

As the very first food sovereignty assessment to be conducted amongst the Cowlitz people, this report has offered great insight into the food systems currently established within the Tribe. The assessment overall helped to recognize many of the strengths and assets already present, as well as identify some areas for improvement. The findings documented in this report have the potential to offer support in furthering the food sovereignty efforts within the Tribe.

Ultimately, these findings can help empower the Tribe to exercise their sovereign rights to control how they manage and distribute food to their people and to reclaim their traditional and cultural lifeways passed down from their ancestors.



COWLITZ INDIAN TRIBE

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY ASSESSMENT

COWLITZ INDIAN TRIBE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY ASSESSMENT 2022

This report was prepared in collaboration with the Cowlitz Indian Tribe Wellness and Diabetes Program and Urban Indian Health Institute.

Contributing Authors:

Rosalina James, PhD, Director of Evaluation and Research and Jennifer Herbert, MPH, Evaluator I, Urban Indian Health Institute

Alyssa Fine, RN, MSN, CDCES, CNL, Wellness & Diabetes Program Coordinator, Cowlitz Indian Tribe Health Clinic

Tanna Engdahl, Elder and Spiritual Leader, Cowlitz Indian Tribe





2022

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We hope this FSA helps to support and strengthen the Cowlitz Indian Tribe's current food system including reclaiming the traditional and cultural lifeways of their ancestors.



Food Sovereignty



“I’ve always felt like Native Americans were the original environmentalists. They were our original environmentalists... they live with the land and on the land and they didn’t destroy the land...they maintained, and they didn’t waste it...I just...I feel like we need to get back to that...”

– Cowlitz Elder

“For many tribal communities, the term sovereignty is used as a term that recognizes the right of Native peoples to retain their cultural identity and to acknowledge and reserve fundamental rights granted in treaties or other legal documents. Connected to this is the notion that Native people have the right to choose what they eat as individuals and as a cultural community. For many centuries, this right has not been honored and the foods we now dominantly consume were introduced through imposing a diet on our people. Food sovereignty is about unraveling that diet and decolonizing our food system from production to consumption. In many ways food sovereignty is a method that supports the revitalization of traditional land management practices and upholds cultural continuity.”¹

A food sovereignty assessment (FSA) has been defined as “a collaborative and participative process that systematically examines a range of community food assets to inform social and economic change and begin the process of strengthening a food system”.² Through the process of measuring and assessing food and land access, community resources and programs, and food policies, Native communities have the potential to reclaim and restore the relationship between the land and people that has been so deeply dismantled through colonization. Thus, we hope this FSA helps to support and strengthen the Cowlitz Indian Tribe’s current food system including reclaiming the traditional and cultural lifeways of their ancestors.

A Vision from Our Elders

“To me, [culture] is a connection to the past....I feel very connected to my ancestors because many generations are buried in a cemetery that’s just couple of miles from where my mom grew up, and all of her siblings are buried there: her dad, her mom, and the two generations before her mom...I will be buried there...Right there in the Columbia Gorge, where our ancestors are from.

And when I look up from that cemetery toward the Cascades, the mountains along the north side of the Columbia, those are exactly the hills where my mom was picking berries when she was a kid. Everything’s right there and connected.

...the younger generations aren’t realizing how important the cultural part is to our identity as Cowlitz...I was part of that fight to get us federally recognized and that if we didn’t have that [proven cultural component] we wouldn’t be recognized. It’s really important to preserve and to give our kids those experiences.”

-Cowlitz Elder



WHO WE ARE

The Cowlitz People

“They know what foods healed us, what foods we needed to make us work, to make us run. They knew the seasons and how it affected everything. They knew the patterns, the migratory patterns of [the] fish and animals and everything, and what affected them...We’ve lost a lot of the culture, and we’ve lost a lot of that knowledge that we need to get back and we need to maintain on how to live in harmony with the environment” – Cowlitz Elder

The legacy of an ancient people in southwest Washington is rich with descendants who manage a growing portfolio of health, education, scientific research, housing, transportation, development, Eldercare, conservation, and legal issues. The Cowlitz Tribe is a growing force in community building in what are now Clark, Cowlitz, Lewis, and parts of Pierce, King, Skamania, and Wahkiakum Counties, a vast territory occupied by numerous Cowlitz villages before non-Cowlitz exploration and seizure. Today, an elected Tribal Council is composed of an array of skilled individuals adept at managing multiple programs and projects.

Tribal members engage in a rich cultural practice of old Cowlitz lifeways such as the Smelt, Salmon, and River Ceremonies. They join other coastal tribes in Canoe Journeys on major waterways.

They drum and sing at ceremonies throughout the year and as called upon for funerals, naming ceremonies, healings, and celebrations. The Cowlitz Pow-Wow is one of the largest in southwest Washington. The Cowlitz Indian Tribe is a significant employer and contributor to local economies. Living without the cover of Federal status, tribal members overcame tremendous obstacles during millennium changes, holding firm to their remembered past as one of the largest and richest tribes in what is now Washington State. When the Federal Government recognized the tribe officially in 2000, the Tribe thought of it as a belated acknowledgment of a cohesive culture spanning centuries.

Following federal recognition in 2000, one of the Cowlitz Tribe’s earliest full-time services was an

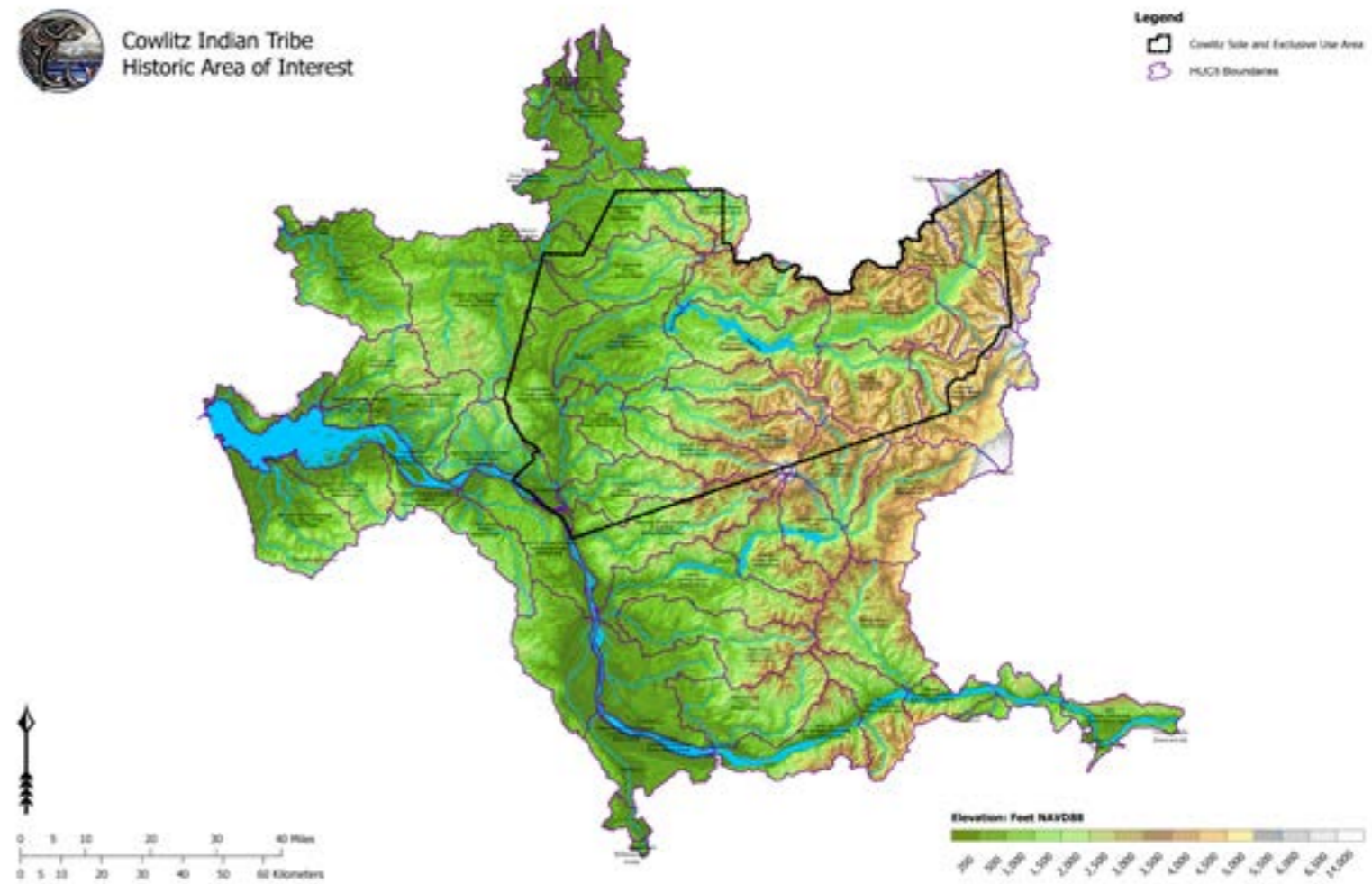
Elder Housing program at its St. Mary’s complex near Toledo, WA. The St. Mary’s school site was part of the Cowlitz Mission complex established by a Catholic order in the 1800s to bring Christianity to Native people of the early territory. It was purchased by the Cowlitz Tribe in 2009 in partnership with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

The Tribe converted the old school and dormitories into elder housing units and improved the kitchen area. Services have since been expanded to include various rental, mortgage, home repair, aging in place, and construction programs offered by HUD Native American Programs services. Cowlitz Tribe Health and Human Services now also runs a substantial garden and food distribution service at this site.

Another early development was a unique and sophisticated fish restoration program that has improved rivers and streams contributing to the Columbia River drainage systems.

Over time, Tribal employees leveraged a few grants into a multi-million-dollar operation that has successfully produced numerous domestic programs including an advanced mental health system covering at least seven counties in Western Washington. The Tribe built a modern health clinic in Longview and soon after added health services in Tukwila and Vancouver, WA. In 2021, the Tribe took over the Girl Scout Headquarters in Dupont, WA, and converted it into tribal health and human service offices that also include Veteran and Indian Child Welfare Services.

The Tribe continues to update and modernize its assets and portfolio and is known for its innovative and rapid economic development enterprises. Cowlitz populations in history lived in numerous villages in southwest Washington and were noted collectively as rich and powerful people. The trend prevails.



Fish Distribution



The Cowlitz Tribe's Fish Distribution Program (FDP) is managed by the Natural Resources Department (NRD) and was established in 2003. The program provides salmon and steelhead to tribal members, connecting tribal membership to their cultural and traditional first foods.

Initially, FDP only distributed whole, fresh fish to members, but in 2018, NRD enhanced the program by partnering with the Senior Nutrition Program and offering frozen filleted fish for distribution to Cowlitz Tribal Elders who might not otherwise have access.

