal and sword fern, are piled. In the middle of the layers the foodstuffs are spread and then covered by more plant mater. Finally, water is poured onto the rocks through an opening left by holding a large stick in the middle of the pit while it is being filled. Once the water is poured, planks or mats are thrown over the pit and they are covered with dirt to prevent any of the steam escaping. The food is then left to steam until it is cooked. [Turner, N., Ignace, M., & Ignace, R., “Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Wisdom of Aboriginal Peoples in British Columbia,” *Ecological Applications* 10.5 (2000): 1283-1284.]

21 Songhees Lands Department, Kwetlal “Camas”: Camas Harvest and Pit Cook.

22 Wayne Suttles (“Coast Salish resource management,” 181-193) debates the origins of these practices and explores the possibility that they were borrowed from European settlers. He concludes, however, that this is highly unlikely and that these techniques are indigenous in origin.

23 Beckwith, “Queen Root of this Clime,” 33.

24 Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997) 220.

25 Nancy J. Turner, Robin Smith, and James T. Jones, ““A Fine Line Between Two Nations”: Ownership Patterns for Plant Resources among Northwest Coast Indigenous People,” in *Keeping it Living: Traditions of Plant Use and Cultivation on the Northwest Coast of North America*, ed. by Deur and Turner (Seattle: University of Washington Press, and Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005) 171.

26 Miller J. *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1991). 187-206.

The effects on First Nations peoples, however, were devastating. As Duff describes, "Change came on too strongly, and the Indian cultures ceased to function as effective integrated systems of living."²⁷ The resultant vulnerability of First Peoples to colonial and imperial pressures led to loss of much of their former food sovereignty and security, reflected in the loss of many dietary traditions and resource management practices, notable among them the close relationship with camas, and the adoption of European foodstuffs.

The introduction of the field potato, which was brought to Vancouver Island by European traders shortly after the establishment of Fort Langley, had a particularly direct impact on camas cultivation. Considering the devastating smallpox and other disease epidemics of 1775, 1801, 1824, 1830 and 1862-63, the low-input potato must have seemed a promising addition to the diets of peoples in the midst of major social upheaval.²⁸ Potatoes rapidly came to replace camas as staple carbohydrate food for the Coast Salish, as well as for the Haida and other First Peoples in the province.²⁹ Journalist W.C. Hazlitt, who wrote a historical sketch of Vancouver Island in 1858, commented on this shift, "Potatoes and dried salmon form the staple food of all natives who can produce them, the camas being by them considered more of a delicacy."³⁰ This transition was encouraged by economic utility of potato as a trade item. Many First Nations people became merchants, selling potatoes—as well as salmon and their physical labour—to the new forts. Flour, sugar, tea, biscuits and other European foods were traded with the Coast Salish and were quickly integrated into their diet as well.³¹

The establishment of Fort Victoria in 1843 compounded the social, political and environmental changes felt by the Coast Salish as land seizures snowballed to match the growing demands of the settle population for western agricultural produce. Between 1843 and 1850, thousands of acres of land around the fort were claimed by the HBC and others for farms.³² Areas put to the plow and turned to pasture included many flourishing camas gardens; the "number one vegetable" was exterminated as if it were a weed.³³ The introduction of livestock had a particularly devastating effect on camas, which was believed to be an excellent forage for both hogs and natives.³⁴ One settler describes the cumulative impact of settlement on the food system of the Coast Salish:

...the very old people who formerly lived entirely on fish, berries and roots suffer a good deal through the setting up of this country. The lands that once yielded berries and roots are now fenced and cultivated and even on the hills the sheep have destroyed them.³⁵

27 Wilson Duff, *The Indian History of British Columbia: The Impact of the White Man* (New Ed. Victoria: Royal British Columbia Museum, 1997) 50.

28 Beckwith, "Queen Root of this Clime," 35.

29 The easy and prolific cultivation of the potato by First Peoples, thus their seeming familiarity with farming techniques, was cited by Suttles in the 1950s as evidence to support his argument that that Straits Salish actively cultivated—not simply extracted—camas and so were familiar with farming techniques. [Wayne Suttles, "The Early Diffusion of the Potato Among the Coast Salish," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 7(3): 272-88 (1951)].

