

**Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
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Title: Indigenous Food Sovereignty

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Transcript: Carol Elliott**

Speaker 1: "For me the reason we should be deconstructing our dinner is because our food is inextricably tied into a globalized and industrialized food system with very few exceptions."

Speaker 2: "Our connection with the rural fifteen per cent of the population that is growing the food has been disconnected and a lot of the urban areas don't really know where their food comes from."

Jon Steinman: And welcome to Deconstructing Dinner, produced in the studios of Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, British Columbia. My name is Jon Steinman and I'll be your host for the next hour.

Today's topic will be taking us in a rather different direction than usual, although what can come out of this broadcast will hopefully provide an expanded understanding of how the food we eat impacts others and ourselves. As this program has explored how the foods that are found in supermarkets and restaurants have become subject to a level of control far beyond the reach of the average Canadian, we arrive at this subject of food sovereignty – a term that has been discussed on numerous occasions here on Deconstructing Dinner, but one that holds a different meaning for every individual. For most Canadians, the idea of food sovereignty consists of our ability to determine how our food is grown and produced and whether such methods are appropriate to us. When we hear of the incredible influence corporations have on the Canadian diet, we hear of their influence on Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating; we hear of their influence in determining the economic viability of rural communities. And this helps direct us to discover alternatives to such an influence that is driven by profit, and not the health or well-being of Canadians.

But for the native inhabitants of Canada - the many indigenous cultures scattered from coast to coast to coast - food sovereignty is a completely different concept: one that in order for the rest of Canadians to identify with, we must look beyond how our food choices impact others and look at how many of our non-food choices so too have an impact. For anyone who enjoys a weekend at the ski hill, or a week-long vacation in slopeside accommodations, how many of us have

ever recognized that the land on which such activities are taking place may be the result of the destruction of the traditional food sources of an entire community?

Today's broadcast is titled "Indigenous Food Sovereignty," and we will be hearing from three speakers today, with all recordings having been compiled exclusively by Deconstructing Dinner. Lending their voice to the program will be Nicole Manuel, a mother and member of the Secwepemc Nation, located on the Neskonlith Indian Reserve just outside the community of Chase, British Columbia. We will hear from Paul Smith, a member of Wisconsin's Oneida Nation. And we will hear from Nancy Turner, who is a professor of Ethnobotany in the School of Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria.

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Jon Steinman: What is perhaps one of the greatest barriers to understanding this idea of food sovereignty is that, for most Canadians, our relationship with food is rather simple. We purchase it, we cook it, we eat it - pretty simple stuff. But such an uninvolved relationship with food has its dangers - all of which lead to each of us being at the mercy of the handful of companies operating within the food chain. Such a distant relationship to food is in direct opposition to the relationship fostered by the majority of the planet's population, where food is identified as spiritual, cultural, and of a meaning that most Canadians would have trouble understanding.

For the first inhabitants here in the Americas, the diet that we all embrace is seen by indigenous cultures as the continuation of European colonization, and this is the recurring theme raised by the three speakers who we will hear from today.

And what is perhaps of greatest importance, aside from understanding the struggles that indigenous peoples have as they fight to protect their culture and their food from this colonization, is that by looking through the lens of an indigenous person Canadians can better appreciate how our modern food system effectively disengages all eaters from both our food and from our land.

At the end of today's broadcast we will hear segments of a lecture given in February by Nancy Turner, a professor of ethnobotany at the University of Victoria. The title of her lecture was "Why Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Beliefs Matter in the Debate on Genetically Modified Foods." Now it has become almost unavoidable for Canadians to not consume the countless genetically modified ingredients that have entered into our food supply. And while many concerns are raised over the health, environmental and economic impacts of such tampering with nature, there are also the religious and cultural implications of such a shift in agricultural practices. And Nancy Turner's research has explored this topic.

But the first voice we will hear from on today's broadcast titled "Indigenous Food Sovereignty" is Nicole Manuel, a mother and member of the Secwepemc Nation, located on the Neskonalith Indian Reserve just outside Chase, British Columbia. Now we have aired clips of this talk on a previous broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner but today we will hear her talk in its entirety. Nicole was recorded speaking in October 2006 in Vancouver at the Bridging Borders Toward Food Security Conference.

And a quick reminder that should you miss any of today's broadcast, it will be archived on our website at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner.

And here's Nicole Manuel and how she defines "Indigenous Food Sovereignty."

