



COMMUNITY-LED CHANGE BRIGHTLIGHTS

COUNTRY FOODS PROGRAM



Country Foods Program staff setting up fishing net

NISICHAWAYASIHK CREE NATION, MANITOBA

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**The Country Foods Program
makes our community stronger.**

NCN Citizen

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COUNTRY FOODS PROGRAM



Country Foods Program staff: Al Murdo Linklater, Malcolm Hunter, James Bonner

The Country Foods Program is a community resource that operates year-round to harvest, process, and distribute country foods to Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation citizens and organizations.

Intention

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The program is being talked about more by people in the community.

Malcolm Hunter, Manager

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Using a goose blind for waterfowl harvest

The Country Foods Program was created with the involvement and guidance of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation community in 1992. The core funder is the Nisichawayasihk (also known as Nelson House) Trust, through the Northern Flood Implementation Agreement. The program operates with a mandate to continue operating and maintaining the program to provide wild foods to NCN citizens through hunting, fishing and other resources. The goal of the program is to provide nutritious foods to the community, in particular to Elders, infirm,

single parents, and low-income NCN citizens. If an NCN citizen requests food, they will not be refused.

We are hoping to achieve a sustainable, healthy, vibrant community by utilizing what mother earth provides and continuing the traditional way of life through harvesting and sharing country food. The program is one way to continue traditions, to pass them onto our children so that they can do the same for future generations.

Program Operations



Preparing for waterfowl harvesting



Wild mint drying



Processing wild game

STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES:

The Country Foods Program consists of three full-time program staff: a manager and two Traditional Harvesters. The Manager is responsible for coordinating program activities including: day-to-day operations, budget management and program reporting, document incoming/outgoing food supply, supervise Traditional Harvesters, organize harvesting trips, hire temporary harvesters, and ensure maintenance of equipment. The Traditional Harvesters are responsible to monitor the food supply at the Country Foods Distribution Centre and to provide an ample supply of fresh food to the program. The food is processed, stored and distributed to NCN citizens and organizations who request it. The Program is overseen by the community's Director of Lands & Resources.

The program staff are required to have:

- Food Handler Certificate
- Boating License
- Driver's License
- Wilderness Survival Training
- Wilderness First Aid/Basic First Aid.
- Possession & Acquisition License (PAL)/
Firearms Acquisition Certificate (FAC)
- Natural skill

The program staff also maintain the Leftrook Lake camping facilities that are located 60 km north of the community. This facility is utilized by individual families, special interest groups and students for special learning and teaching of traditional Cree culture. The facility has five cabins, a communal teepee and a cook shack. The cabins are accessible by snow machines in the winter and canoe or float plane in the summer.

HARVESTING & PROCESSING:

The gathering and distribution of country foods is based on the species the season provides. The variety of species depends on the daily, weekly and seasonal operation and implementation of

the program. Generally, the Traditional Harvesters re-supply the freezers with what the Elders in the community request. Usually it is the staff who harvest for the program. However, NCN citizens can also harvest wild food for the program on their own and be compensated for the cost of going on the land (gas, food). About 15-20 local harvesters are hired throughout the year. NCN citizens and youth can also join the Traditional Harvesters on harvesting trips which doubles as a learning opportunity. The Country Foods Program has a designated area for harvesting and the Department of Land & Resources allocated a lake for dedicated fish harvest for the program. Traditional Harvesters must complete a trip plan every time they go out on the land and water. This includes sharing with the RCMP and community where they are going and expected time of return. An equipment checklist is completed, which includes a satellite phone to ensure connectivity in case of emergencies.

All wild foods are cleaned, dressed, weighed, and stored at the Distribution Centre. The Program Manager is responsible to document the size of the harvest for each trip (pounds and type of foods). These records are submitted to Nisichawayasihk Trust as part of program reporting.

