

CHAPTER 5

THE CHANGING FOOD ECONOMY IN NUNAVUT: WILL COUNTRY FOOD STORES SECURE NUNAVUT'S FOOD SUPPLY?

Heather MYERS

International Studies, University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, BC, CANADA

Abstract: The traditional Inuit food production economy has been influenced by a variety of events and circumstances, including the settlement in communities, the introduction of new hunting technologies and wage employment, the anti-sealing lobby, and social policies and changes that have altered hunting and fishing, and sharing patterns. Yet the traditional economy has remained important to Inuit, and the Nunavut government has recognized the value of developing the renewable resource sector. Country food stores may be one way to meet several needs—economic development, provision of affordable and nutritious food, and continuation of Inuit cultural values. There have been several such outlets developed in the Northwest Territories, which have entered local, regional, territorial, national and international markets—some with impressive success. In Nunavut, two examples of country food outlets are examined, from Pond Inlet and Cambridge Bay, along with their philosophy, employment and sales patterns. These outlets and their apparent success, raise some interesting research questions, which are outlined at the end of the paper.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the Inuit produced all of their food and other needs from the lands and waters that they roamed. This traditional food economy came under pressure from a variety of influences. First, government programs to move the nomadic Inuit into settled communities meant a change in the way they harvested—indeed the government and some Inuit probably saw the adoption of a more 'modern' community-based way of life to be preferable to the vagaries of a hunting lifestyle, which sometimes came with periods of starvation. Once in communities, wage employment, and the growing importance of the cash-based economy, not to mention changing technologies of harvesting, changed some harvesting and food production patterns. Later, the anti-sealing boycott from Europe affected Inuit seal hunting and sales of skins and crafts. The (cash) poverty that already existed in the North, and which was exacerbated by this and other campaigns meant an increase in Social Assistance payments to northern families, and those came with certain limitations of how money could be used, and thus, whether they could continue participating in the harvest. Nonetheless, traditional food production is still

a vitally important part of northern lifestyles, though its role in the economy has changed somewhat.

The rapidly growing population in the North, along with the growing cash-oriented economy, create a pressure for more employment for Inuit communities. Unfortunately, there is little employment available. The new Nunavut government has suggested that it will be important to continue the traditional food economy, as well as to increase employment and incomes. Indeed, experience with many enterprises suggests that small-scale renewable resource-based enterprises could provide some of these benefits. In particular, country food stores have been set up in the North, to provide processed and packaged arctic meats and fish. These have met with great success in northern communities—they have experimented with new and traditional products: caribou and muskox jerky, seal pastrami, char, *maqtaq*—some of which have met with keen customer interest and demand. Furthermore, the stores provide jobs in the community that support the domestic harvest, so in the food security context they have a multiple effect.

But what will be the effect of these developments on the traditional food economy and other social arrangements in arctic communities? Some may be concerned about the impacts on traditional sharing

relationships, if products of the harvest can now be sold for cash; others about increased pressures on wildlife stocks; still others might be concerned about another anti-use campaign from Europe or elsewhere. There is little literature available on the development of country food stores, however, other research provides some commentary on food production and use patterns in arctic communities. From this, it is possible to extract suggestions about research that could be useful to elaborate and enhance the benefits of country food stores, while identifying potential disbenefits and suggesting policy or practice treatments.

2. THE TRADITIONAL FOOD ECONOMY AND PRESSURES ON IT TO CHANGE

A number of influences have changed the way that traditional Inuit food production is practiced: a move to settlement in communities *versus* a nomadic lifestyle; changes in technology which permitted more efficient harvests and travel; the increase of wage-job opportunities which altered the type of income households could derive; and the European boycott of sealskins, which undercut the cash-earning ability of Inuit harvesters, and therefore, their ability to fund domestic harvesting and food production; and Social Assistance, which for a long time, prevented people from funding on-the-land activities through welfare. Yet, despite these influences, the traditional harvesting lifestyle, and the food production it represents, has retained its importance—for cultural, social, nutritional and economic reasons. Overall, these activities still constitute an important part of Inuit communities, though the participants, and the nature of their participation, may be changing.

