

Northern Quebec

Eeyou Istchee

Territorial Food System (TFS) Synthesis

CONTEXT

Objectives of the regional syntheses

These regional syntheses aim to provide a concise and general overview of territorial food systems (TFSs) across Québec. They adopt a systemic approach, gathering existing information from diverse sources into a single document, focusing on key initiatives within the various components of the food system and sectors of activity. These syntheses offer a snapshot of a territorial food system at a given time, serving as a baseline for regular updates.

While they describe the situation at a regional scale, they acknowledge the supra-local (MRC) and local specificities. During national gatherings of Forum SAT, the synthesis of a territorial food system can serve as a reference or a point of comparison with other regions.

WHAT IS A TERRITORIAL FOOD SYSTEM (TFS)?

A territorial food system (TFS) is an interconnected network of actors and activities encompassing the production, processing, distribution, consumption, as well as the management and value of residual materials, and the transportation of food within a specific territory. TFSs rely on collaborative governance, where territorial actors work together to strengthen food autonomy and ensure access to healthy and sustainable food for all, while promoting social and ecological transition. (Forum SAT, 2024)

TERRITORIAL SPECIFICITIES

- Eeyou Istchee is the traditional territory of the Crees of Northern Quebec; it is located between the 49th and 55th parallels. It represents about 20% of the land area of Quebec. The total population is approximately 20,000 people, about half of them being under 25 years old.
- It is composed of nine communities (Whapmagoostui, Chisasibi, Wemindji, Eastmain, Waskaganish, Nemaska, Waswanipi, Oujé-Bougoumou and Mistissini), as well as vast hunting territories.
- Most of the territory is composed of forests, lakes, rivers and bays where people hunt, fish and gather food for subsistence. Crees harvest traditional food on their territory and use traplines according to geographical and seasonal availability.



CONTEXT

Local Food System in Eeyou Istchee



The local food system of Eeyou Istchee is based on **harvesting** of local traditional foods such as fish, beaver, goose, duck, ptarmigan, hare, moose, caribou, bear, berries and plants.

Families and communities hunt, fish and gather food seasonally (e.g. geese in spring, berries in August/September, fish all year round) in different hunting areas.

Foods are generally **butchered or processed** on the land, at home or in a cultural camp.

Local traditional foods are **shared or exchanged** amongst families and communities. They are **served** during family meals, cultural activities, community celebrations and feasts.

Food sold in stores comes from outside the region. Local foods are not yet available in the stores. Availability, cost, variety and freshness of store-bought foods are important concerns in our region.

Success
story

CREE TRAPPERS ASSOCIATION

*Harvesting and distribution
of traditional food.*

HARVESTING & GROWING

Harvesting Traditional Food

The local food system of Eeyou Istchee is mainly based on harvesting traditional foods. Hunting, fishing and harvesting berries remain subsistence activities.

Fishing is an important Cree tradition; fish is always available, and people fish all year-round (e.g. ice fishing in the winter, fishing with a net or a fishing rod in the summer).

In Eeyou Istchee, harvesting is done according to six seasons:

Pipuun or best time to trap (January-February): fish, beaver, caribou, moose, porcupine.

Shiikuun or snowcrust season (March-April) : hare, ptarmigan, fish, lynx, spruce grouse.

Miiuuskumin or thaw (May-June): goose, ducks, duck eggs, fish.

Niipin or time for gathering (July-August): fish, duck, black bear, porcupine, berries.

Waastebakun or early fall (September-October): moose, goose, duck, black bear, fish, porcupine, caribou, snow-shoe hare, grouse, berries.

Daakahten or late fall (November-December): beaver, lynx, fish, black bear, spruce grouse, snow-shoe hare, ptarmigan, fish eggs, porcupine.

Growing food locally

There is an increasing interest in local food production; a few community gardens and greenhouses are in development, and some seem interested in the revitalization and development of local products such as berries, Labrador tea and mushrooms.

PROCESSING

Local traditional foods are generally **processed** on the land, at home, in a cultural camp or a teepee.

Skinning, gutting and butchering of animals and filleting of fish is often taught by parents and grand-parents. Youth also learn skills during Cree culture classes or cultural activities.

*Youth
learning
butchering
in Cree culture
class and cultural
activities.*

TRANSPORTING AND PRESERVING

Families transport local traditional foods from their hunting territories to the communities.

Traditional foods are usually consumed fresh when in season, or **frozen to preserve** them for the months to come.