Nicole Manuel: Well, I was thinking about several things, like how I'd like to start off. I really do think it's important to talk about this day in particular, which is Columbus Day and Thanksgiving Day. And that's what the problems are stemming from is that colonization. And I see all these different nations that are European nations from somewhere else - that have a homeland that's somewhere else. My homeland is here.

I guess when the voyager Columbus came here it was a recon expedition to explore new lands for market - a food market. First they came with three ships. When they came back two years later, they came back with seventeen ships and all their soldiers - their military - with plans to occupy and settle our lands. They did this through massacres, tortures, rapes, scorched earth policies where they destroyed our entire food systems. And within a century, tens of millions of indigenous people died through these massacres and diseases.

This is important because what we are trying to do is stop this process of colonization. Us indigenous people - we haven't been colonized yet. (audience: *applause*) Our land - yes, our land is occupied. And I know the Secwepemc people - the white people here or other settler races here aren't going away. But the government still tries to push that policy - the colonization through assimilation - and trying to assimilate us into the mainstream system, the mainstream society. This will damage and destroy us forever as indigenous people.

They started the policy of assimilation by ripping our children away and putting them into the residential schools, where everyone knows the atrocities that happened there. My father, he went there, and I experienced what he experienced because he put that on us children. It was a hard life and it's still a hard life growing up as an indigenous person. We struggle every day with this, and it is emotional. Assimilation is the psychological attack on our belief system. This is very important when we talk about food sovereignty, because this belief system encompasses all the natural beings and what everyone considers

inanimate or animate objects or things that all have a spirit. And that's what we believe – our food has a spirit.

I need to berry pick - every year I have to berry pick. If I don't I'll go crazy, I'll go mental, and this is not a lie. And I realize other women experience the same thing - that emotion, it's a spiritual connection. Some people might call it zen, or chi, or whatever you call it. But it's a spiritual connection – to us, to our food systems. And the same goes with the hunters that provide food for our families, and the fishermen that provide fish for our families. There's that spiritual connection: it's deeper than I can explain in English. It would be really hard, but it's there. We're connected to our food in a deep, deep way.

It was six years ago to this very day Secwepemc gathered at a place called Skwelkwekwelt. The white man calls it Sun Peaks. It's a ski resort in our backyard – in our territory. There must have been almost a hundred Secwepemc there. And when people started standing up and speaking about the land there, they started speaking about the hunting: how bountiful it was, how the fish were in the lakes, the creeks; the berries, the roots - all along the valley bottom of Skwelkwekwelt.

There were Indian potatoes - they were big, like potatoes. That was a staple of our diet. The elders - they spoke about running along the valleys there, and they would feel lumps along the bottom of their feet. Those were the Indian potatoes: they don't grow there anymore.

Right now there's a day lodge – a village day lodge. There's a Delta Hotel – Nancy Greene's Cahilty Lodge. But no more Indian potatoes. And that hurts all of us.

And when we heard all the stories about our food, us women and even men cried for what that Japanese company, Nippon Cable, is doing to destroy our lands. But it was that – talking about our food and our connection to our food - that caused us to take action.

So far there has been over fifty arrests of food gatherers, medicine gatherers, hunters. Our homes have been destroyed, and we've actually been banned from occupying lands that we've always occupied.

Like I said, we are not colonized people. We still practice our food gathering. Our people still hunt. When you go into my uncle's freezer you don't see beef and chicken in that freezer. It's a deep freeze full of salmon – wild salmon, wild deer meat and moose meat: without that, his grandchildren will go hungry - that's what they live on. But it's not agricultural land; that's not our gardens, even though we've adapted to it and we use to sustain ourselves now. Most of our food comes from the mountains, and these mountains are at the threat of destruction by the ski resort industry. You heard mentioned earlier the 2010 Olympics: those

mountains that are untouched that are now staked for development because of the 2010 Olympics - I'm not in support of that. (audience: *applause*)

But, like what Don says, it all comes down to the land policies that the government has pushed on this land, has laid down on this land. There's several people in my community who haven't stopped fighting. One of them is my grandfather. He's my mom's step-father - Wolverine Ignace. He fought to try to bring forward these land issues, to try to educate the public of how we were defrauded out of our lands through the Canadian legal process. And it was through the Indian Act: before the Indian Act existed, Canada was obliged and they were forced through law to either purchase our land or sign a treaty with the indigenous peoples. B.C. - they instead didn't listen to these laws – this Royal Proclamation of 1763. They didn't listen to these laws, and B.C. created the B.C. Land Act, which now still exists here on this land.