When the Inuit were moved from a nomadic lifestyle into settled communities in the Canadian arctic, it seemed a tacit government expectation that the people would cease their hunting-dominated lifestyles, and take up employment in a more modern economy. But jobs were scarce in those communities, and it became apparent that many people preferred to keep on hunting, whether on a full-time or part-time basis. Numerous studies have documented the continued importance of the subsistence or domestic harvest, which produced income in the form of food, furs and other materials (Wenzel 1981, 1986, 1991; Myers 1982, Usher & Weihs 1989, Bureau of Statistics 1990).

Changes in the technology of harvesting, which allowed faster, further travel and more efficient harvest

(Condon *et al.* 1995), compensated somewhat for the inconvenience or inefficiency, in harvesting terms, of having people concentrated in settlements. People were thus able to live a community life and also get out onto the land to hunt, fish, and trap. The consumption of country food continues to be important in arctic communities—more than 80% of older adults and 45% of 18-34 year olds in Sanikiluaq eat country food each day (Wein *et al.* 1996). The Labour Force Survey in the NWT also confirms that a high proportion of Inuit participate in hunting, fishing and trapping (Bureau of Statistics 1990).

An obvious influence on food production was clearly the increase in wage-job opportunities which have become, slowly, more plentiful in arctic communities. As people began taking jobs their harvesting time was more limited. But, at the same time, that wage income became more and more critical to supporting the traditional harvest. A downward spiral of dependency was a constant threat that people might give up subsistence hunting for wage employment, but that their wages would never keep up with the inflationary store prices for food (Hedican 1995:124). Yet still, many people continued to hunt, and the job income was used very much for supporting harvesting activities (Wenzel 1986).

The final, arguably most fundamental influence on the traditional Inuit food economy was the European boycott against sealskins, which gutted the subsistence/cash sealskin economy of the Inuit, making the pursuit of the domestic harvest much more difficult (Wenzel 1986, 1991). From earning enough cash from sealskin sales to support domestic harvest, the Inuit were suddenly faced with an inability to generate cash for any purpose, which curtailed the ability of some to pursue traditional domestic food production. Yet, despite increasing difficulties in being able to afford to hunt, people continued to do so, and to describe the hunt as critical to their identity, even though cash-paying jobs were becoming necessary to support it (Condon *et al.* 1995, Elias 1991:207, Wenzel 1986, 1991; Dorais 1997:51-3).

A very destructive aspect of the European campaign was the damage to people's confidence in seal-hunting as a valid way of life, and indeed, for a while some people felt this uncertainty, under pressure from the dominant European culture. Some relate the high rate of suicide among Inuit to the self-doubt introduced by the anti-sealing campaign that cast seal-hunters as ignorant brutes. In the end, one can say that the sealskin boycott changed the commercial benefit of the seal harvest, which underpinned the subsistence

harvest, but it has not stopped the seal harvest, which is still critical for peoples' physical and psychological nutrition. However, hunters now may be more inclined to harvest more for food needs, and less for commercial purposes (Dorais 1997:53).

The sealskin boycott severely curtailed the ability of Inuit to make a living. Now that people were living in communities, they had more expenses: food at the Bay or Co-op store, fashionable clothing and treats for children, ammunition and fuel for the harvester in the family. All of these were relatively expensive in the North, and as in the south, prices at the store only ever went up!

Thus, there was an increase in the number of people on Social Assistance, trying to meet their cash expenditure needs; this was another influence on the traditional food-producing economy. Being on Social Assistance made hunting more difficult however, as the rules said that you could not spend Assistance money on fuel and ammunition for hunting. For a long time, this policy led to a negative feed-back cycle where people hit hard times, and Social Assistance prevented them from going on the land to alleviate that poverty, at least somewhat, by providing country food. This was addressed in the 1990s, finally, by a revision of Social Assistance rules.

This change could also have impinged upon the traditional sharing networks and obligations within families and communities—if people could not harvest, they could not contribute a share to others, though they could still receive parts of other peoples' harvests. Indeed, these sharing patterns, typical though somewhat varied in form around the North, have changed over time, but are still a distinctive part of Inuit culture (Buijs 1993, Dorais 1997:54, Condon *et al.* 1995, Collings *et al.* 1998, Wenzel 1991). In Greenland, only family sharing remained by the 1970s (Hertz 1977 in Petersen 1989), though services and cash could also be shared, as well as food (Petersen 1989); in Canada, sharing networks are more varied now, but they are still important to Inuit social strength (Wenzel 1991:91-103, Collings *et al.* 1998).