Surplus fish are received from several Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife hatcheries located on the Lewis, Kalama, Elochoman, Cowlitz, and Washougal Rivers. Fish are then picked up by NRD staff and distributed to Cowlitz members at tribal offices and produce distribution sites. In 2020, FDP distributed over 5,700 fish to roughly 556 tribal members.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, FDP

made the frozen fillet program available to all Cowlitz tribal members. Included in this response was the shipping of frozen fillets to tribal members who resided in areas beyond the current established distribution area. As a result, in partnership with the Elders Nutrition Program and the Community Wellness Garden, FDP distributed 6,085 frozen fillets to 556 Cowlitz tribal members and shipped 550 fillets to 50 tribal members across the U.S., including Florida, Indiana, Missouri, and Colorado.

All Cowlitz tribal members are eligible to receive fresh or frozen fillets through the program. To learn more, interested individuals can email fishdistribution@cowlitz.org for more information.



Community Wellness Garden

The Cowlitz Tribe's Community Wellness Garden is managed by the Wellness and Diabetes Program and is located at the Tribe's Elders Housing site in Toledo, WA. The program aims to increase access to healthy and traditional foods through direct distribution, education, environmental and systems improvements, and partnerships.

While initially focused on combating food insecurity within the tribal community, the work of the Community Wellness Garden has since expanded to include broadly supporting tribal food sovereignty efforts.

The Community Wellness Garden's first growing season was in 2019 and, with about 10,000 square feet of growing space, it was able to provide produce to approximately 50 individuals at two distribution sites. Since then, the Garden has more than doubled its in-ground production space; added a 30x70 foot high tunnel to extend the growing season; and constructed a pole barn for dedicated cold storage, composting, and equipment housing. Most recently, over 7,000 pounds of produce were harvested and distributed to over 500 individuals at eight different distribution sites.

In addition to distributing produce to households, the Community Wellness Garden provides a significant amount of produce for the Senior Nutrition Program to use in meals as well.

The Garden also provides the following programs and services:

- Distribution of Doorstep Gardens to households to grow their own food at home. Kits include soil, pots, seeds, starts, and instructions
- Annual youth internship program for roughly eight youth each summer
- Distribution of recipe kits that contain all the ingredients needed to make a healthy dish and are often accompanied by video demonstrations
- Live and virtual education classes on a variety of topics, such as food preservation, cooking, and gardening
- Garden events such as an annual Harvest Festival and youth summer camp activities
- Propagation of traditional foods on tribal lands
- Volunteer opportunities for community members

The Garden boasts eight raised beds elevated with

benches to allow easy access for Elders and individuals with mobility limitations. A native plant nature walk is also currently under construction and will provide a 700-foot-long space for community members to engage with and to learn more about culturally relevant species. To support and respect the relationship with the land, Garden staff utilize organic and sustainable practices, including no-till gardening, drip irrigation, dry farming, and composting.

In their efforts to best serve the tribal community and promote food sovereignty, the Community Wellness Garden maintains partnerships with several internal and external stakeholders, such as:

- **Natural Resource Department:** Garden development and expansion, traditional foods (e.g., camas root, wapato) propagation, joint programs and activities, mutual support for food distribution efforts
- **Senior Nutrition Program:** Utilization of garden produce in Elders' meals, joint programs, and activities, mutual support for food distribution efforts
- **Medical Clinic:** Patient referrals to garden programs, funding support
- **WSU-Extension 4-H Program:** Access to community garden space for Cowlitz tribal members and clients
- **Lower Columbia School Gardens:** Joint education efforts, sharing resources, developing spaces for native plants and traditional foods at school gardens and within school garden curriculums

Garden produce is available to all Cowlitz tribal members, Native Elders, and anyone who utilizes Cowlitz Tribal Services and is experiencing food insecurity. For more information or to register, email garden@cowlitz.org.



Cultural and Traditional Practices

Cowlitz tribal members and staff work together to offer access to several traditional food items through structured opportunities throughout the year.

The following annual events capture some of the occasions where tribal members can access cultural and traditional food items:

- Wapato harvesting in the late fall
- Ceremonial smelt dip in the late winter/early spring
- Camas digging and preparation in the earth oven in spring
- Elders fishing trip in fall and late summer
- Salmon ceremony beginning of summer
- Huckleberry camp in the late summer

Many of these events are planned jointly by Cowlitz tribal members, the Cultural Resources Department, and the Natural Resources Department. They are open to all Cowlitz tribal members who wish to participate.



Survey Results

DEMOGRAPHICS

Overall, 525 people responded to the FSA survey. All the respondents were 18 years of age or older, and the largest age group to respond was 60 years or older (see Figure 2). The margin of error for the survey results is +/- 4%.

TRIBAL AFFILIATION

Approximately 87% of respondents identified themselves as being a Cowlitz tribal member or descendant. Of those who responded that they were not a Cowlitz tribal member or descendant, 85% identified as being a tribal member or descendant of a tribe other than Cowlitz and reported using Cowlitz Tribal Services. The remaining identified as being a non-tribal member or descendant and using Cowlitz Tribal Services.



LOCATION

The majority of respondents lived in Washington, Oregon, or California; however, a total of 27 different states were represented in the survey from across the U.S as well as residents of Mexico (see Figure 3).

GENDER

Sixty-five percent of respondents self-identified as female whereas 32% self-identified as male. The rest of the respondents reported their gender as transgender, gender non-conforming, two-spirit, other, or preferred/refused to answer.

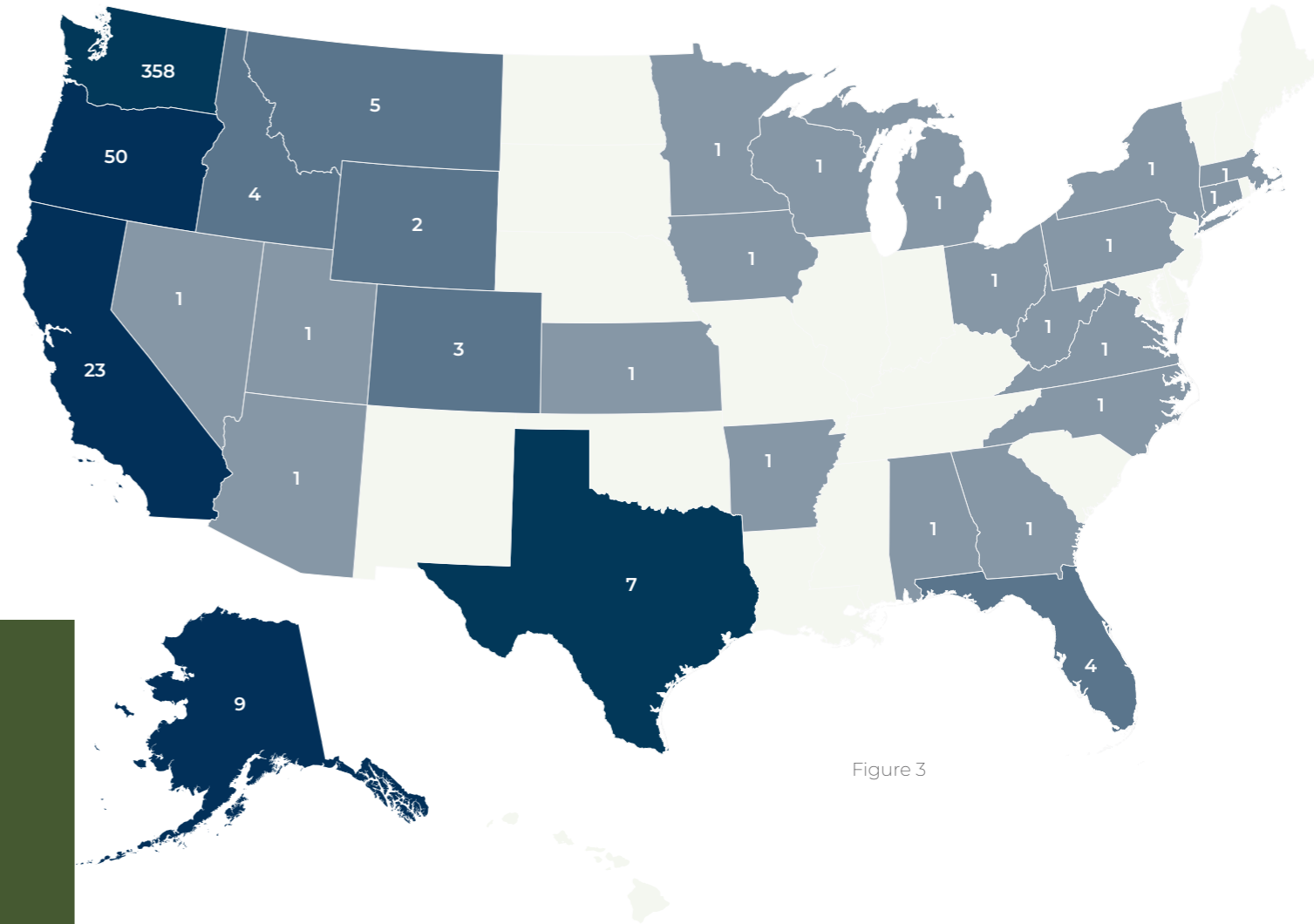


Figure 3

Elder Spotlight

Age 60 or Older

Elders were defined as any adult 60 years of age and older. They were one of the largest age groups to respond to the survey with 172 respondents. Approximately 87% identified as being a Cowlitz tribal member or descendant. Many Elders (65%) reported living in households with 2-3 other people (i.e., spouse/partner, child/children, grandchild/grandchildren), including themselves.