The Canadian government told B.C, “No, you cannot do this.” and struck it down with the duty of disallowance - did not allow this B.C. Land Act to exist. They said, “No, you must make treaties or purchase land from the indigenous peoples.” They came together and tried to conspire, “How can we do this now that this Royal Proclamation stands and we can't push this B.C. Land Act and open up this land for settlement. What do we do now?”

So what the Canadian government did was they created the Indian Act, which now doesn't make us nations or indigenous peoples: it creates a system where we are wards of the government. Now they can make decisions on behalf of us. But this is illegal, and this is what B.C. is basing their land policies on just to this day right now.

This activism that people talk about - I don't consider myself an activist – I consider myself more just as a Secwepemc mother of two children and I am responsible to ensure their health. I choose to feed them wild salmon and meat. We all want wild meat. Everyone here knows that it's a lot healthier than the beef and the chicken. The berries: we understand the medicinal value – the anti-oxidants - in the berries. That's our way – that's our way.

There are other food systems that are being destroyed by these colonial policies - like in fisheries. On the East Coast, there was the Burnt Church fight over the lobsters where the Mi'kmaq Indians were fighting for what they've always done: caught lobsters for their food. On the West Coast we have the Cheam – the Indians of Chilliwack - with the fish wars for the wild salmon that they harvest out of the Fraser River.

I hear stories about Elders – women within our Secwepemc Nation - going and picking medicinal berries and getting them confiscated by park rangers. But our food system is a lot different than mainstream food systems and we need help protecting it.

When I see signs “Bridging Borders Toward Food Security” - that’s important. We need help protecting our forests from these ski resort and real estate developments up there. We need help protecting our fishing and hunting rights. That’s our food security.

I’d just like to also mention a little bit about the health of the people. My grandfather - he died of heart disease. He was a world leader – an indigenous man. He travelled the world talking about sovereignty and nationhood. He died from heart disease from what he ate. My grandmother – she died of diabetes, as well as my uncle. So I see that it’s a direct result from the food and the colonizing of our diet.

One other thing: just in the Spring I had the opportunity to go to a water conference in Yellowknife. And if it’s not the land policies of real estate development or some sort of tourism development it’s the mining, and even industrial agriculture, because it leaches fertilizers into the water, which destroys the fish and the hunting grounds for indigenous people. The mining takes the water and produces poison - like uranium and the cyanide poisoning. And we all know about the dangers of the fertilizers, the people are directly beside these developments that are happening all around them.

Now, the B.C. government is trying to enforce a treaty process because they know we never extinguished our rights. This treaty process that exists now calls for the extinguishment of our rights to the land and title to the land. If we sign this all over to them they agree that they’ll grant back land in fee simple title under their control, of course. This is also something that we have to stop – this British Columbia treaty process, which hopes to totally alienate us from our lands and annihilate any relationship that we still have and still hold onto.

I know how everyone came here because of the concern for the food, and I hope that through making alliances with indigenous people you can understand and feel the spiritual connection and start to understand it, because we were all once tribal people. We all understood that connection: we all called our earth mother at one time in history. This land is our mother and we must take care of this land otherwise we won’t have any food.

We have to learn how to simplify our lives - how to accept the very little that we can take until we can work to make our ecosystems the way they were before colonization: bountiful. We didn’t just have enough – there was a bounty of food.

And that is what I hope and dream and pray for, for my kids. That we can get back to that: first even within our territory – the Secwepemc territory - to have a bounty of food for my children and grandchildren.

And I pray for that for everyone. For everyone just to reflect on that - about colonization and what it's caused for indigenous people. Some people think it's a good thing. I think it's the most devastating genocide and holocaust that's happened in the whole entire world, with tens of millions of people being annihilated. Those people along with the surviving indigenous people hold the knowledge of how to take care of this land that you call Canada and the United States. (audience: *applause*)

Jon Steinman: And you're tuned in to Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio.

And that was Nicole Manuel of the Secwepemc Nation located just outside of Chase, British Columbia. Nicole was recorded by Deconstructing Dinner in October 2006 in Vancouver. There will be more information on the content of her talk located on our website cjly.net/deconstructingdinner.

soundbite

Jon Steinman: Today's broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner is titled "Indigenous Food Sovereignty." This term "food sovereignty" is one that describes the human right of all peoples and nations to grow food in ways that are culturally, ecologically and economically appropriate for them. As the content of this program more often explores food sovereignty from the perspective of Canadians reliant on the Western food and agricultural systems, this term is interpreted much differently by the indigenous inhabitants of Canada and other nations. This broadcast is exploring this very topic.