DISTRIBUTION:

The number of households and families who access country foods varies each year. In a slower year, about 600 individuals benefit from the program and in higher years, it can be closer to 1000 individuals. It depends on the economy. If the economy is doing well, less people request country food. If grocery prices increase, more people request country foods through the program. Once a request is made by an individual or community organization, program staff will deliver the foods to the NCN citizen or event. The Program Manager documents community usage of the program (names of people accessing foods, size of their families, and amount of food given to each family) for program reporting. On average, about 30 people access the program per month.

Community Partnerships



Traditional Harvester tilling a garden for an Elder



Learning how to harvest traditional medicines from an Elder

While providing traditional food for the community, the program also aids and assists in the preservation and promotion of culturally appropriate activities. The program has partnered with the Granny and Grandpa program at the school to demonstrate singeing geese or filleting fish. The program has partnered with NCN Parks and Recreation festivals and events to engage youth. This provides a platform to share about the program, gives hands-on opportunities for the youth, and to share about Cree traditional ways of life. The Wellness Centre has also been a partner, especially with the gardening, beekeeping and chicken projects. The Country Foods Program has a tiller and has helped home gardeners or provided labour

for those who have needed it. In return, the gardeners have given the program some of the produce that they grew. Country Foods Program staff also participate in outings in Leftrook Lake that are organized by the Wellness Centre. These outings provide youth and families the opportunity to learn on-the-land activities such as fishing and picking medicines and berries.

Given the current circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe that our community will see even more the importance of the program and of learning about traditional ways of living. We would also like to be able to put more energy and funds towards community gardening and growing foods in the community.

Spring & Summer Harvest



The harvests are getting a lot better now with new equipment

James, Traditional Harvester

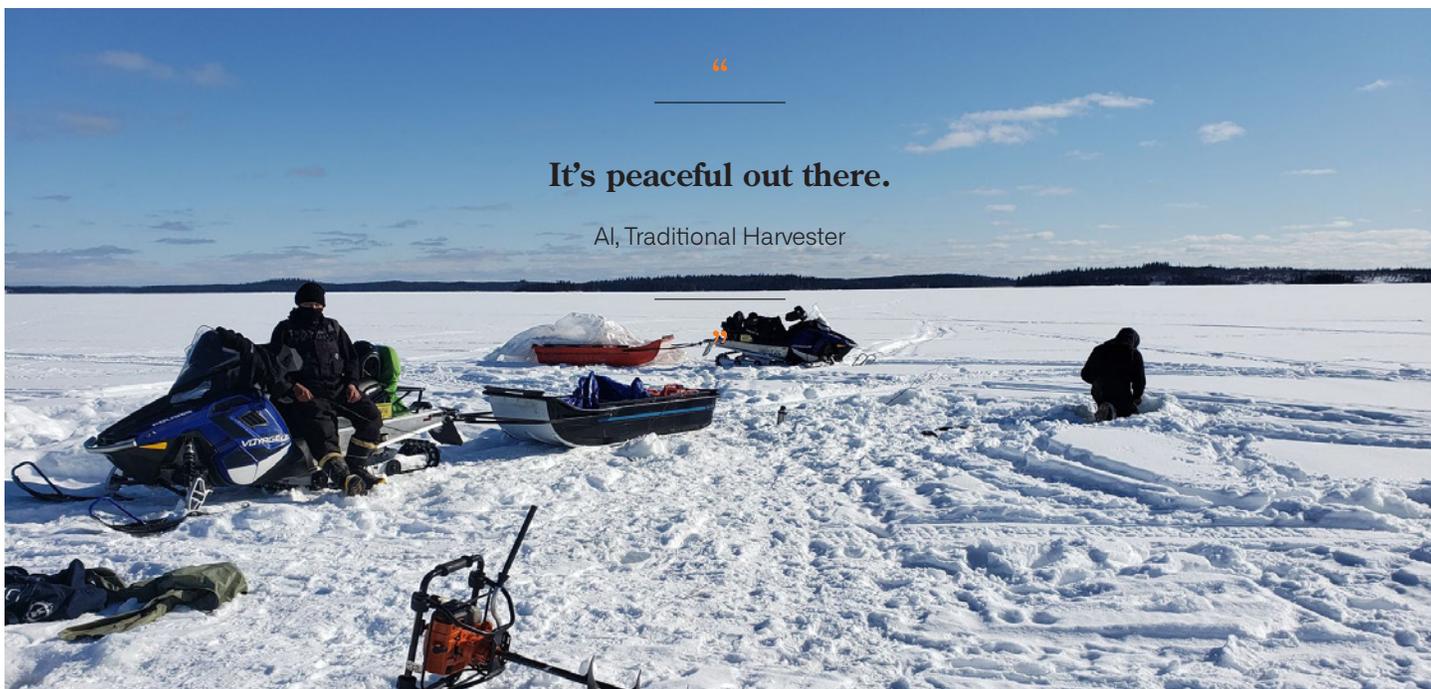
During the spring season, there are various activities in harvesting wild foods such as waterfowl. The gathering of waterfowl is plentiful where individuals and groups are out harvesting for themselves as well as providing for the program. The program provides in-kind support through equipment, supplies, and expenses for these individuals and groups. In April, we help NCN citizens with preparing their gardens.

