

“A Return to Country Foods”; A Workshop Series on Contaminant Perception in the Dehcho Region of the Northwest Territories.

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Health Canada, Climate Change Adaptation program funded “Country Food” surveys in six of The Dehcho Dene and Métis communities.

Community leaders suggested that we needed more data on the level of use of country food, especially fish and the perception on contaminants in country food. Surveys were conducted in two major centers; Fort Simpson and Fort Providence and three smaller communities, Sambaa K'e (Trout Lake), Ka'a'gee Tu (Kakisa) and Jean Marie River

Table 1. Percentage of surveyed households that hunt, fish, garden and gather berries.


| | Households that Hunt | Households that Fish | Households that Gather Berries | Households that Garden |
|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| Fort Simpson (159) | 72.3% | 58.5% | 85.5% | 47.8% |
| Kakisa (15) | 73.3% | 73.3% | 93.3% | 40.0% |
| Jean Marie River (18) | 81.3% | 71.8% | 88.9% | 61.1% |
| Trout Lake (21) | 100.0% | 85.7% | 81.0% | 76.2% |

Table 2. Average meals per week of wild meat and fish for surveyed households

| | Meals per Week with Wild Meat | Meals per Week with Fish (summer) | Meals per Week with Fish (Winter) |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Fort Simpson (159) | 3.5 | 2.7 | 1.4 |
| Kakisa (15) | 4.4 | * | * |
| Jean Marie River (18) | 4.3 | 2.6 | 1.5 |
| Trout Lake (21) | 5.8 | 1.7 | 1.3 |

Dr. Heidi Swanson of the University of Waterloo is researching bioaccumulation of mercury in the food chain in ten Dehcho lakes

2013-2015 Questions



- Benefits of eating fish: cultural, nutritional (fatty acids, other nutrients) – balanced view
- Identify the safest, healthiest fish
- What will happen in the future? – Food security
- Are there mitigation strategies? – Increasing fishing?

How much mercury in this fish?

How acidic is my lake?

Is my lake tea-lake?

How warm is my colored or clear? What other fish are in my lake? (food chain length)

How much oxygen in my lake?

Where do I eat it?

How clear is my lake?

Age

Growth rate

What do I eat? (trophic level)

Size

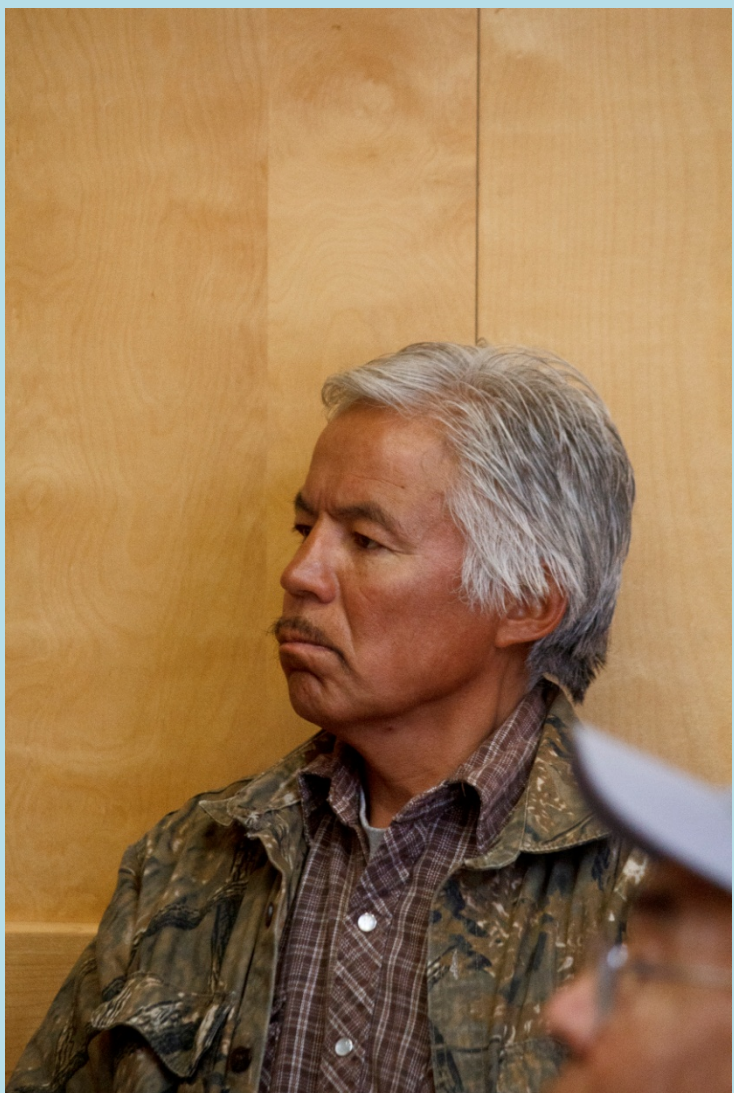
How many nutrients in my lake?



Research on mercury in the NWT may have scared some Dene and Métis people off eating any kind of fish

Dehcho *Aboriginal Aquatic Resources and Ocean Mgmt.* (AAROM) program has been involved with partners AANDC, NCP; Environment Canada; and the GNWT, Dept. of Health and Social Services (HSS) in updating mercury level data on fish from community fishing lakes in the Dehcho. Consumption advisories for some fish species from some lakes were issued by HSS and early media reports may have caused our Dehcho Dene and Métis members to be overly concerned about eating fish. Since the workshops newspaper reports have been much more balanced in the Dehcho Drum.

A series of “Country Food” workshops funded by the NCP were designed to improve communications and promote discussion on country foods and contaminants



AANDC, Northern Contaminants Program has funded a series of Country Food workshops; to date one in Jean Marie River in August, 2012 and recently one in Kakisa in 2013. The workshops were well attended by a good mix of participants; Government reps from Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada; Environment Canada; Fisheries and Oceans Canada; and GNWT, Health and Social Services; Environment and Natural Resources, Lands and Water Division, and researchers from the University of Waterloo and Sir Wilfred Laurier University presented information to community First Nation and Metis leaders, Environmental staff, AAROM monitors and harvesters. Community delegates were active in discussions of mercury issues and concerns about other contaminants.

Health Benefits of Fish



Fish are one of the most important and frequently used traditional foods. Fish can be eaten locally (e.g. fish caught and stored) and there are many different ways to prepare delicious fish meals.

Fish provide important nutrients in our diet and are a good source of nutrition. It is high in protein, vitamin B and omega-3 fatty acids, which are important to heart health and brain and eye development. Fish is also a significant source of Vitamin D, which is important for teeth and bones.

Mercury can be found in fish as a contaminant, however, the health benefits of eating fish far outweigh any risks from mercury contamination. Levels of mercury can vary from lake to lake and can be caused by human activities and natural causes. To reduce the risk of exposure to mercury, Health Canada has established guidelines on what levels of mercury are acceptable to eat and the following recommendations should be followed:

- Eat smaller (younger) fish
- Eat more fish that are lower in the food chain (bottom feeders), such as whitefish, suckers or grayling and less predators such as walleye, northern pike and lake trout

The Canadian food guide for the First Nations, Inuit and Métis is an excellent source for a variety of healthy food choices.