The next speaker featured here on today's broadcast is Paul Smith of the Oneida Nation in Wisconsin. Paul also represents the Indian Nations Program of Heifer International – an organization that works with communities around the world to end hunger and poverty and to care for the earth.

Paul spoke after Nicole Manuel at the October 2006 Bridging Borders Toward Food Security Conference in Vancouver, and here is that recording.

Paul Smith: I guess I want to reiterate what some of our previous presenters shared and that's the gratitude for my being here. It's one of the first forums I've seen where indigenous people have actually been honoured both with the reception from the Squamish Salish community – the traditional communities that we're in – and also for us to share our challenges so to speak around food security/food sovereignty that's this conference is really based on.

As you've noticed, the previous speakers – what they've done is they've introduced themselves as to how we recognize who we are as a people. And so I'm going to do the same thing. I normally do this primarily with other native

communities that I work with and other native territories or peoples but I'll share with everyone here.

It's true my name is Paul Smith but that's my again colonized or my English name. My real name is Losadagai, and that means "that I have feet on my shoulders." Now in our culture we have a well for our clans. And I come from the Turtle Clan, or we say A'no:wal.

And so my name – when we talk about bridging borders, and we're talking about borders here - comes from this side of the border. I was born on the other side of the border. Because our territories straddle - whether it's Mexico, or whether it's Honduras, or whether it's Canada and the U.S. - all of our borders have somehow divided our peoples, separated our peoples. And so even for me to come visit my relatives and my people and share in the ceremonies I'm always challenged at the border. A real issue.

And it's this entity called Customs and Immigration. It's at their discretion whether they want to let me in or not. So I challenged them one time: I asked what their customs were. (audience: *laughter*) They couldn't answer me. And as the history books told me, you're the immigrant. Maybe I should be behind the desk. (audience: *laughter*)

I've got a lot to say but I've got a very short period of time to share it. I'm not going to share a lot of the work that I really do because I want to build on and try to again bridge some of the things that were spoken about. One of the things certainly is my name being Losadagai but they also call me Iroquois, which is a French term given to us from the East coast – the Mohawks, the Senecas, the Cayuga, the Onondaga, the Tuscarora. We call ourselves Haudenosaunee. I come from the people – or the Oneida people as I was introduced - but we call ourselves Onyote'a:ka.

Normally, most of our indigenous names – as to how we identify ourselves – it's usually about our geographical bioregion: what's there. So ours is "the area of the standing stone."

The American legacy - and I keep on hearing about land – but the American legacy on the U.S. side was removal. Our people during the revolutionary war had a choice: either fight with the Queen or fight with this young gentleman named George Washington. So we had a choice. Most of our confederacy went with the Queen but some of us – the Oneidas and the Tuscarora - sided with General George from the colonial army.

I guess we were the fortunate ones because they promised us that we would be secure in our lands if we fought with the Colonists. However, what they didn't tell us was that they promised - George promised - all of the people that came into

that militia - lands. They would be paid in future lands if they won in that revolutionary period.

Well, the Iroquois or the Haudenosaunee that fought with the Queen, it was called the Sullivan Campaign. His job was to destroy and kill all Iroquois people that fought under the Queen. So they were in flight, so to speak. And a lot of our seed stuffs were left behind. Because even in a Jesuit journal, in one little Iroquois village he identified twenty – oh, I'm sorry, I had twenty-three - he identified thirty-some bean varieties from one village. Different original heirloom beans - because we are the people of the corn, bean and squash. Destroyed and girdled all of the fruit trees, and drove all of the people onto the Queen side which is now in Ontario, where we have got several Iroquois reservations in Quebec and Ontario. I have a hard time as I mentioned visiting with them, honouring with them and sharing with them.

So right off the bat, the history and the legacy of the governments was to destroy our food systems – purposely - and then they could access our resources, whether it was gold, whether it was silver, whether it was timber, whether it was oil. Or whether it was recreation today that people that can afford.

You heard all the stories about the killing of the millions of buffalo. It was the same thing: destroy their ability to feed themselves and you've got control. And they've done it repeatedly, and it continues today, as these previous panelists spoke to.