Age of Respondents

Figure 2

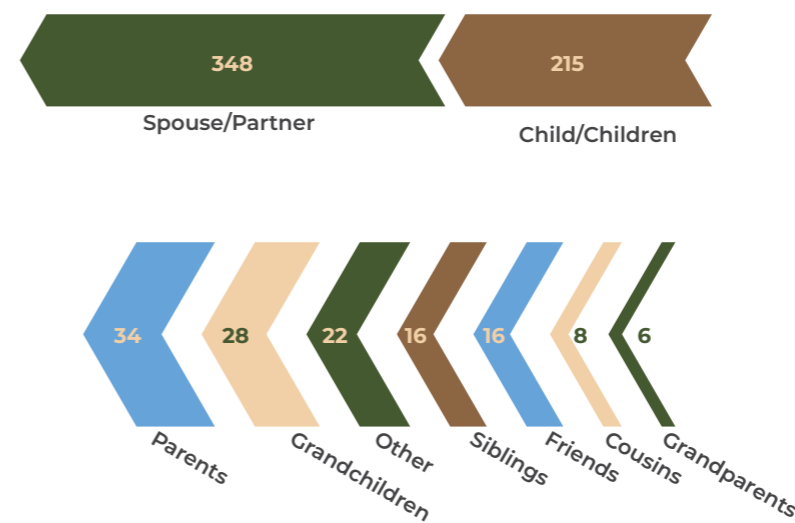
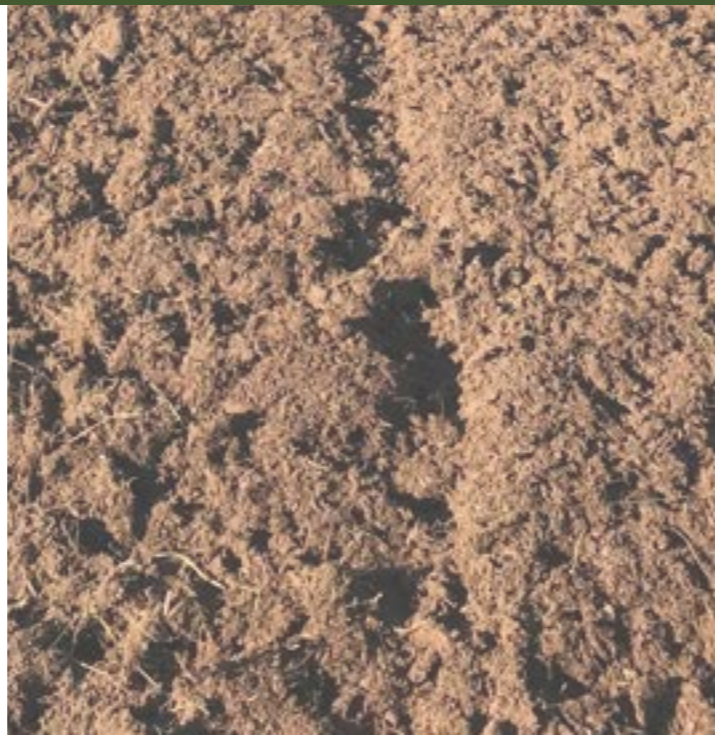
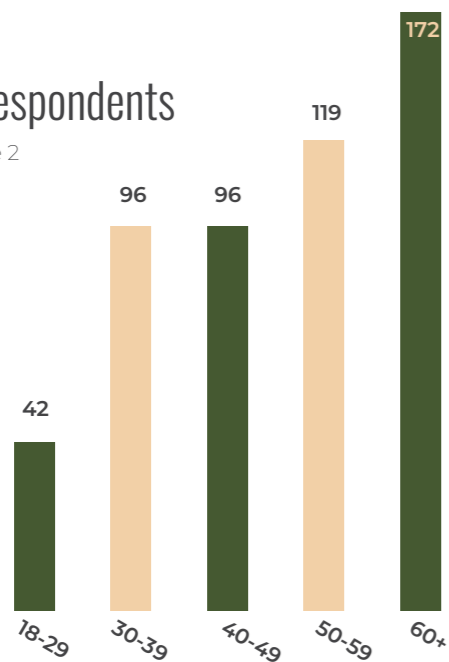


Figure 4

MEMBERS IN HOUSEHOLD

Most respondents lived in households with other people, with 55% reporting households of 2-3 individuals, including themselves. Those who lived with four or more people (29%) far outnumbered those living alone (16%). Of those who lived with other people in their household, many reported living with their spouse/partner (82%) and/or their child/children (51%). Others reported living with other family and friends as shown in Figure 4.



Survey Results

FOOD ACCESS, RESOURCES AND ASSISTANCE

A series of questions were asked to assess food accessibility, resources, and assistance among respondents. When they were asked how easy is it to get to their grocery shopping destination, many reported that it was either very easy or fairly easy. However, 10% of respondents found it somewhat, fairly, or very difficult to get to their shopping destination (see Figure 5). Respondents who reported some level of difficulty accessing their shopping destination cited distance, lack of transportation, current medical conditions and/or physical disabilities, high costs of local grocers, and time as several of the main reasons why it is difficult for them to get to their grocery shopping destination.

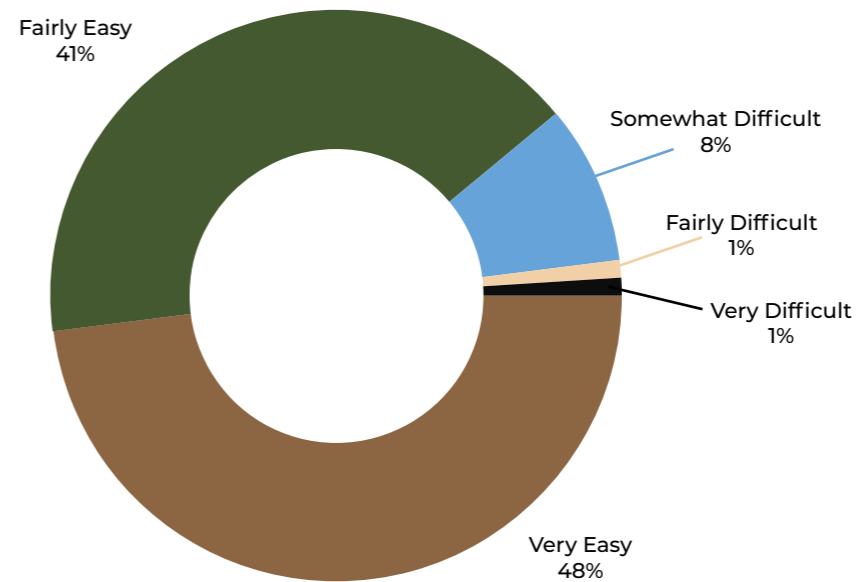


Figure 5

How easy is it to get to your grocery shopping destination?

What They are Saying

"...the closest grocery store is 25 minutes away. We do have a car, but we can't just go to the store for every little thing. We also live outside any grocery delivery."

"The one we like to shop at is 40 miles away. Local grocers are prohibitively expensive"

"It takes 10 miles to get to the closest store during the day. At night the closest store is 22 miles away."

"We focus on the kids eating the healthy food like fresh fruit. We usually only have enough for the kids to have fresh fruit. Also food budget is around making meals, outside of our 3 meals daily, we don't have snack food, we wait until meals to eat."

"Bills get paid first. Food is what's left over."

"My children are growing faster than I can keep food in the house. We don't have enough money at times after bills between paychecks to purchase more and end up eating pretty poorly because we only have pantry items."

"Everything is getting expensive, and food stamps only go so far"

"Food is costly here. Although I work 3 jobs, sometimes there just isn't enough."

Moreover, most respondents reported shopping for groceries a few times a week (32%), weekly (41%), or a few times a month (21%), and mainly paid via cash, check, debit card, or credit card. Almost one-fifth of respondents reported using food stamps, vouchers, electronic benefits transfer (EBT) cards, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) cards, or food bank donations.

Almost a third of respondents indicated that they sometimes feel they do not have enough food. Of that group, about 91% said they feel that way "sometimes"

or "once in a while," while the remaining 9% said they feel that way "all the time" (see Figure 6). Reasons provided by respondents for not having sufficient access to food included finances, lack of transportation, and the high costs of food at the grocery store. One respondent wrote, "I don't make enough to pay bills and get food for the house." Another respondent wrote they "don't have enough money or resources to get enough food for [their] children." In addition, 31% of respondents reported they often or sometimes rely on food from family members or friends.

Do you ever feel like you do NOT have enough food?

30%

DO NOT HAVE ENOUGH FOOD



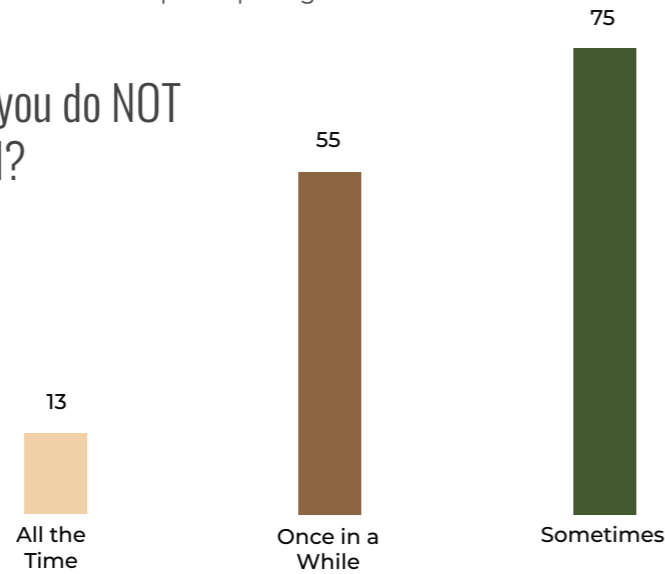
Survey Results

FOOD ACCESS, RESOURCES AND ASSISTANCE CONT.

When asked about participation in food assistance programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or food stamps and WIC, most reported “no” whereas about a quarter reported “yes”. Of the respondents who said “yes”, most of them participated in SNAP or food stamps, National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and WIC. Many reported that the reason they participated in many of these food assistance programs in the past year was due to unusual expenses, running out of food stamps, a recent job loss, and/or continued unemployment (see Figure 7). Respondents who chose not to participate in any food assistance programs reported that they did not need it or that they did not think they qualified. Others reported embarrassment and the distance as some other reasons for not participating.

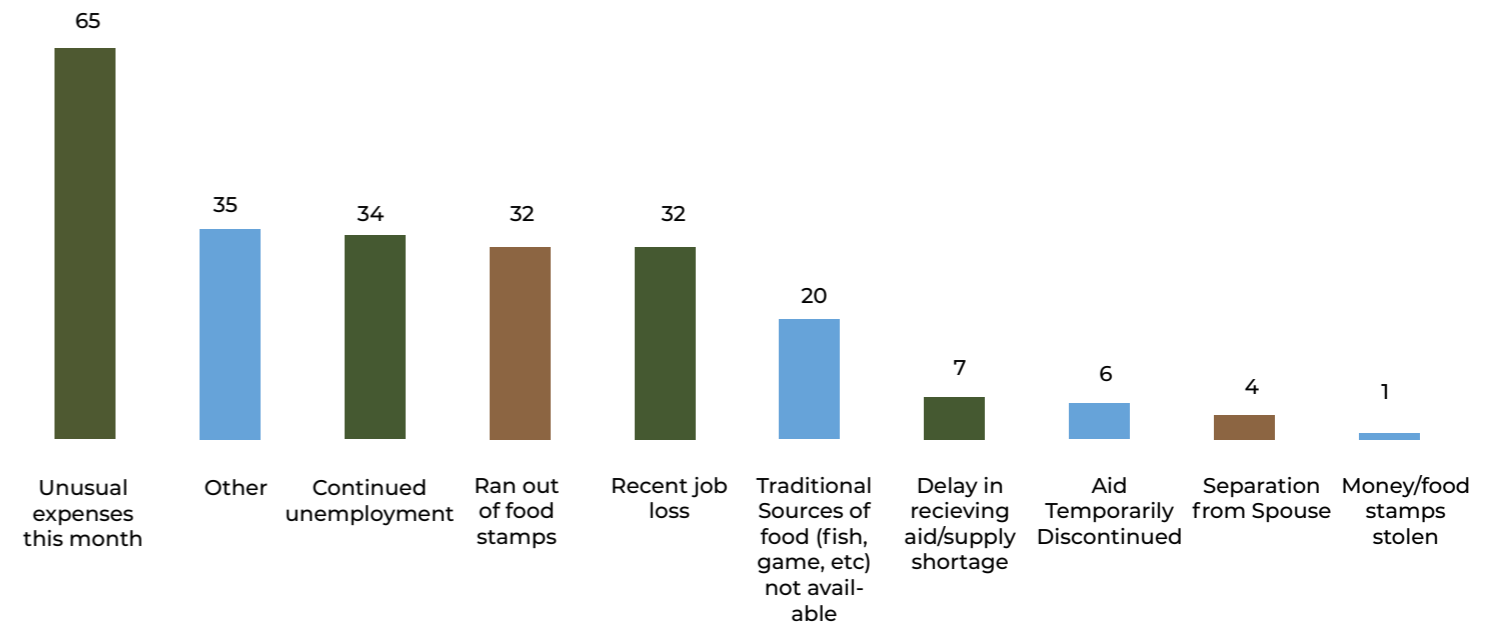
How often do you feel like you do NOT have enough food?