Traditional ways of preserving food also include **drying or smoking** meat or fish.

*Community
freezers being
installed for the
sharing of traditional
food in each
community.*

PREPARING, EATING AND SHARING

Traditional foods are often **roasted over the fire, smoked, boiled, stewed or pan-fried** (e.g. roasting geese over a fire, smoking fish, stewing hare, boiling ptarmigan/partridge, pan-frying caribou or moose).

Traditional meals are prepared at home, in a cultural camp or in a teepee, especially during harvesting seasons, feasts and celebrations (e.g. goose break, walking-out ceremony, moose harvesting season, community feast, Elders or Youth lunch programs).

Nowadays, local traditional foods are cooked in various ways and incorporated into recipes along with store-bought foods (e.g. caribou burger, moose and vegetable stir-fry, goose macaroni).

Success story

Communities offer traditional lunch programs for youth and elders at their cultural camp.

Sharing is an important Cree value. Local traditional foods are always an occasion for socializing, celebrating, **sharing or exchanging** amongst families and the community members.

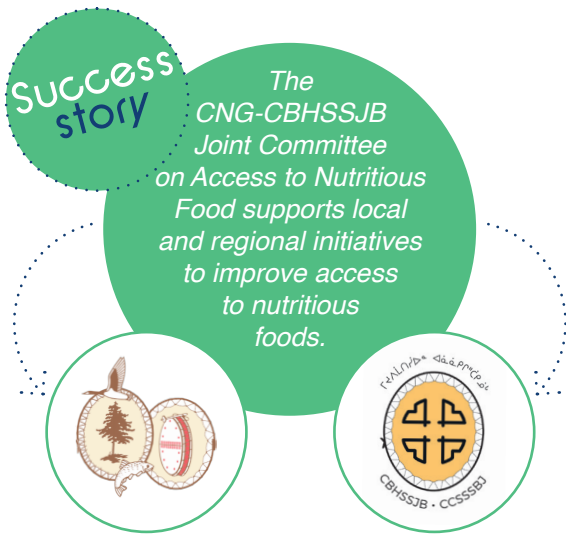
Eating traditional food, even in small quantities, improves substantially the overall quality of the nutritional intake.

MANAGING WASTE AND REPURPOSING

Traditionally, there was no waste; all parts of the animals were used. Meat, fat, guts, nose, tongue, brain, etc. were consumed.

Families use traditional food waste to feed animals in the wild (bear, wolf).

Furs and hides were used for clothing and shelter, and bones to make tools. Nowadays, most parts of the animals are still used. There is little waste. Most food wastes comes from store-bought foods and their packaging. Certain communities have introduced recycling and composting systems.



GOVERNANCE

The regional Committee on Access to Nutritious Food, composed of members of the Cree Nation Government (CNG) & Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay (CBHSSJB), strives to support the development of the local food system along with its actors, as well as the actors of the commercial food system.

In 2021, the CNG-CBHSSJB Joint Committee on Access to Nutritious Food organized food engagement sessions where community members, and local and regional stakeholders were invited to participate in discussions about access to food in Eeyou Istchee. Following these sessions, a vision was developed:

Within 50 years, our people will be healthy, and connected to our land, animals, food and culture. Everyone will have access to healthy food, including traditional food, locally-grown food and healthy store-bought food.

Currently, the main local food system actors are families, communities and the local and regional Cree trappers associations.

TRANSVERSAL

Food infrastructure and transportation system:

Infrastructure to produce and process local foods is limited in Eeyou Istchee, since traditional foods are usually processed at home or at the cultural camp, and there is little local food production.

Food Engagements Sessions have been held with the goal of improving access to local foods. The participants mentioned the need for processing facilities (butchering, packing,

canning, etc.), community freezers, fish processing facilities, blueberry farms, community greenhouses or gardens, and transportation vehicles to distribute and share food between communities. They also expressed the need to improve local stores infrastructure, for example by renovating, expanding and adding refrigerators and freezers or storage space.

Building local capacity:

Cree culture is strong in Eeyou Istchee. Knowledge about harvesting and processing traditional foods is passed down from generation to generation, or taught at school, during community activities and programs, or through local hunters' associations.

Efforts to preserve these important skills need to be maintained and enhanced to ensure that younger generations continue to consume traditional foods. This can be achieved by providing community workshops and by offering programs on the harvesting and processing of traditional foods.

Including Elders and local experts in food-related training activities furthers the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills (e.g. inviting Elders to speak of food safety training, hiring skilled harvesters/local experts to teach youth during cultural or land-based programs).