The summer months are very idle in gathering wild foods, with the exception of wild berries and gardening. Berries are cleaned by the individuals when brought to the Distribution Centre. The cost of berry picking is determined by the total weight of the product and are then stored, ready for distribution. Fish is harvested all year with minimal harvest in the summer months.



TOP: Preparing for medicine harvest BOTTOM: A successful goose harvest

Fall & Winter Harvest



It's peaceful out there.

AI, Traditional Harvester

Traditional Harvesters with NCN citizens at Leftrook Lake

Moose hunting is done in the fall. If NCN citizens wish to go on a moose hunt, they are provided equipment, supplies, and transportation. With a successful harvest, the hunters provide the program with a portion of their harvest. Ideally, it is half of the harvest. The Distribution Centre is equipped with a meat cutter and refrigeration units.

During the winter season, the Country Foods Program staff, along with guides, go on caribou hunting trips north of the community. These are usually extremely successful in providing wild meats for the program. When processing larger animals such as moose, the Traditional Harvesters will quarter them and freeze them. Once frozen, a band saw is used to cut it into steaks and is then packaged in Styrofoam and plastic packaging.



Program staff processing caribou

Challenges



Processing equipment - band saw



Winter harvesting gear

The main challenge is funding. Our funding covers employment, fuel and supporting local harvesters to go out onto the land. It is difficult to run our program with limited funds. With more funding, we would hire more harvesters to provide food to the program. We have begun sourcing funding outside of our community to strengthen our program and keep our workers safe.

Another challenge is the upkeep of equipment. Some equipment needs to be replaced each year and there is a need for equipment upgrades and safety equipment. It is difficult for staff to be working in harsh and cold weather on rough terrain so there is a need to purchase new equipment and supplies. Staff safety is always a concern and eliminating the possibility

of accidents and breakdowns is key. If a NCN citizen requests to utilize any harvesting equipment, a Traditional Harvester staff will join them on their harvest.

We would like more youth to be involved in harvesting and relearning traditional ways of life but it is difficult to engage new youth. Some youth are interested and take part with their families but other youth will only come to events if they are required to for school. We would like to see more youth take part but for now we will continue to work and mentor those youth who are really interested and engaged. There are some youth and families who practice traditional ways. We would like to see more of this happen and we think that will continue to happen through the Country Foods Program.

Impacts



TOP: Program staff learning about beekeeping **BOTTOM: Promoting chicken coop livestock to the community**

The Country Foods Program is being revitalized with the purchases of new equipment. It's being talked about more by people in the community. The Elders love the program because they are able to access their traditional food even though they might not be able to go out on the land themselves. It is also an opportunity

for program staff to keep in contact with our elders, to check in on them, and to help in ways that they may need. Along with purchasing new equipment, our program goals are to promote the opportunity of beekeeping and chicken and hen coops in the community.