Figure 6



Reasons for Using Food Assistance in the Past Year

Figure 7



Elder Spotlight

Many Elders reported that it was either very easy or fairly easy for them to get to their grocery shopping destination. Some Elders who reported that it was somewhat or fairly difficult to get to their destination revealed that it was due to certain challenges and barriers, including the lack of transportation, physical mobility challenges, lack of childcare, and distance to travel.

In addition, when asked if they ever feel like they do not have enough food, just over 17% reported “yes.” All of them reported feeling this way sometimes or once in a while. Cost of food, money and/or budgeting, transportation-associated costs, lack of transportation, and distance were all reasons they gave for feeling like they did not have enough food. Also, approximately 28% of Elders reported sometimes receiving or relying on food from other family members or friends.

“I DON’T THINK I CAN AFFORD MEAT AND VEGETABLES AS OFTEN AS I SHOULD.”

Most Elders reported that they did not participate in any federal or community food assistance programs, such as SNAP or food stamps, in the last year because they did not need it. Those who participated in any food assistance programs in the past year (17%) mainly used SNAP or food stamps, commodities programs (i.e., Food Distribution on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)), or the Cowlitz Senior Nutrition Program. Elders reported using one of the programs due to unusual expenses this month, unavailability of traditional sources of food (fish, game, etc.), low income, and/or job reduction.

“THE EXPENSE OF HEALTHY FOOD IS A BARRIER.”



Health

Respondents were asked several questions to assess their current health status, physical activity levels, food and eating habits, and other health-related questions. When respondents were asked to rate their health, many reported their health as being “very good” (42%) or “fair” (43%) compared to being “excellent” (10%) or “poor” (5%). In addition, when respondents were asked to check which health conditions apply to them, many reported obesity/overweight and high blood pressure as shown in Figure 8. Respondents who selected “other” described having health conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, osteoporosis, fibromyalgia, and thyroid disorders.

About one-third of respondents reported participating in physical exercise or movement activities 1-2 times per week, although many indicated being active 3-4 times a week (28%) and 5 or more times a week (22%). Furthermore, to help gauge current perceptions and knowledge about health and wellbeing, respondents were asked, “what does it mean to be healthy?”. Many respondents primarily described it as eating a balanced meal that includes more vegetables and fruits and limiting the intake of red meat and processed foods. Respondents also mentioned that it means eating home-cooked meals rather than frozen or fast foods.

Health Conditions

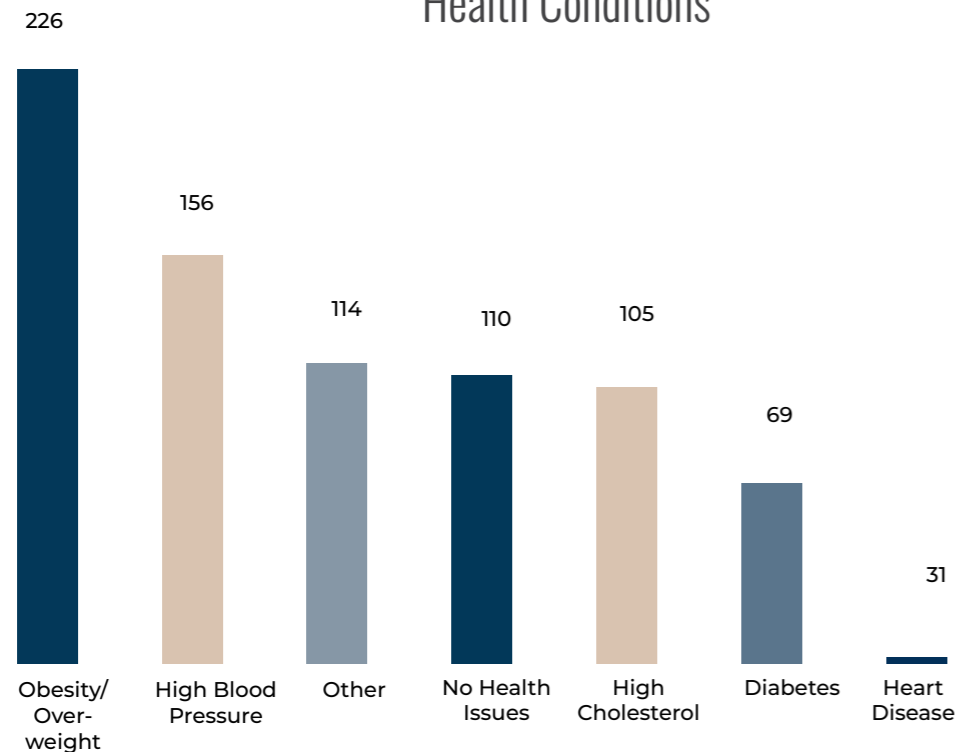


Figure 8

“TO EAT A WELL BALANCED DIET. IT CERTAINLY DOESN'T NEED TO BE PERFECT.

But a good breakfast to start the day, snacks between meals, fruits, veggies, and meat. I think it's important to avoid high processed food as well. I also think it's important to watch sodium intake.”



WHAT PEOPLE EAT

Water and coffee were the most consumed beverages on a daily basis. Respondents reported that tea (any kind), juice, alcohol, smoothies, milk, and regular soda/soft drinks were consumed only sometimes. The least frequently consumed beverages included powdered drinks (e.g., Kool-Aid), energy drinks/shots, vitamin powder (e.g., Emergen-C), diet soda/soft drinks, and protein shakes/powder/

Seventy-one percent of respondents wish they had more access to fresh

produce. Some challenges that impact access included high costs, time, distance, availability, and poor quality of produce available. Interestingly, many reported eating fruit only 1-2 times a week (40%), however, 36% of respondents reported eating vegetables daily. Also, 60% of respondents reported eating out at restaurants or getting takeout 1-2 times a week. Most respondents reported having good access to helpful information on diet and nutrition.

Health

Approximately 38% of respondents reported growing their own produce, such as tomatoes, cucumbers, herbs (e.g., basil, mint, rosemary, cilantro), onions, peas, beans, lettuce, peppers, and winter and summer squash. In addition, three-quarters of respondents indicated they were interested in growing their own food. For those who reported no interest in growing their own food, they disclosed that it was due to limited space, lack of time, little to no energy, and/or physical disabilities.

Lastly, 38% of respondents indicated they had received meals or food items from the Senior Nutrition Program, Fish Distribution Program, or Community Wellness Garden. Respondents who reported participating

in any of these programs indicated that the first time they participated was as far back as 10-15 years ago and as recently as summer 2021. Furthermore, when they were asked if they currently received fresh produce from the Community Wellness Program, only 9% reported “yes” whereas a large percentage (64%) said “no”. Interestingly, 10% said they were not sure if they were eligible and 17% were not aware of the program. Similarly, when respondents were asked if they currently receive fish from the Fish Distribution Program, only 19% said “yes.” Eleven percent said they were not sure if they were eligible and 10% were not aware of the program (see Figure 10).

“FRESH, LOCAL VEGETABLES AND MEATS, SOME FRUIT. LOTS OF GATHERED AND CAUGHT FOOD. MADE AT HOME. SINGLE SOURCE. NO PRESERVATIVES. FRESH DAIRY, EGGS”

HEALTHY EATING

About 39% of respondents were asked if they feel like they are eating healthy and many reported that they were for the most part. Only a small number of respondents said they were not sure if they were eating healthy (see Figure 9). When respondents were asked if they were satisfied with their current diet and/or eating habits, 34% said “yes”, 28% said “no”, and 38% (188) said “sometimes”.

Do You Feel You Are Eating Healthy?

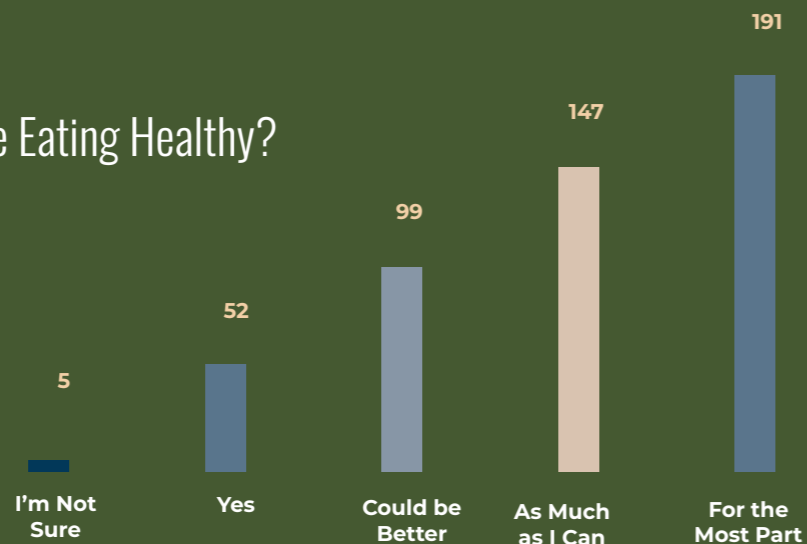


Figure 9

70%

OF RESPONDENTS WISH THEY HAD MORE ACCESS TO FRESH PRODUCE

Individuals were asked “Do you wish you had more access to fresh produce?” 348 people (70.59%) responded yes while 145 (29.41%) responded no.



Elder Spotlight on Health



12% OF ELDERS ACCESS GARDEN DISTRIBUTION

In addition, only 12% of Elders said they currently receive fresh produce from the Garden Distribution Program and only 21% said they currently receive fish from the Fish Distribution Program (see Figure 13A).