30 Beckwith, "Queen Root of this Clime," 52.

31 Suttles, "Coast Salish resource management," 188.

32 Beckwith, "Queen Root of this Clime," 37.

33 Beckwith, "Queen Root of this Clime," 165.

34 Beckwith, "Queen Root of this Clime," 165

35 Douglas C. Harris, *Fish, Law, and Colonialism: The Legal Capture of Salmon in British Columbia* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2002)

149.

The Colony of Vancouver Island was declared in 1849 and the enclosure of First Nations land was formalized through the Fort Victoria Treaties—commonly known as the Douglas Treaties—of 1850-52. These stipulated that native lands be consigned forever to the HBC in exchange for 75 pounds sterling—in the case of the Songhees of Victoria—with the exception that the First Peoples were allowed rights to their village sites, to any enclosed fields (camas plots were not recognized as such), hunting rights over unoccupied land and the right to fish as formerly.³⁶ The Coast Salish were sequestered on small reserves as their territory and food sources were taken from them. The gold rush of 1858 further accelerated land alienation as the non-native population expanded dramatically. This was followed by further waves of settlement, and resulting in displacement, during the 1860s and 70s, fueled by Victoria's growing manufacturing and resource extraction industries.³⁷

The shifting demography and the deconstruction of the Coast Salish livelihood—through the appropriation of land and resources and the denial of First Nations' access to them—and the food security that it provided, forced many people into the wage economy. Thus, a vicious cycle of cultural transformation was created as the more the Coast Salish were distanced from their traditional livelihood seeking patterns, the more difficult it became to return to that way of life because it further opened the door for more access by settlers and more land to be taken from them. At the same time, with reduced harvesting and use of camas and other resources, children and youth were not able to learn about such foods and how to harvest and prepare them, leading to a further downward spiral of loss. This cycle intensified peoples' dependence on money, and the purchase of European staples, as a means to food security and so furthered the distancing dynamic. For many the only employment option was at one of the many salmon canneries along the coast. This work, however, was only available during the summer, the very time when traditional harvesting opportunities were the greatest. Thus, colonization and breakdown of First Nations society can be heavily linked to the distance created between people and their traditional livelihoods.³⁸

The colonization of the Coast Salish continued as BC entered Confederation in 1871 and the First Peoples of BC became subject to the Indian Act. Over the successive decades, the Indian Act opened the door for policies—such as the Residential School System and the discouragement of potlatching and other celebrations—seeking to further erode opportunities for transmitting Coast Salish culture and food traditions.³⁹ Beginning in the 1880s, and continuing until the 1980s, First Nations children across Canada were taken from their communities to be educated at schools established by the Federal Government in cooperation with the Catholic, Anglican and other denominational churches.⁴⁰ The schools were an overt attempt to assimilate First Peoples into settler society as farmers and Christians, through an attack on the family and community bonds and the cultural practices of First Peoples. Children at the schools were forbidden to speak

36 Government of British Columbia, *Government, Papers Connected with the Indian Land Question, 1850-1875* (Reprinted 1987, as *Indian Land Question, 1850-1875, 1877*) (Victoria, BC: Government Printer, 1875) 6.

37 Beckwith, "Queen Root of this Clime," 38.

38 Duff, *The Indian History of British Columbia*, 126.

39 Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*, 187-206. Douglas C. Harris, *Fish, Law, and Colonialism: The Legal Capture of Salmon in British Columbia* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2002) 149.