In addition, participants in Food Engagement Sessions mentioned their lack of knowledge about local food production; they shared their interest in workshops, training and tools on how to grow, produce and process food.

Climate change and the local food system:

Climate change has a significant impact on land availability and traditional food sources.

Cree families must adapt their transportation methods so that they can continue to access their hunting territories, even in the event of unforeseen weather and temperature changes.

As temperature and seasonal patterns change, migrations are affected, leading to a decrease in availability of some species, such as caribou.

Forest fires and floods can disrupt food access and supply. Natural disasters are becoming more frequent and intense, putting wildlife habitat and food sources at risk.

Protecting land, water, and animal species is essential to ensure that future generations can continue to enjoy traditional foods and practices.

Conclusion

Northern Quebec Eeyou Istchee

REGIONAL PRIORITIES

Here are some of the regional objectives developed during the Food Engagement Sessions (2021):

- **STRENGTHENING** the culture, traditional practices, values and the health of our people.
- **ENSURING** greater access to traditional food for all, and improving access to the land.
- **PROTECTING** the land, water, animals, fish and birds to ensure food security and access to traditional food.
- **INCREASING** local food production and availability of local foods.
- **BUILDING** local capacity and increasing people's knowledge about traditional food and local food production.
- **REDUCING** the cost of food by producing locally and reducing food waste.

For the following sections, although the summary recognizes the contribution of a diversity of actors in each territory, the choice was made to emphasize collective, social economy, public and/or non-profit organizations and actions.

LIST OF MAIN ACTORS IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

●●●●● Band councils

●●●●● Cree Trappers' Association (CTA)

● Cree Nation Government (CNG)

●● Cree Board of Health and Social Services
of James Bay (CBHSSJB)

● CNG-CBHSSJB Joint Committee on Access
to Nutritious Food

OTHER INITIATIVES, STRATEGIES AND SUPPORTING TOOLS

●●●● Access to traditional food program

The Cree Trappers Association hires harvesters to harvest fish and small game, and shares food with families and Elders, as well as with community organizations.

●● Installation of community freezers

The Cree Trappers Association is installing community freezers in the nine communities to preserve and share traditional food.

●● Traditional meal or lunch programs
at cultural camp

Communities have traditional camps where participants can enjoy community meals. Harvesters and cooks are generally hired locally.

● Installation of community greenhouses and gardens

Some communities are in the process of building community greenhouses and gardens to produce food locally.

● Funding programs to support access to traditional
food and local food production

CNG and CBHSSJB have funding programs to support local initiatives (Cree Alliance for Solidarity, Elders and Youth Fund, Food Security Fund, Social Economy Fund, etc.).

●●● CBHSSJB Traditional Food Program
and Training

Traditional food is served to the CBHSSJB clientele through its food services (hospital, day centers, etc.). Harvesters, cooks and other CBHSSJB employees receive training about the program (policies, procedures, etc.) and about food safety and hygiene.

●● Workshops on harvesting of local edible plants
and mushrooms

Workshops are offered in the communities to learn about local edible plants and mushrooms.

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METHODOLOGY

This synthesis was written by Chantal Vinet-Lanouette and Catherine Godin from the Public Health Department of the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay, in partnership with their colleagues of the CNG-CBHSSJB Committee on Access to Nutritious Food. The Forum SAT team reviewed the format of the synthesis.

LIMITATION OF LIABILITY

These syntheses were created in collaboration with stakeholders from their respective region and using the data available to the authors. In certain the cases, access to complete and up-to-date information, as well as the availability of Forum SAT partners for content review, may have been limited. Additional, contradictory, or relevant information may exist elsewhere. The synthesis contains opinions and facts, cited when possible, but does not constitute a comprehensive report developed as part of a research project or commissioned by specific regional stakeholders. The information collected should not, under any circumstances, be taken to constitute recommendations. Forum SAT and its partners may cannot be held liable for any damage resulting from the use of the content in this document.



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ABOUT FORUM SAT

Forum SAT is a collaborative initiative designed to bring together actors and networks from all across Québec that are working within a framework of socio-ecological transition to bring about food autonomy and security for all. Its mission is to build the capacity of all Quebec stakeholders who work on territorial food systems to promote healthy, equitable, local and sustainable food. Its makeup mirrors the diversity and the richness of the territories it comprises, and its work is based on the imperative of realizing the right to food.