ELDERS AND HEALTH

Although most Elders rated their health as very good or fair, 63% reported that they wish they had more access to fresh produce. Some of the Elders reported that costs, distance or location of grocery store, availability, and poor food quality from grocery stores were some of the greatest challenges they faced when trying to access fresh produce.

About 33% of Elders grow their own produce and herbs, while the majority do not. However, 62% reported that they were interested in growing their own food. Those who were not interested in growing their own food indicated that insufficient space, lack of time and energy, physical disabilities, and their housing arrangements (e.g. living in an apartment) were some of the barriers preventing them from growing their own food.

1 in 2 ELDERS NEVER RECIEVE FOOD ASSISTANCE

Approximately half of the Elders reported that they have never received meals or food items from the Senior Nutrition Program, Fish Distribution Program, or the Community Wellness Garden.



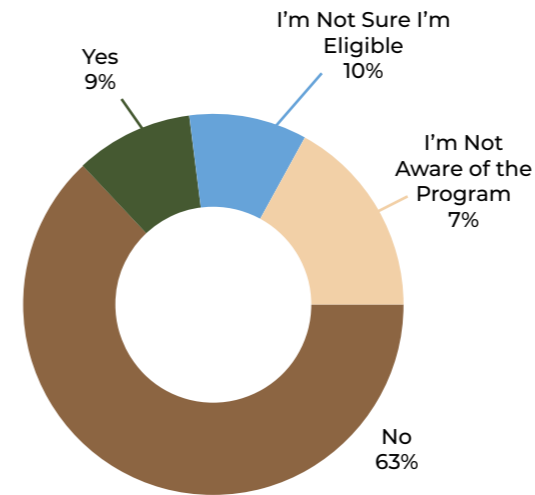
Current Participation in Cowlitz Distribution Programs

Participants were asked if they participated in or were aware of both the Garden Distribution Program and the Fish Distribution Program. The responses revealed that an overwhelming amount of survey respondents did not participate in either program. Generally, participation in the Fish Distribution Program was higher than Garden Distribution. Interestingly, Elder participation in the Fish Distribution Program was the highest at 21%.

Garden Distribution

Fish Distribution

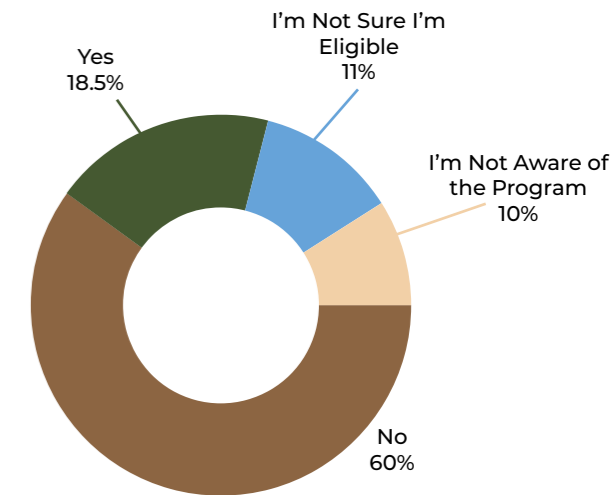
GENERAL



Garden Distribution

Fig. 10 A

Do you currently receive fresh produce from the Cowlitz Garden Distribution Program?

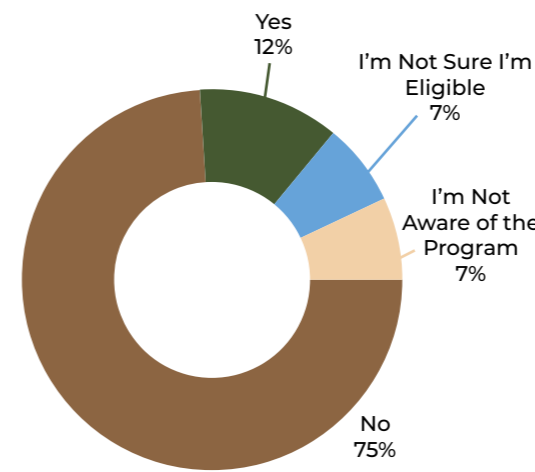


Fish Distribution

Fig. 10 B

Do you currently receive fish from the Cowlitz Fish Distribution Program?

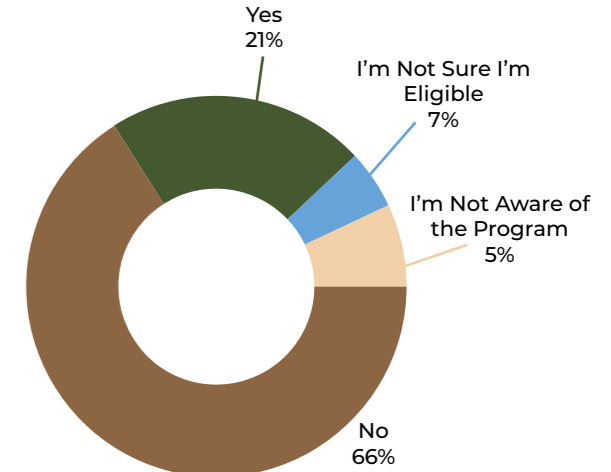
ELDER



Elder Garden Distribution

Fig. 11 A

Do you currently receive fresh produce from the Cowlitz Garden Program?



Elder Fish Distribution

Fig. 11 B

Do you currently receive fish from the Cowlitz Fish Distribution Program?



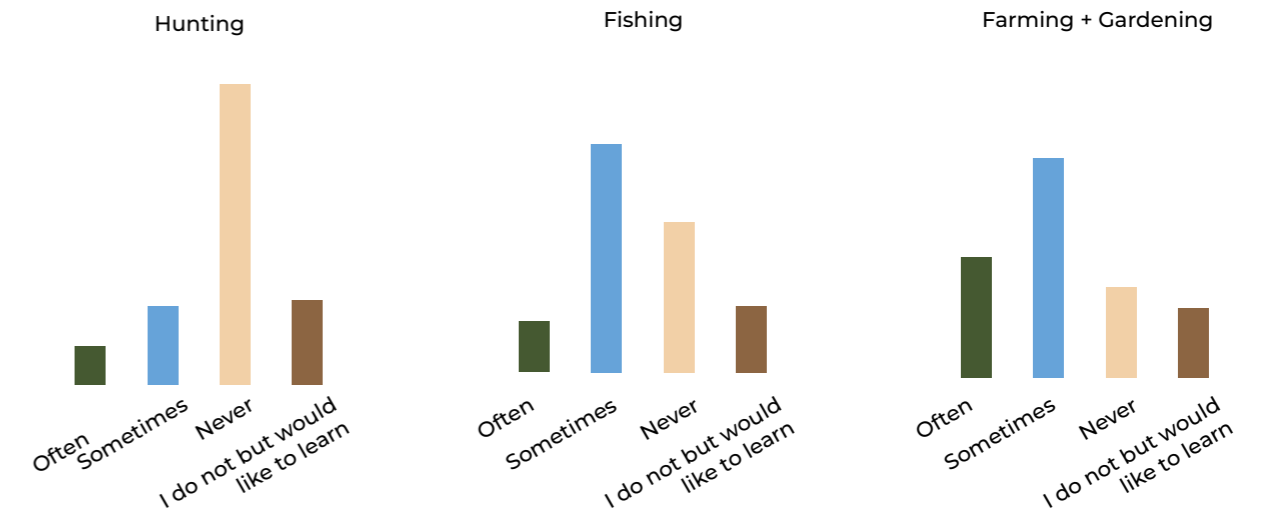
PARTICIPATION IN CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL ACTIVITIES

FIGURE 12

SURVEY RESULTS

Traditional Plants and Foods

Considering the current food system and food sovereignty status of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, several questions were asked to assess the perspectives and knowledge about traditional foods, plants, and medicines. When a series of questions were posed about traditional foods and plants, many responded that they were familiar with several of the common berry varieties that are present in the region, such as salmonberries, huckleberries, blackberries, and raspberries, but many were unfamiliar with some of the others including salal berries and elderberries. Respondents were also more familiar with salmon, smelt, and sturgeon as traditional foods, yet they were less familiar with waterfowl, camas root, nettle, and wapato. Salal berries, camas root, and wapato were among the three main traditional foods and plants that many reported they did not know about and did not know how to gather, harvest, or prepare (see Figure 13).

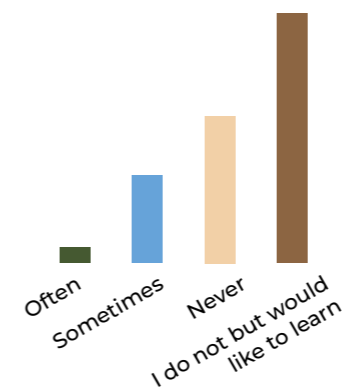


“[My grandmother and her kids] went to the mountains every day in the summer... and picked whatever berries were there, in season, the rotation of berries through the season. And [my mother] told me that once a month, they canned 200 quarts of blackberries, so that was very substantial winter food for them.” – Cowlitz Elder



“[My grandparents] would go to the mountains and pick berries [with my older sisters and they] camped in a traditional Indian area in the Mt. Adams huckleberry fields, camped for up to a couple weeks and harvested berries and processed them there. They canned them there. They took a wood stove in their truck to the berry fields and canned berries so that was in the 40s...without realizing it, to us it was just the way of life...” – Cowlitz Elder

Preseving Cultural and Traditional Foods and Medicines



Traditional Food Familiarity, Awareness, and Knowledge of Preparation and Harvesting

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Figure 13

“...our main diets were salmon, smelt, deer, elk, huckleberry, camas, wapato, and then all of the other little things, the little berries and the roots...
And so what we have really lost in our culture is the history of the roots”

Traditional Plants and Foods

Many respondents (41%) indicated that they sometimes use traditional foods and plants, whereas 29% said they never do. Two-thirds of respondents reported that they do not eat traditional foods and plants as often as they would like. Reasons for this under-consumption included lacking knowledge on gathering and preparation practices and lacking access to the places where the foods are (see Figure 14). Respondents recommended that having more access to educational materials (e.g., videos, maps) and hosting more classes or workshops both in-person and online would be some ways to improve access to traditional foods and plants (see Figure 15). Currently, only a small number of respondents participate in classes, activities, or programs offered by the Community Wellness Garden. Most respondents would like to have access to both in-person and virtual trainings or workshops that focus on plant identification and gathering, gardening, cooking, and food preservation.



ELDER SPOTLIGHT

"I would like to see more gathering of traditional foods...because it's healing for me both spiritually and physically to go do those things, you know, like our ancestors used to do and I wish we had our fishing and hunting rights so we could do those sorts of things as a group too...It helps to get us back to our roots...it just gives you a good feeling to be able to do the things that our ancestors used to do and to have somebody, you know, show you what our ancestors used to do and to be part of that...it's a good feeling and like I say I've went with other people and it always brings people together and gives you kind of a community feeling and a way to get closer to your people."