And it's done in such subtle ways that the world does not even know - through legal federal legislation. You can pass legislation tomorrow - and it will be passed again - around hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering rights. And you can enforce it upon us because both these colonial governments arbitrarily created a *Citizenship Act* and said, "You are ours. You are a part of us." So when there are issues and we take it to an international arena - at the U.N. - the U.S. stands up and tells the other countries, "Don't you get involved because this is a domestic internal issue. Those are our native people."

So according to federal law we are domestic dependents; that's what they call us. We are still the children of these colonial governments. So when we talk about our territories and our lands it's true that we recognize them as ours. However, because seventy per cent of Canada has not been ceded or treated away, the Canadian government interprets that as being theirs - because we didn't give it to you – we didn't treaty it.

See, on the U.S. side we were very, very slick. What we did over there - we called it the Indian Land Claims Commission that was put in place in the late sixties and the early seventies and said, "Okay, Indians, if you've got any claim to any land you get on the docket and you argue your case. We'll review it and if we

find it valid then maybe we'll entertain it." If you didn't do that you were just shit out of luck, so to speak. So this continues today – just keep that in mind.

1977 was the first indigenous forum at the U.N. 1977 – they finally let the indigenous peoples of the world come to the U.N. and talk about their issues of genocide - both physical and cultural genocide. Since that time there has been developed over the past few decades a permanent forum on indigenous issues and the issues are on food sovereignty. And what does that mean?

It was from a meeting that we held in 2002 in Guatemala. It's called the Declaration of Atitlan. I want to read this because this is indigenous people from around the world defining food sovereignty from an indigenous perspective.

The Declaration of Atitlan issued at the First Global Consultation for Indigenous peoples on the right to food in 2002 happily explains that the content of the right to food of indigenous peoples is a collective right based on our special spiritual relationship with mother earth, our lands, territories, environment and natural resources that provide our traditional nutrition. The Declaration also defines food sovereignty as the right of people to define their own policies and strategies for the sustainable production, distribution and consumption of food with respect for their own cultures and their own systems of managing natural resources and rural areas and is considered to be a pre-condition to food security. We can never have food security in our indigenous communities if we do not have the right to self-determination. (audience: *applause*)

I know I'm running short on time so I just want to run through some things really quick and if there are questions I'd be glad to answer them. Otherwise I think I can stand up here half a day myself.

But one of the things that I would like to mention is that there's been so much legislation that was called the Allotment Act. Native people recognized that we don't own the land – it's not ours - and that there was literally dozens of confederacies throughout all of our territories. Just like the Salish – that was a confederacy. The Squamish is one nation of that confederacy that extends all the way down into the U.S. But the confederacies – the reason we came together was to say that, "Yes, we got shared territories for hunting and fishing and production. But we'll still co-exist. We recognize their shared territories." And that's okay.

So the issue even today when I look at it, and I've been fighting land claims for over thirty years, trust me. I was one of the people that was in military custody up in Oka in 1990. I came out of there. I was involved at Wounded Knee and AIM in the seventies.

But when we look at each other – every native person in here is struggling with liberation, but we struggle with liberation in a different way. So what I'm saying - even we recognize that the land is sacred and our relationship to that.

All of our ceremonies where I come from are based on food, whether we got our seed ceremonies, whether we got our harvest - where the U.S. Thanksgiving came from. Whether we got our green corn ceremonies, whether we got our planting songs and our planting ceremonies. Whatever it is, it comes from that: our relationship to those life forces. We are relatives.

And so when we are fighting even from our homelands in the East, our original homeland was New York State but we all got relocated. They were trying to create an Indian country. Not like Canada. The U.S. did it different: they were trying to push us all West into the Oklahoma territories. Son of a gun if they didn't find oil. (audience: *laughter*) Now land is a major issue because native people don't have no land. Just as this young lady was saying, we don't have that land. That land is held in federal trust: it's the government's land. It sits within the Department of Interior and a sub-department called the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Over here it's the Department of Indian Affairs. And they determine how that land is going to be used.

Much of that land on the American side is leased out to non-native people – ranchers - because it's fractionated. Too many errors they said. It's not our land. They hold it in trust for us and they remind us of that, too. Just like you hold some federal lands in trust for the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts - same with the native population. It's not our lands: we're domestic dependents. Keep that in mind. So we can't stop a lot of the things that actually happen when we call it "development" within our own territories.