Even today, a high proportion of Inuit people participate in hunting, fishing, and trapping. Dahl (1989), Dorais (1997:03) and others have argued that there really is no differentiation between the traditional and 'modern' economy and lifestyle; the commercial and subsistence sectors are intertwined. The 1989 Labour Force Survey showed that in the Baffin, Keewatin and Kitikmeot regions, 58%, 54% and 61% of Inuit participated in harvesting activities (Bureau of Statistics 1990). The harvest was estimated, about that time, to

produce an average of \$10-15,000 imputed value or cash-equivalent for NWT harvesters (Usher & Weihs 1989). Hunters from Holman Island were estimated to spend \$1.01 to produce \$10.54 of food (Smith & Wright 1989), making the harvest, though expensive, worthwhile.

Despite the value of the harvest, in social, psychological and domestic income terms, it is expensive to undertake. At the time of the above estimates of the harvest's value in production, it was also estimated that it might cost a hunter \$5-10,000 per year for equipment, fuel, and supplies (Usher & Weihs 1989:11). Yet, harvesters' households frequently had the lowest household incomes (Elias 1991:210). Furthermore, if they were unable to get special assistance or Unemployment Insurance, those households might be unable to hunt, which had implications for food availability in the community. A number of studies have suggested the adoption of harvester income support programs, such as that adopted in northern Quebec, which has had a positive effect on food production and harvester viability (Dorais 1997:54, Hedican 1995:119). It may be this income factor, combined with the effects of a school system, which removes young people from life on the land, as well as other influences on social change, that has led to a situation where fewer young people wish to pursue a traditional hunting lifestyle (Condon 1990). This change is not certain however—perhaps young people will 'grow into' the harvesting responsibilities and lifestyle as they get older and as their parents age (Condon *et al.* 1995), or perhaps they will come to appreciate the values associated with traditional harvesting. For now, though, there is evidence of a greater reliance on store-bought foods (Wein *et al.* 1996).

It is clear that the traditional Inuit diet has benefits for health, and a switch to more store-bought food carries with it greater risk of diabetes, heart disease and other problems. Despite concerns about contaminants in arctic foods, the relative nutritional value of a traditional meat and fish diet is clear (Mulvad *et al.* 1996, Usher *et al.* 1995, Cameron & Weis 1993).

Despite the obvious persistence of the traditionally rooted food production systems in arctic communities, change is continuing. A profound influence will be the interests and aspirations of the young Inuit. Raised with TV images of work, amidst a context of traditional Inuit culture and social values, what will they do when they are adults? Condon (1990) suggested that fewer are interested in hunting, for a variety of reasons (lack of training, lack of money to buy equipment and supplies, lack of interest in a 'marginalized' activity, increasing

dependence on wages and therefore less time to hunt, increased involvement in sports, and changing diet). Yet, young Inuit men may take on traditional harvesting roles more, as they get older (Condon 1990).

Thus, we see that the traditional harvest and food production are continuing in Inuit communities even while they are changing as a result of a variety of influences. How much more might they change?

3. COUNTRY FOOD AS A DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY

We know that there is a very high unemployment rate in the arctic communities,¹ and a demand for employment, income, and development of some sort. Where will development and employment come from?

Given the importance of the traditional renewable resource economy to the Inuit, some development potential may be found in this sector. Indeed it has been experimented with over the past twenty years; a variety of government programs have funded various forms of renewable resource development. At first, these focused on simply supporting harvesters, as did the Primary Producers section of the Special Agricultural and Rural Development Agreement (SARDA) program. Over the years, and through several federal-territorial Economic Development Agreements, evolution of the SARDA, and evolving programs from the Government of the Northwest Territories, the attitude to the renewable resource economy seems to have shifted from simply supporting or subsidizing an archaic way of life, to developing new commercial ventures rooted in the traditional lifestyle today (Myers 1994, Young 1995). The support of domestic and commercial production of renewable resources, particularly country food and fisheries, has been a key focus of some of these programs (see Table 1).