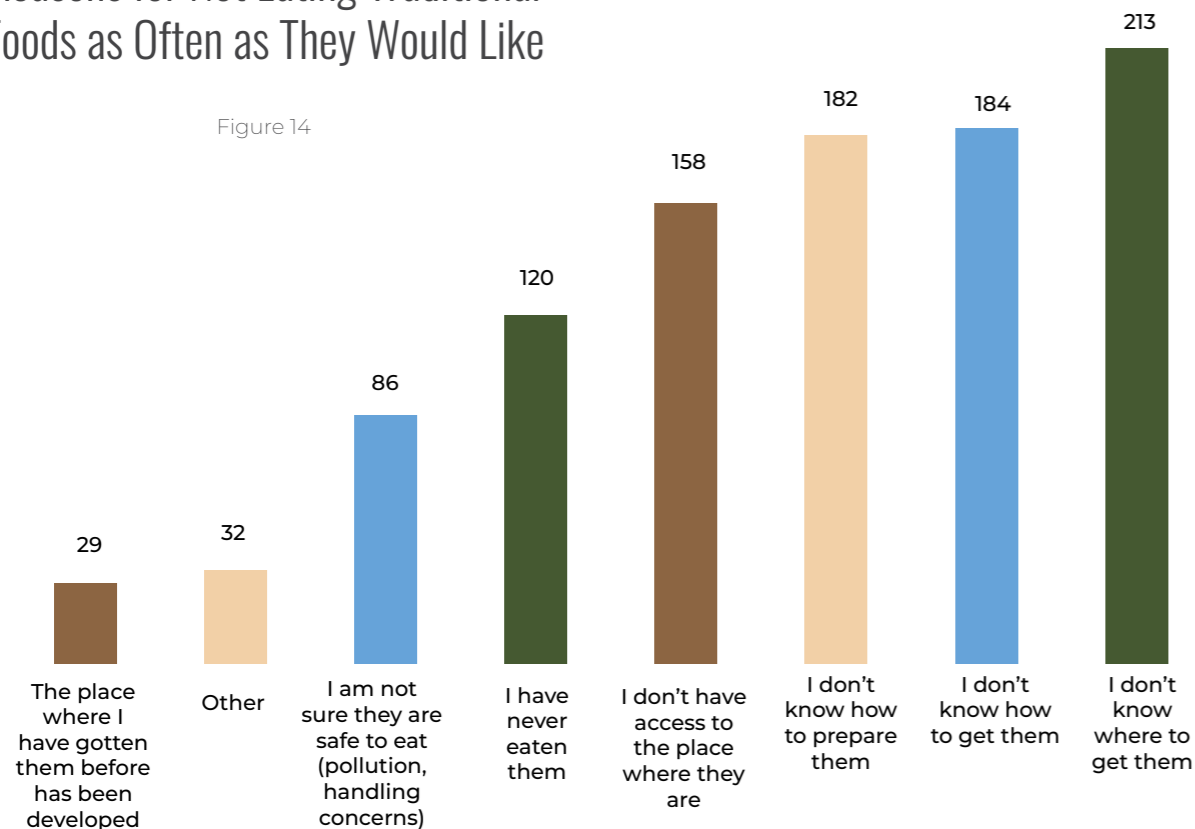
- Cowlitz Elder

ELDERS AND TRADITIONAL FOODS

When Elders were asked if they use traditional foods and medicines, 43% said "sometimes", 32% said "never", 18% said "I don't know", and 8% said "often". When asked if they eat traditional foods and medicines as often as they would like, 60% of Elders said "no." Of those who reported "no", most Elders indicated that they did not know where or how to get them, did not have access to the place where they are, or did not know how to prepare them. And over 80% of Elders reported that they have not participated in any classes, program, or activities offered by the Community Wellness Garden (see Figure 13). However, Elders reported that they would be interested in the following types of trainings or workshops: plant identification/gathering, nutrition classes, cooking classes, gardening classes, and food preservation.

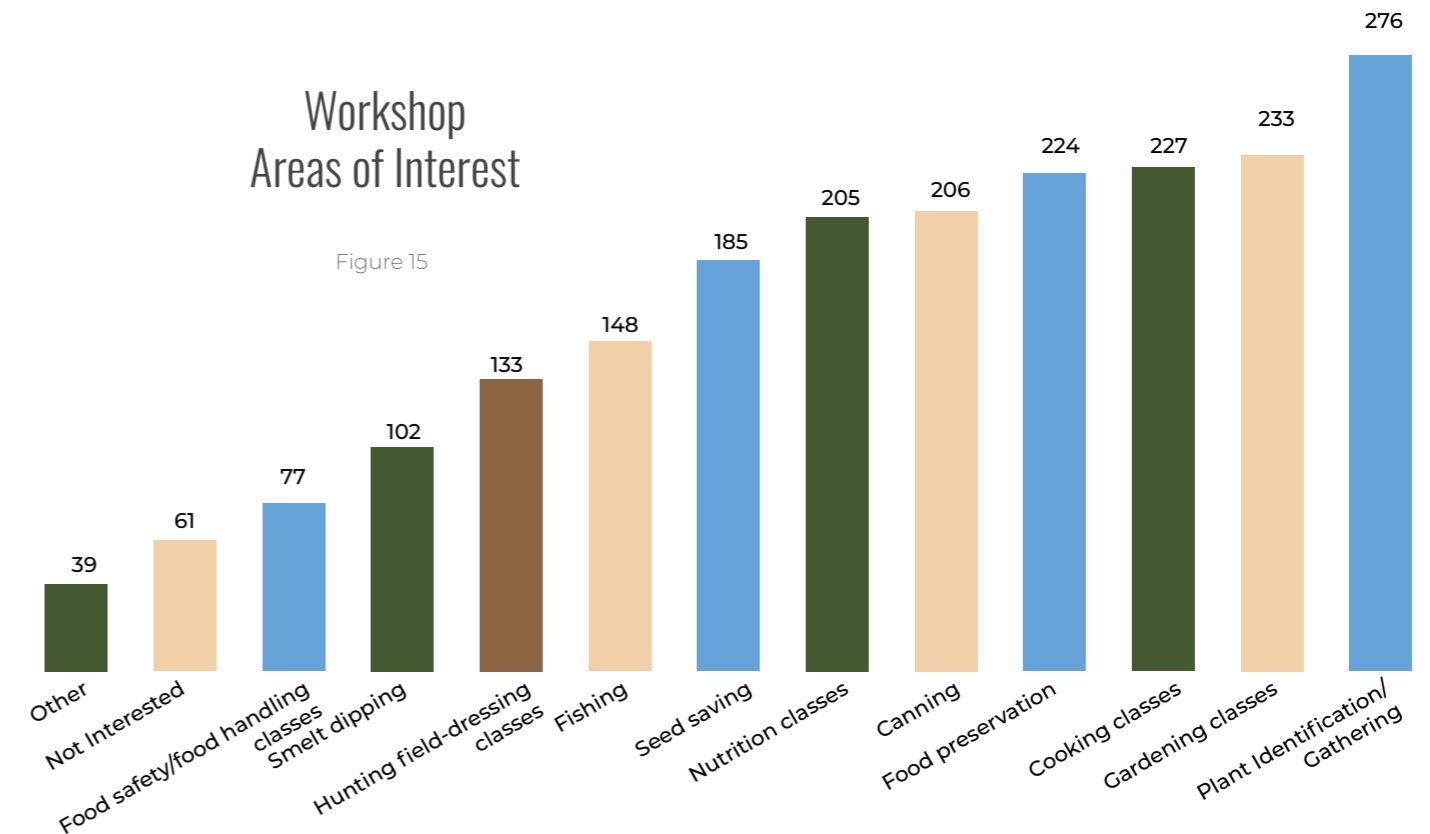
Reasons for Not Eating Traditional Foods as Often as They Would Like

Figure 14



Workshop Areas of Interest

Figure 15



Fish Distribution Pathway



Participants were presented with an image, as shown in Figure 16, describing the Fish Distribution System and after reviewing the diagram, 58% of respondents reported being unaware of the distribution pathway and 60% would like to learn more about the pathway (Figure 17).

Many respondents indicated that they were not surprised by any of the steps in the fish distribution pathway. However, others mentioned they were surprised by the complexity of the pathway and the steps involved, such as the role of the fish hatcheries. One respondent wrote, "I thought they were just locally caught by Cowlitz and distributed. Did not know of the many steps." Another respondent reported that they were surprised "that the fish were raised in a fish hatchery and that the fish were processed by the Natural Resources Dept." Additionally, some respondents were surprised to

know that fish was available to be shipped out of state. When respondents were asked what the distribution pathway means to them, many commented on the preservation of culture and the good work Cowlitz is doing for their people. One respondent wrote that "the tribe is very involved with taking care of members and preserving our way of life" and another respondent wrote, "I'm proud to see how the tribe is involved in feeding, teaching, and helping other tribe members."