I want to mention that one of the real challenges certainly was for a project I am working with in Oklahoma. We can deliver cattle, we can deliver a lot of technical expertise. And Heifer International is one great organization - the best that I've ever certainly been affiliated with, other than First Nations. (audience: *applause*) But their real challenge was how did they access land?" I said, "I can't help you with that. You've got to figure that one out." So they did come together as a people and somehow found the moneys, because the banks wouldn't lend them nothing, right? Because how can you repossess on federal land? You can't. So we can't even go up to lending institutions to develop economic development enterprise within our own world - sustainable practices that we want to. But here nor there, somehow they accessed the money to put in some bids for some of their own lands to get it back from some of the non-native ranchers. And they were successful. So we delivered eighty-five head of cattle. But that's not uncommon when it comes to land tenure in so-called quote unquote "Indian country."

And now that I mentioned Indian country I'm going to close really quick because there's a lot of confusion. I heard it mentioned a few times, and even within the people that I work with. I initially was working in three countries – Mexico, the U.S. and Canada. And on the Canadian side the Native people call themselves "First Nations." On the U.S. side they call themselves "Indian Nations," primarily because there is something that's called "Indian law" – "Indian treaties" - and all of those things. So we stayed with the term "Indian," though we know that Columbus was lost; even though he discovered us, he was lost. Probably high or something – I don't know. He was way off base, here nor there.

So we call ourselves Indians because of the treaties and because of the legal binding paperwork that we have there. And certainly in Mexico – I work with the indigenous peoples – that's probably the most appropriate term because, again, at the U.N. level it gives criteria and definition to indigenous peoples. And we're talking about a people that have their own unique language, their own governance - as far as decision-making - and their own economy. That's how we identify indigenous peoples.

So with that, in closing, I do want to acknowledge Mike for a lot of his data on statistics, because last night when we had dinner we were talking about.... Remember the base age was forty-five and up – we used to say this is the percentage of Native people with type 2 diabetes. Then we dropped it to forty – that was the base age. Now we are down to thirty-five and up.

I've got three children. By the time they were twenty-two they were type 2 diabetic. Three. I've got a sister in the hospital right now where they may amputate. It's rampant.

One of the highest rates that we've seen documented in the Tohono O'odham in Arizona is eighty per cent of the population over thirty-five is type 2 diabetic - eighty per cent. I know I recently got one from Mohawk country and it said seventy-five percent. I thought, "Wow, that's getting up there." But for many of our communities it's hitting fifty per cent, from the age of thirty-five and up.

And it's because of the diet: the food changes - the processed foods, the refined sugars. But also other things came into our world. We weren't a wheat- and dairy-based society, but suddenly that's what was given to us when they were talking about the starvation diet of flour and animal fat. It's basically a starvation diet as they enclosed us on the reserves. What they here did in Canada - they didn't remove all the Native people. What they did was they just kind of squeezed us on average in a one-by-one mile square and said, "That's yours." It's a sad legacy but it's a reality.

Jon Steinman: And you're tuned in to Deconstructing Dinner, a syndicated program produced and recorded at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, British Columbia.

That last speaker was Paul Smith of the Oneida Nation in Wisconsin. Paul also represents the Indian Nations Program of Heifer International. Deconstructing Dinner recorded this talk in October 2006 in Vancouver. More information on the Oneida Nation and Heifer International can be found on our website at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner.

soundbite

Jon Steinman: Rounding off today's broadcast titled "Indigenous Food Sovereignty," we will now take a listen to segments of a lecture recorded in February 2007 in Victoria, British Columbia. Deconstructing Dinner correspondent Andrea Langlois was on hand to record the second of a four-part lecture series titled *Acceptable Genes? Religion, Culture and the Genetically Modified Foods Debate*. The series was organized by the University's Centre for Studies in Religion and Society and draws on a new study by the Department where international scholars explored how the recent introduction and widespread use of genetically modified foods influences consumer acceptance of such foods by those of Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Indigenous traditions.

This latter culture was researched by Nancy Turner, a Professor of Ethnobotany in the School of Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria. Nancy's lecture was titled "Why Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Beliefs Matter in the Debate on Genetically Modified Foods." As part of Dr. Turner's research, she compiled responses to this question from indigenous peoples from both North and South America.

The introduction of genetically modified crops, such as the primary ones of corn, soy, and canola, have become so prevalent in the North American diet that our acceptance of such foods and support for such foods is, essentially, supporting the further colonization of the indigenous people in the Americas. The very same companies that are introducing genetically modified corn varieties around the world are the very same companies we financially support when we eat.