The result of these and other funding programs, and the commitment to a form of northern community development that the latter can relate to, is that a variety of enterprises, with roots in traditional native culture, have been tested: wilderness and cultural experience-based tourist camps, fishing and fish-smoking, seal-skin tanning, sport hunt outfitting, and so on. A particularly

successful form of enterprise has been country food stores.

The Nunavut government has clearly stated that the traditional sector will be an important part of the future Nunavut economy. Now, the threads of this story can be woven together, preserving elements of a traditional economy, developing jobs and income in the territory, and enhancing food security. Country food stores provide an interesting example; they represent changes in Inuit economy, but at the same time, a continuation of traditional values and practices.

In Greenland, country food sales have been practiced for centuries; by the 1990s they were seen as a way to achieve sustainable development by satisfying goals of nutrition, culturally valued food production, and economic opportunities for hunters (Marquardt & Caulfield 1996). In Nunavut, such stores could provide an equally valuable tool for community development, with implications for food security, employment, continuation of culture, and economic diversification and development.

4. THE NEW FOOD ECONOMY

In an attempt to alleviate the impacts of the sealskin boycott on northern communities, to support the domestic harvest, and to test the possibility of diversified commercial opportunities based on the traditional harvest, Nellie Cournoyea, then Minister of Renewable Resources in the Government of the Northwest Territories, introduced a program in the 1980s which would fund community freezers and meat-cutting plants in communities that wanted them. In some communities, the processing and sale of country foods has become a successful component of the local economy. Twenty-one communities currently have freezers, though the history in each community varies; of these, a handful are used for country food stores.

4.1 Country Food Stores

The potential for country food sales was first developed in a large way by the Inuvialuit, who sought ways to both control and capitalize on the burgeoning muskox population on Banks Island. They have since developed a business, which exports muskox product to the United States and Japan. Other country food stores have been developed in several NWT communities, whether small, medium or large. They have been surprisingly successful (Myers 1994), selling to local and regional markets, and serving individual consumers as well as institutional

¹ The measure of "unemployment" in the arctic is problematic because of the different ways in which employment is seen and used as part of an entire household economic strategy. But regardless of the absolute rate, it can probably be agreed that more jobs could be used by arctic residents, in some form or other.

Table 1. Federal and Territorial Spending on Commercial Fishing and Country Food Development in the NWT, 1978-1992

PROGRAM	Commercial fishing	Country food	TOTAL
Special Agricultural & Rural Development Agreement (1978-89)	1,016,910	2,690,500	3,707,410
Economic Development Agreement (1982-87)	1,165,037	1,058,364	2,223,401
Economic Development Agreement (1987-91)	1,290,615	868,987	2,159,602
Economic Development & Tourism 1986/7-91/92)	673,176	187,085	860,261
Renewable Resource Demonstration Projects Fund, 1988-92	142,511	180,833	323,344
TOTAL	4,288,249	4,985,769	9,274,018

(Source: Myers 1994)

ones such as hostels and prisons, hotels, and other retailers. They have experimented with products, learning valuable lessons over the years, for instance, that old male muskox, and narwhal jerky make unpalatable products, but that caribou and muskox jerky can be so popular it is difficult to keep up with demand.

The stores receive fish and animals harvested under the commercial licensing system, which sets a sustainable limit on the harvest. Hunters and fishers may go out just for the commercial harvest, or may combine it with hunting and fishing for domestic purposes. They deliver their catch to the store, where it is cut and wrapped, and perhaps processed for jerky, salami, corned roasts, sausages, smoked fish or other products. The stores employ hunters, processors, and sales personnel.

Two excellent examples of country food stores can be found in Cambridge Bay and Pond Inlet. They had similar social philosophies instigating their start-up. In Pond Inlet, the store operates on a non-profit basis, aiming at supplementing the incomes of hunters and fishers (Erkloo, pers.comm.). In Cambridge Bay, the store was also started by the Hunters and Trappers Association, in order to ensure that elders had continued access to a traditional food source (Relkov, pers.comm.). In the latter, country food meat prices were similar to those of imported beef, but access to traditional foods was the main concern; it was felt that more people were working or traveling, and less able to provide their own country food, so the store provided an important social function.