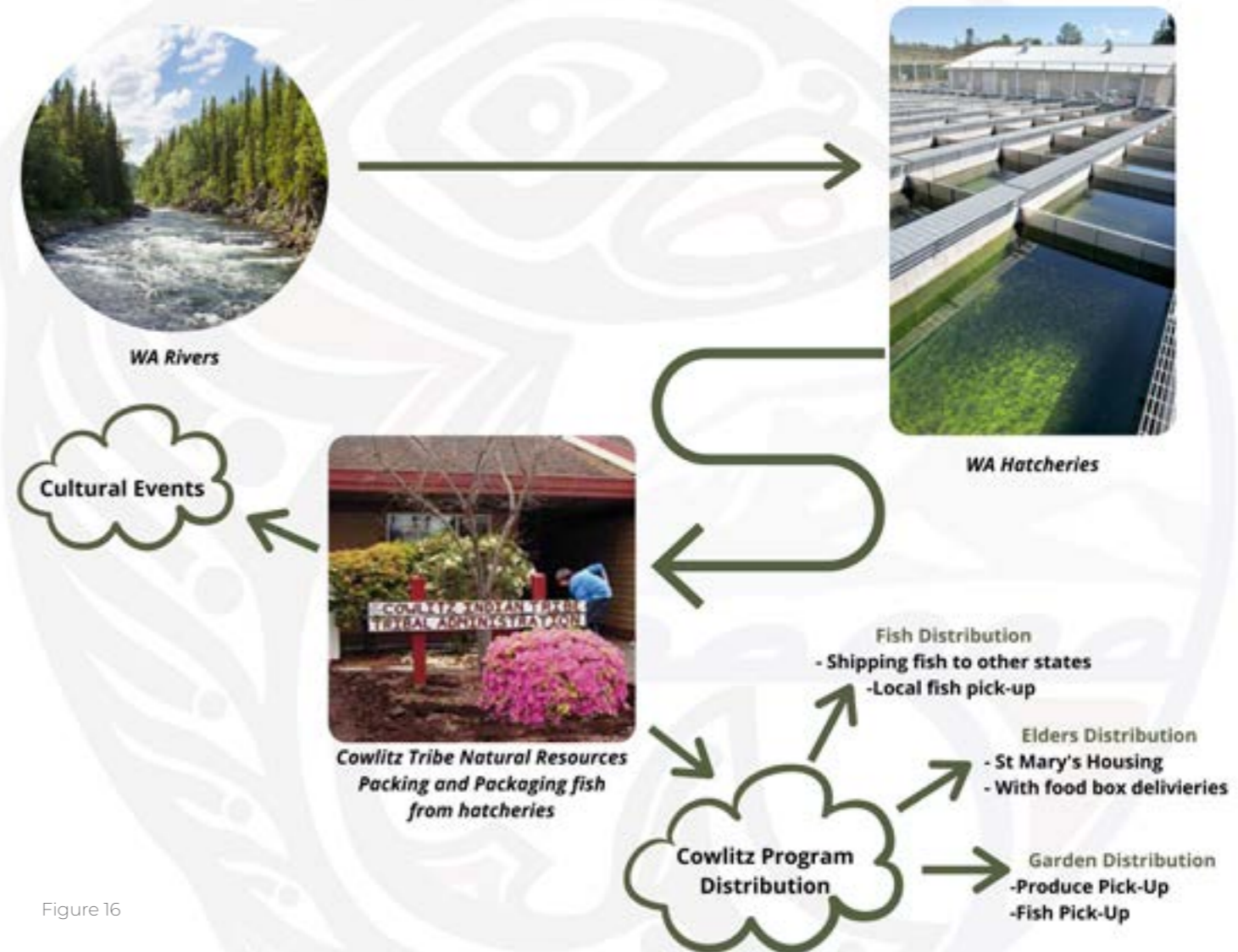
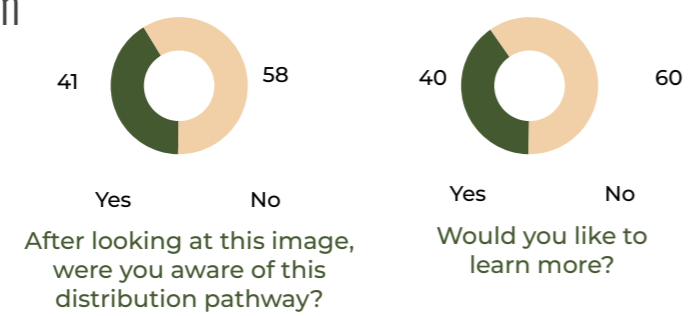


Figure 16

"I DIDN'T KNOW IT WAS SO ACCESSIBLE."

Knowledge about Fish Distribution System

Figure 17



"IT BRINGS ME BACK TO MY ROOTS. AS A YOUNG CHILD I HAVE CAMPED AND FISHED THE TOUTLE RIVER"



Garden Distribution Pathway



Participants were also presented with an image, as shown in Figure 18, describing the Garden Distribution System and after reviewing the diagram, 76% of respondents reported being unaware of the distribution pathway and 67% would like to learn more about the pathway (see Figure 19).

Similarly, when respondents were asked what surprised them about this pathway, many responded that nothing surprised them. However, others mentioned they were surprised to know that other tribes played a role in the pathway. One respondent wrote, "it surprised me to find out that we work with other tribes and school gardens." In addition, some respondents were also surprised by the complexity of this pathway and the resources available. One respondent wrote that they were surprised by "the availability of garden fresh produce to members in the local area." Another wrote that they were surprised by "how many people it takes to gather seeds, plant, harvest and distribute to our people

all over the State of Washington." Some other respondents were surprised that a seed catalog existed, and that seed saving was being carried out.

Also, when respondents were asked what the distribution pathway means to them, many reflected on the access to fresh produce that is offered by the garden, as well as on the preservation of culture. One respondent wrote that "the Cowlitz tribe is working hard to distribute healthy nutritious food to tribal members" and another said that they "see a traditional focus on wellness, the community being supportive of the individual."

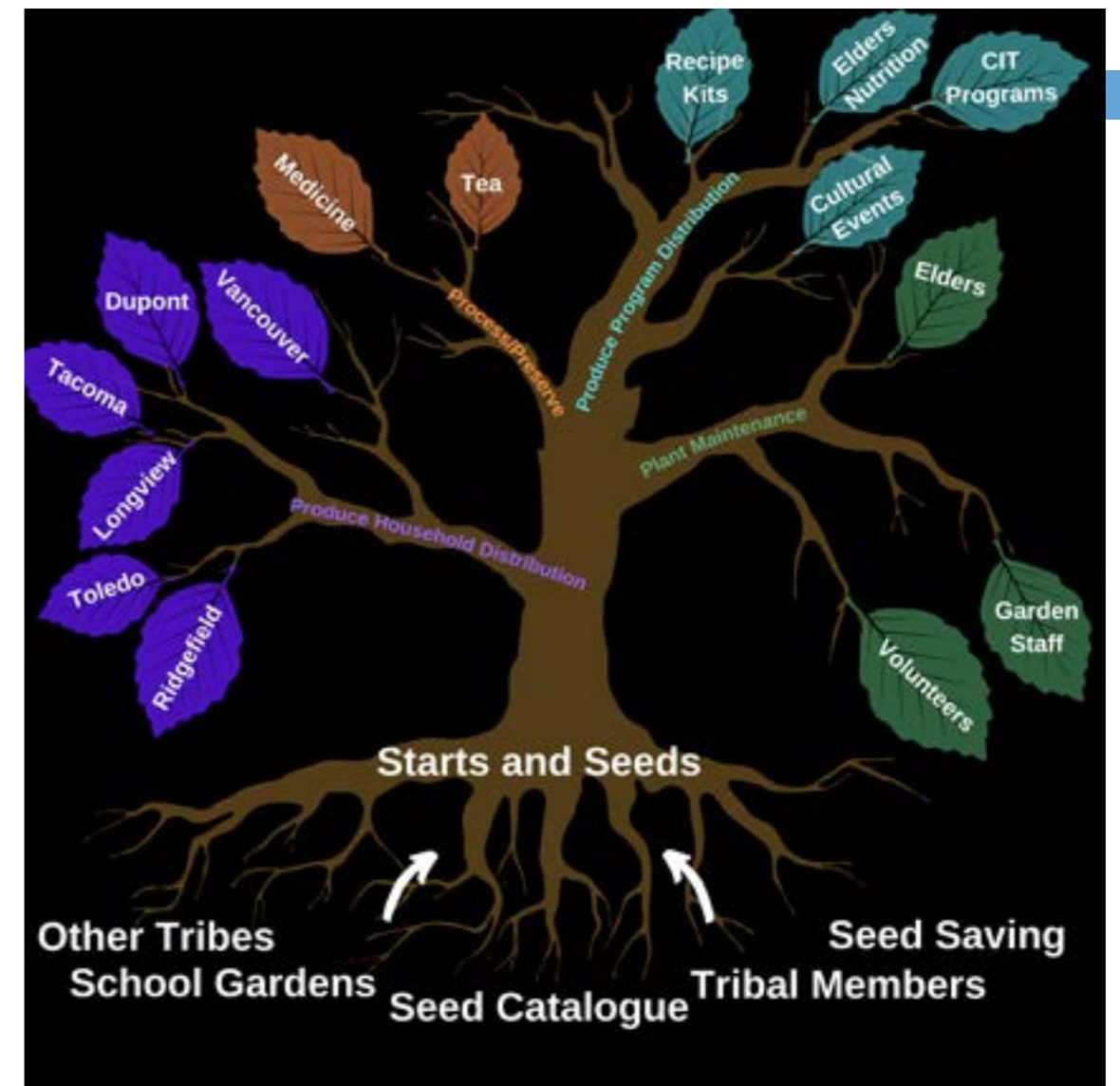
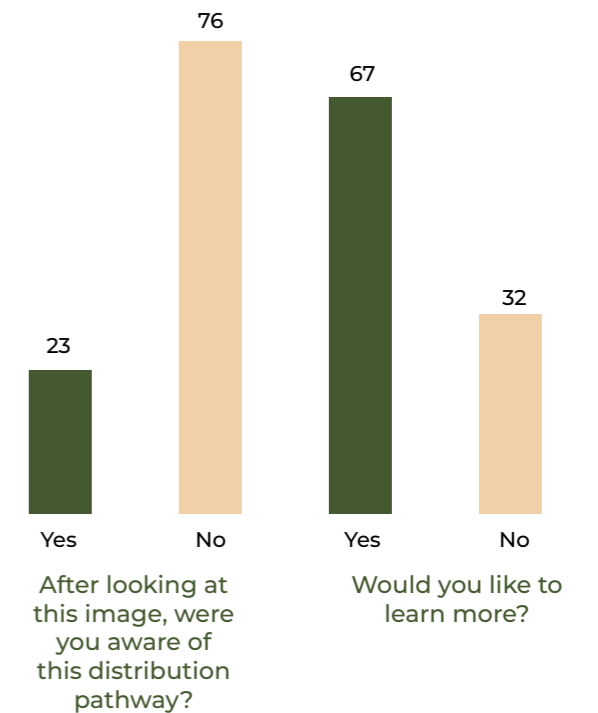


Figure 18

Knowledge about Garden Distribution System

Figure 19



"HOW CAN WE CONTINUE TO THRIVE AND CARE FOR EACH OTHER?"

PRESERVING THE OLD WAYS."

ASSETS AND STRENGTHS

When word spread that the Wellness and Diabetes Program was collecting feedback on a FSA, several tribal members expressed high interest in understanding the current food systems in place as well as learning more about any current food sovereignty efforts.

In addition, many tribal members have continued to show interest in learning more about gardening, harvesting, processing, and preserving plants, foods, and medicines. Recognizing this strong interest among tribal members and other community members is an important step in creating and implementing activities that promote food sovereignty within the Tribe.

Established Tribal Food System

The Cowlitz Indian Tribe has engaged in food sovereignty efforts for many years, beginning with the establishment of the Fish Distribution Program in 2003. Over the years, the Fish Distribution Program has developed a strong partnership with the Senior Nutrition Program as well as with the Community Wellness Garden. More recently, the Fish Distribution Program has been able to respond quickly to the needs of Cowlitz tribal members during the COVID-19 pandemic by increasing its capacity to offer shipping of its frozen fish fillets across the country to tribal members. In addition, the Community Wellness Garden has contributed significantly to building the foundation of the Cowlitz food system. From the Garden's first growing season in 2019, it has since increased its food production and the number of distribution sites to serve more than 500 individuals annually. With increased food production, the Garden has been able to offer produce to the Senior Nutrition Program where it can be incorporated into meal preparation. The space in and near the garden offers an opportunity to host different workshops, events, and gatherings for community members to learn more about gardening, cooking, gathering, harvesting, and other relevant skills. Thus, the collaborations between departments in growing food sovereignty efforts continue to be an asset and strength for the Cowlitz community.