And here's Nancy Turner highlighting the many responses she received to this question, "Why Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Beliefs Matter in the Debate on Genetically Modified Foods."

Nancy Turner: And here's Alestine Andre, my Gwich'in friend from Tsiigehtchic.

"Respect" – and this goes to the belief system – "Respect must be used when harvesting or gathering traditional foods. Cultural practices must be followed on the land. For example, when collecting plant foods the gatherer or harvester must give a token of thanks before they pick any parts of the plants, including their berries. Care must be given to ensure there are food resources for the future."

And this is a very, very common practice - to always give thanks to the food that people are harvesting or hunting or growing. And there was a strong understanding of people's relationships to their home places.

"It is important to continue gathering and eating traditional food because it is from the land and we are from the land. It is important to know where your food is coming from: to kill it; handle it; and prepare it. You get a respect for where it comes from and what it provides to you when you are a part of it."

And then concern from my friend Pakki Chipps, who didn't mince any words in her responses. She said, "I would like to use traditional foods entirely but we have a serious shortage of them, as the aggressive introduced plants erased the traditional food plants." She's thinking about broom and all the weedy plants that are now a major part out on their reserve at Beecher Bay and elsewhere. "We have traditional places where our food plants grew and where we would travel in order to gather them. But we no longer have access to these places or they are just paved or damaged, too."

So the restricted access to food goes back to colonial times when people were placed on these very small reserves that were only a fraction of their traditional territories that they really relied on for their complete food and sustenance.

And here is this notion of kincentricity comes up again from Jeff Corntassel: "Bears are our brothers. These people started as part of a now non-existent bear clan." So these go back into their origin stories. "They prayed to ask the creator how they could best serve the people and next morning they were turned into bears. Eating a bear is like eating a fellow Tsalagi." That is, a fellow human being. You would not eat a bear if you are a member of the Cherokee nation.

The same thing is reflected in Pakki's perspectives and many, many others: "We should not have the right to tamper with plants and animals for they are people, too." That puts it pretty succinctly.

Everyone had the feeling that food was part of the natural order. Their food was just an important part of who they were and their culture. Their traditions about eating food reflected their particular cultural perspective on the natural order. So, for Jeff Corntassel from the Cherokee Nation, foods from the upperworld should not be mixed from foods from the underworld. So you don't eat birds together with fish, from his perspective.

These boundaries should also be respected. Now, this would be a case where, in Jeff Corntassel's world, even if he accepted the notion of genetically modified food, he would not want to see a fish gene being spliced into a bird, or vice versa.

“There is a lot of cynicism about the world governments and industry. I trust the ancestors far more than I trust the grocery store or the advertisers or the WTO,” Pakki says.

Dr. Taiiaki Alfred, too - he’s very astute politically. This was one of his responses: “I do not like the idea of genetically modifying plants or animals to make them more marketable or to increase profits for corporations. I don’t think they are poisonous or harmful but I think that they disturb the natural balance and promote the outgrowth of capitalism and corporate power.”

From Jeff and from one of the Metis delegates to Terra Madre – Jewel Chartrand from the Winnipeg area. Jeff says, “The development of GM food (in his view) would be unacceptable and a violation of the natural law.” And Jewel Chartrand - something quite similar: “I say leave the Creator’s work alone. I trust his work better than man’s alterations of His work.”

Pakki, again as I say, didn’t mince her words in this response: “I already feel violated in knowing that the store bought foods I’m forced to buy are altered. For them to introduce genetic materials from plants or animals that are taboo would be yet another attempt at cultural genocide. It would be the ultimate insult and sign of disrespect for our communities and traditions.”

So there is a global perspective of indigenous peoples that this forcing of genetically modified food on them is just a continuation of the colonial kind of dominance that the Western world has had on indigenous people. This is from a website that’s related to indigenous people and genetically modified food. Deborah Harry, the Director of the Indigenous People’s Council on Bio-Colonialism: “Genetically engineered foods represent to indigenous peoples world-wide both the extension of an on-going colonial destruction of their local knowledge system and a violation or desecration of the natural world.”

And Vandana Shiva, I think I mentioned earlier, was at Terra Madre and is one of the really strong outspoken people relating to bio-piracy, as she calls it, or the appropriation of indigenous and tribal people’s food and knowledge, medicinal plants and so forth by corporations. So she doesn’t mince any words either: “The duty to incorporate savages into Christianity has been replaced by the duty to incorporate local and national economies into the global marketplace and to incorporate non-Western systems of knowledge into the reductionism of commercialized Western science and technology.”