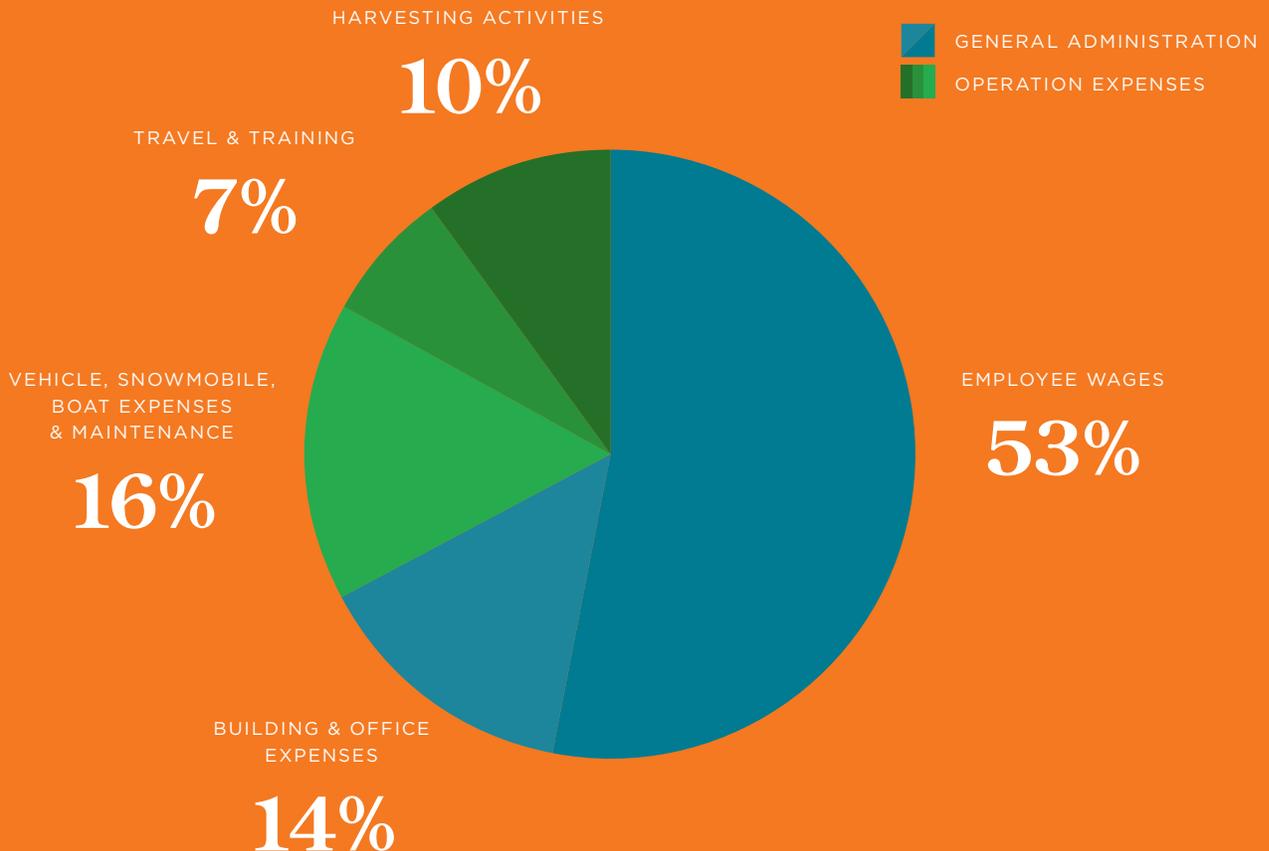
Summary Finances

The Country Foods Program Manager applies for funding each year through the Nisichawayasihk Trust.

Currently, **67% of funds are used for general administration (employee wages and building/office expenses)** and **33% of funds are used to run the operation (equipment expenses, travel & training, and harvesting activities expenses).**

2020 SNAPSHOT

GENERAL ADMINISTRATION & OPERATION EXPENSES



COUNTRY FOODS PROGRAM
NISICHAWAYASIIK CREE NATION

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