40 Duff, *The Indian History of British Columbia*, 129-149.

their own language and were fed only western foods, including potatoes. The children were taught that the food of their parents and grandparents and other aspects of indigenous ways of life were inferior and wrong. It is reasonable to assume that years of a child eating a different type of food would have an impact on their food preferences, particularly considering the psychological coercion involved, in which their former food was portrayed negatively. Furthermore, while children were away at school, they were not able to learn, from their mothers and grandmothers, the complex cultivation and production knowledge of their people, such as harvesting and pit-cooking camas. Other colonial government policies also sought to break down First Nations cultural practices and vilified traditional feasts and ceremonies, such as the potlatch, at which traditional foods and knowledge about their maintenance were shared and celebrated. As a result of these, and other pressures including advertisements and popular media, the diet of the Coast Salish has come to resemble that of the non-native population.

Impacts of Loss and the Drive for Renewal

Increasingly, packaged, processed, high-calorie, low-nutritional valued foods, most of which travel thousands of kilometers between sites of harvest and markets, have become the basis of the western diet. The health consequences of this nutrition transition are profound and First Peoples are shockingly over-represented in rates of related dietary health problems, which have become common throughout North America. Incidences of heart disease are 1.5 times higher and rates of type-2 diabetes are 3 to 5 times higher than the general population.⁴¹ Two intersecting factors help explain this. Firstly, people living in poverty are most vulnerable to these consequences of an unhealthy diet; as in the global food system, the most affordable fare is generally that with the lowest nutritional quality. In Canada, the First Peoples are the poorest overall sector of the general population. And secondly, First Peoples are better adapted to their traditional diet makeup, which was very low in simple carbohydrates and higher in protein and fats, thus they are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of the North American dietary change.⁴²

The connection between food and culture has also been drawn more explicitly in recent years and indeed, returning to traditional foodstuffs, such as camas, is seen as an important way for First Peoples to rebuild their health.⁴³ Thus, many also see the reclamation of traditional foodstuffs as a critical step in the decolonization process, a way of educating young people about their heritage and reconstructing cultural pride and identity. As a reflection of this movement, Coast Salish in Victoria successfully revived camas harvest during the late 1990s.⁴⁴ Since then, harvests and community pitcooks have taken place on the Lekwungen Traditional Territory, as well as at the University of Victoria campus. To date, these activities have largely been ceremonial and educational, but Cheryl Bryce and other camas revival leaders hope that they will develop into something more lasting and commonplace. As one elder

41 First Peoples are also over represented in tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and other forms of infectious disease. <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnih-spni/diseases-maladies/index_e.html> Health Canada (May 25, 2006).

42 Jacob Beaton, *Diabetes Then and Now* (Video) (Victoria, BC: Songhees Nation and University of Victoria, 2004).

43 Jacob Beaton, *Diabetes Then and Now*.

44 Eric Higgs, *Nature by Design. People, Natural Process, and Ecological Restoration*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Jacob Beaton, *Diabetes Then and Now* (Video) (Victoria, BC: Songhees Nation and University of Victoria, 2004); Anon. 2005. "Camas harvest celebrates ecocultural history", *The Ring*. (June 2005, Vol. 31, No. 6) <<http://ring.uvic.ca/05jun09/news/camas.html>> (May 25, 2006).

explained, "The Old Foods are the New Foods."⁴⁵

Conclusions

Although the knowledge of camas cultivation, harvest, preparation and consumption went unused for almost 150 years, the knowledge was not lost. This is a testament to the resiliency of the Coast Salish people, their culture and ecological knowledge in the face of many overt and covert attempts to destroy Coast Salish identity. Attacks on food security and food sovereignty—through the introduction of European food stuffs of lower nutritional value than the traditional diet, followed by land, labour, education and legal pressures that created further dependency on, and preference for, these new foods—had immense impact on the way of life of First Peoples. Recently, perhaps because of the growing awareness of health impacts of introduced foods, food sovereignty has become a central issue in the fight to achieve equity and justice for First Peoples. The right to harvest camas, from which the Coast Salish have long been alienated, has become a focus of emancipation because of the important place of camas as a cultural keystone species, a species once so critical to these people that their very identity was bound to it. It can be hoped that by using camas as one element in reconstruction, the Coast Salish will be able to strengthen and rebuild their health, cultural identity and complex ecological knowledge system.

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