Food is sacred. I mentioned that. Here is Jeff Corntassel again: “Tsalagi principles for leading a good life urge our people to eat our foods from well-tended gardens. How can we call our gardens well-tended if they are based on modifications of our sacred plants and derivatives of sacred animals?”

Here is some cynicism again as Dalin expresses: “I’ve heard the argument that it’s the only way to feed the poorer people of the world. But if GM foods are owned by private industry they will be trying to make a profit. Where is the profit in the poor nations?” So he sees it as a social justice as well.

Richard Atleo, as I say, gave a very thoughtful response in which he listed and weighed the pros and cons of genetically modified foods from his own perspective: “Genetic modification, as with any process that involves transformation, appears to be a two edge sword: one edge appears to be beneficial; and the other edge dangerous and risky. I think it unacceptable that the U.S. is not required to label GM foods.”

So, in conclusion, Indigenous people still regard their traditional food as being very, very important to their health, their well-being, their cultural identity and their environment. To them, food security and food sovereignty – even though they might not put it in those words – it’s very, very important to them. And, for the people that we consulted - and I have to again emphasize that this is only a very few people of the tremendous diversity of indigenous people and food systems around the world - but for them food is sacred and should not be tampered with. And there are taboos around eating certain foods in many cultures, or at least at many life stages for a lot of people. The imposition of genetically modified food in any kind of food system is seen as another form of colonialism.

Jon Steinman: And this is Deconstructing Dinner, a weekly syndicated radio program produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, British Columbia. Today’s broadcast is titled “Indigenous Food Sovereignty,” and you’ve been listening to a segment of a recorded lecture given by Dr. Nancy Turner, a professor of ethnobotany in the School of Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria. Deconstructing Dinner correspondent Andrea Langlois recorded this lecture in February 2007.

Nancy’s lecture was one part of a four-part series that heard from researchers who contributed to a study by the University’s Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, with her research focusing on how genetically modified foods impact the traditions of indigenous cultures in both North and South America. There will be more information on this series and on Nancy Turner’s research located on the Deconstructing Dinner website, which is cjj.net/deconstructingdinner.

In wrapping up today’s broadcast, we will hear one more clip from Nancy’s lecture. In it she touches on the risks genetically modified crops pose to wild species of plants, and how such risks can impact the traditions of indigenous peoples.

Nancy Turner: I haven’t talked much about the worries about contamination and conservation of the landraces of the crop plants that are genetically modified but

this is another concern. Because, for each of the major crops that have genetically modified varieties or forms, there are wild species that grow around them that have the potential to be contaminated by genetic drift through pollinators and through transfer of pollen.

So, for maize, there are Teosintes. For potatoes there are wild Solanums and wild forms of potatoes - the original wild ancestors of potatoes growing around the field. For sunflowers, there are wild sunflowers. For strawberries, there are wild strawberries around them. For mustards, there are many wild mustards and some of them grow as weeds around the main fields.

Now, there are other ones as well, but those are just some examples that they have actually proven that this has happened - that GM genes have actually found their way into wild populations, and this is a concern.

And finally there is the issue of intellectual property that some of us were talking about earlier. The people in Lorenzo's home community have taken thousands of years to develop maize - over painstaking work over generations and generations. And then they see the injustice of one company coming, taking the product of their ancestors, and putting one single gene or changing one single trait it, and then patenting it and putting a claim on it as theirs as totally unjust. And they worry that, just as Dalin said, although people say that genetically modified food is developed for the common good of humanity and will enhance the environment and make food more available to people, people are quite cynical about that, and they think really that profit is probably a major motive in many cases.

So, in conclusion, there is a general feeling amongst the respondents in our study that genetically modified foods are unacceptable, not just for consumption but also because how they affect the sacredness of the natural order. At the very least they say they feel that GM foods should be labeled so that they have a choice as to whether they want to consume them or not. And so I think for all of these reasons indigenous peoples' perspectives on this topic are very important and they do need to be considered in the overall debate. Thank you very much. (audience: *applause*)

ending theme

Jon Steinman: And that was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman.

The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident Adham Shaikh.

This radio program is provided free of charge to campus/community radio stations across the country. Should you wish to financially contribute to this program, we invite you to offer your support through our website at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner or by dialing 250-352-9600.

'Til next week.