Commercial fishing can be the engine of these stores: the Cambridge Bay commercial quota of 3000 pounds of char was bought for \$1.25 per pound, and

sold for \$5-9, or \$22-24/pound if smoked. This assisted greatly in covering the costs of hydro, water, and sewage pump-out regular expenses for northern businesses (Relkov, pers.comm.). In Pond Inlet, the potential for a turbot fishery holds promise that the country food store will become more viable (Erkloo, pers.comm.).

The stores provide employment, both seasonally and full-time. In Cambridge Bay, most of the employees were middle-aged women, which fits with the traditional female role of food processor. There seemed to be relatively little interest amongst young people in working at the store/processing plant (Relkov, pers.comm.). The Cambridge Bay store employed about seventeen people: six core staff at the store, three part-time students, five to six hunters, and three fishers. Hunters were paid \$1 per pound of meat, plus expenses. With 1200 people in the community, the store had 30-40 regular non-native customers, and hundreds of regular Inuit customers. The children loved the caribou and muskox jerky so much that the store literally sold tons of it. In a good month, the Cambridge Bay store might pull in \$18-20,000 in sales.

The country food stores in Pond Inlet and Arctic Bay have operated for over a decade now, providing food for local consumption, as well as for inter-settlement trade. Trade in *maqtaq*, especially, is important to the Iqaluit market.

These stores have generated a great deal of community pride and confidence, and suggest an important role for such enterprises to support Inuit harvesting and food-production culture in the future. They have shown that they are capable of bringing revenue in from outside the community. Marketing and quality control demand new and different effort, but are

necessary in order for the stores to get and maintain consumer confidence. More broadly, the stores also provide an example of how businesses work, and what is required in order to run a business.

5. RESEARCH NEEDS

Given the pressing need to alleviate unemployment in northern communities, the potential for country food stores for employment and revenue, and the contribution this might make to arctic food security, it seems useful to consider what might be necessary to help them prosper.

The questions is whether selling country food impinges on traditional food-sharing systems, and somehow excludes or disenfranchises some members of the community.

- Will such stores appeal to unemployed youth, or what would make them more appealing as a job source?
- Will having a country food store in a community improve the nutrition and health of its residents?
- What are the employment and income benefits from country food stores?—this has not been fully examined.
- Will such a store help hunters, trappers and fishers continue their traditional pursuits?
- How much will the community economy save, by being able to replace imported foods, at least to some degree?
- What are the resource limits that must apply to country food products?
- From the perspective of a country food store manager, how can facilities be designed better for northern needs, while meeting federal food standards?
- And, what kinds of products will appeal to northern and southern consumers?
- Can the sustainability of country food production, and its relevance to the cultural context of Inuit communities, protect it from onslaught by another European anti-harvest campaign?
- Will the ability to sell country foods enable those who wish, to continue with their traditional domestic harvest?

6. COUNTRY FOOD IN THE CONTEXT OF FOOD SECURITY

Though this paper has stressed the community economic implications of country food production and sales, it has obvious links to the question of food security.

Most importantly, if Inuit people can provide more of the foods they desire, as was the objective of the Cambridge Bay store, they will have a more palatable, nutritious, and perhaps affordable source of food than if

they depend solely on imported foods. By tradition, the Inuit have provided their own food; these stores would allow them to continue to do so, in the context of an evolving, increasingly cash-oriented, northern economy. The opportunity to develop new products, such as corned muskox, will also help prove to young Inuit that their culture is part of the 'modern' world. The creativity it stimulates may filter into other parts of Inuit community life.

The country food stores may help ensure that domestic food supplies are available, by supporting the cash needs of hunters. They will also help to make commercial food available for those unable to hunt.

These stores will also help to replace imports, and thus the leakage of dollars away from the local/Nunavut economy. They may also become exports, depending upon resource availability and markets, and will contribute to the revenue base of Nunavut.

In terms of sustainable development, the establishment of country food stores satisfies cultural values, contributes to the economy, and can exist within a healthy human-environment relationship.

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