Community Partnerships and Support

Existing community partnerships continue to be an asset and strength for the Cowlitz tribal community. These working relationships have been established with local arborists, gardeners, and farmers; local schools (e.g., Toledo Elementary School); local, regional, and national organizations and programs (e.g., Lower Columbia School Gardens, Native American Agricultural Fund, NW Tribal Food Sovereignty Coalition, Small Tribes of Western Washington); state and federal government agencies (Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Forest Service); and other tribes. These partnerships offer ample opportunities to strengthen the Cowlitz food system through collaborations that seek to enhance current food and nutrition programming, increase land access to traditional foods and plants, and foster and build connections among communities.

Integration of Food and Nutrition into Health and Human Services Priorities

The Community Wellness Garden is overseen by the Medical Clinic within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This unique organizational structure ensures that access to healthy food is incorporated into the planning, priorities, and daily tasks of the biggest department within the tribe and those working directly with clients. This approach demonstrates a commitment to holistic health and wellness, prevention, and public health that directly benefits members of the tribal community who are accessing other HHS services. An example of this mutually beneficial arrangement is the availability of a consult within the electronic health record so that clinicians can refer patients to receive garden produce during visits. This arrangement serves as a literal embodiment and daily reminder that food is medicine, a key principle of the indigenous approach to food sovereignty.



"I'm just so happy with the fish program. I'm happy that I can get salmon, I'm really pleased about that."

– Cowlitz Elder

"Partnerships are very important because partnerships are really the only way that the Cowlitz Tribe has access to lands for certain types of resource gathering."

– Director of Cultural Resources



"...each of these programs, the Elders program, the Garden program, and the Fish Distribution Program, have all sort of been **entrepreneurially started on their own**, but they're so closely allied that they just need to be sort of woven together so that they **could be integrated**. And so the mission overall becomes larger [because] what each of those different programs as separate things, are providing service in their food distribution, but **they are also promoting the sovereignty of the tribe**. But that's not their stated end goal, but that's what they're doing...so, if we can frame those programs as food sovereignty, then all of them say, "Yeah, we do this, but we are ultimately promoting this sovereignty of the tribe". [That's] what we really are doing, or advancing it. And then any other programs that can be entrepreneurially developed, have a place to fit... [So] it's the weaving together of the existing people and the existing services into a bigger mission."

– Director of Cultural Resources

Challenges and Barriers

They know what foods healed us, what foods we needed to make us work, to make us run. They knew the seasons and how it affected everything. They knew the patterns, the migratory patterns of [the] fish and animals and everything, and what affected them...We've lost a lot of the culture, and we've lost a lot of that knowledge that we need to get back and we need to maintain on how to live in harmony with the environment" – Cowlitz Elder

LIMITED AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FOOD

One of the main challenges identified in this project was the lack of awareness or little to no knowledge about food sovereignty. Through various conversations and discussions with tribal employees, tribal members, and other community members, it was evident that no one person had a shared understanding or shared definition of food sovereignty. Sometimes, even individuals who were immersed in the Cowlitz food system and actively doing "food sovereignty work" were not familiar with the term or lacked knowledge of what a food sovereignty assessment is and its purpose.

LACK OF FOOD SOVEREIGNTY INTEGRATION INTO EXISTING TRIBAL POLICIES

Another challenge identified was the lack of integration of food sovereignty into existing tribal policies. In addition, the current comprehensive strategic plan for 2019-2023 makes no explicit mention of ways to enhance and strengthen food sovereignty within the Cowlitz tribal community. The lack of food sovereignty integration poses significant challenges and barriers in developing policies that determine how food is produced, distributed, and consumed, as well as by what mechanisms these actions are carried out.

LIMITED PROJECT STAFFING

A third challenge identified was the lack of staffing for this project. The planning and implementation phases for this assessment were largely spearheaded by the Wellness and Diabetes Coordinator with assistance from the Health Education Assistant. Both individuals had no previous experience conducting a food sovereignty assessment, so it was important to first understand the purpose of the assessment and how it can offer support to the Cowlitz Tribe. While many of the tasks and responsibilities

were carried out by the Wellness and Diabetes Coordinator and/or Health Education Assistant, the amount of time available was limited due to their other responsibilities within the health clinic. While external guidance and support were provided by two Evaluators at the Urban Indian Health Institute to assist with the survey development, data analysis, and reporting of the results, having additional project members would have been helpful to carry out administrative tasks, create and design survey content, as well as strategize creative ways to recruit participants.



“I THINK THAT WE REALLY NEED TO BE A LITTLE BIT MORE COHESIVE, NOT JUST EVEN WITHIN OUR OWN TRIBES, BUT WITHIN OUR TRIBAL NEIGHBORS, WITHIN OUR WHOLE TRIBAL COMMUNITY.”

-Cowlitz Elder



Recommendations and Future Opportunities

ENHANCE CURRENT AND FUTURE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

As we recognize the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all Native communities across the country, it has become more important to develop and implement innovative ways to engage community members in learning about cultural and traditional plants, foods, and medicines. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, and virtual meeting applications, such as Zoom, have offered a unique opportunity during this time to share information and knowledge with the community regardless of location. Since many Cowlitz tribal members do not reside within the ancestral lands of Cowlitz and reside in other places throughout the country, enhancing social media and virtual programming can provide another opportunity for Cowlitz tribal members to access resources wherever they may be living. Furthermore, increasing access to education and support for individuals and families who participate in any form of gardening or gathering can help to reinforce knowledge, skills, and teachings about planting, harvesting, and/or preserving as well as preparing

POLICY AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

Information gathered from this assessment can help guide and support the decision-making process when considering any policies or procedures that impact the Cowlitz Tribe, especially the current and future infrastructure of the Cowlitz food system. Establishing sound policies and strategic plans that protect cultural and traditional resources and increase access to “Usual and Accustomed Places” are important for Cowlitz to promote their tribal food sovereignty. This assessment also advises enhancing current programs aimed at increasing access to traditional foods for all tribal members, including mapping and identifying traditional food habitats through propagation, and providing planned opportunities for harvesting and gathering. Responses to this survey also indicate a strong interest in gardening and increased healthy food access which can be realized through policies and funding that support the current food system with potential for expansion.

IMPROVE AWARENESS AND ACCESS TO COWLITZ DISTRIBUTION PROGRAMS

While there was an overwhelming number of participants who completed the survey, there was still a significant number of people who had not heard of all the distribution programs offered to Cowlitz tribal members and others who utilize the Cowlitz Tribal Services. Enhancing communications about the Cowlitz Distribution Programs, which include the Fish Distribution Program, Community Wellness Garden, and Senior Nutrition Program, can work to ensure that tribal members have knowledge about the program and how to participate. Communications with tribal members should also include those who reside outside the Pacific Northwest region.

ENCOURAGE THE TRANSFER OF INTERGENERATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Despite this survey not assessing the attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives of the Youth, incorporating their voices in every step of strengthening the Cowlitz food system and food sovereignty is essential. Creating opportunities for Elders and Youth to interact with one another can help foster a supportive environment that encourages learning, growth, and empowerment. These opportunities can take on many different forms such as community gatherings, events, workshops, tribal council meetings, Youth council meetings, and others. There is also potential to build off pre-existing opportunities, such as the Garden Youth Internship and collaborations between the Community Wellness Garden and the Youth Program.

CONCLUSION

As the very first food sovereignty assessment to be conducted amongst the Cowlitz people, it has offered great insight into the food systems currently established within the Tribe. The assessment overall helped to recognize many of the strengths and assets already present, as well as identify some areas for improvement. The findings documented in this report have the potential to offer support in furthering the food sovereignty efforts within the Tribe.

Ultimately, these findings can help empower the Tribe to exercise their sovereign rights to control how they manage and distribute food to their people and to reclaim their traditional and cultural lifeways passed down from their ancestors.



Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used to collect qualitative and quantitative data on Cowlitz tribal members' demographics, knowledge and perceptions of the Cowlitz food system, connections to culture and community, and food security. Collecting this information included coordinating a site visit, conducting key informant interviews, and distributing a food sovereignty assessment survey. This assessment was directed by the Cowlitz Wellness and Diabetes Coordinator and Health Education Assistant, in partnership with the Urban Indian Health Institute. Weekly meetings were held to discuss, plan, and coordinate the assessment activities, such as identifying appropriate tribal leadership, staff, and community members to interview, developing and disseminating the survey, and analyzing results.

[Click here to see the survey!](https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-mHDlj222T3jsEFYybhhSiA_3D_3D/)

https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-mHDlj222T3jsEFYybhhSiA_3D_3D/



A 66-question survey was developed in close collaboration with the Wellness and Diabetes Program Coordinator to assess Cowlitz's food sovereignty status.

Questions developed covered socioeconomic demographics, food access, community food resources, food assistance, nutrition, diet and health, culture and traditions, and Cowlitz's Distribution Programs.

A preliminary survey was created and distributed to several Elders, tribal members, and staff from various tribal departments to test the usability, accessibility, and length of the survey. Piloting the survey before dissemination ensured the survey was appropriate for a diverse audience. A total of seven people tested the survey and provided feedback to the Wellness and Diabetes Program Coordinator and Program Evaluators.

After reviewing the comments and feedback from the survey testers, the survey underwent minor revisions, and the final survey was available for distribution on July 19, 2021. The final survey was created using SurveyMonkey, an online survey platform, and distributed via email to active patients within Cowlitz Indian Tribal Health Services, members who have registered for the Wellness and Diabetes listserv, and to all Cowlitz tribal members who have active email addresses on file with the Tribe. In addition, flyers containing the survey link were included with produce from the Garden during pick-up hours. A tablet was also provided during the Elders Symposium, a two-day community event, for individuals to complete the survey.

SURVEY POPULATION

After much consideration, it was determined that the survey would be available to individuals who were 18 years or older, self-identified as a Cowlitz tribal member or descendent, or a non-Cowlitz tribal member who utilized Cowlitz Indian Tribal Health Services. In addition, it was highly encouraged that one survey be completed per household as this would provide a more comprehensive assessment of the current food system in the Cowlitz tribal community.

LIMITATIONS

Tribal Youth representation is not available. Tribal members under the age of 18 were not eligible to participate in the survey due to difficulty in obtaining parental consent as well as concerns about duplicating survey data due to multiple responses in one household.

Tribal members may have been excluded. The survey was emailed to all enrolled Cowlitz Indian Tribal members. Members who did not have active email addresses on file with Cowlitz Tribal Enrollment they may have been missed.

REFERENCES

1. First Nations Development Institute. Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool. 2nd
2. First Nations Development Institute. Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool. 2nd

Review and Analysis

The survey was available to eligible participants beginning on July 19, 2021 and was closed on August 31, 2021. Responses were collected, stored, and secured on the SurveyMonkey database. Initial review and comparative data analysis began in September 2021 by two Program Evaluators at Urban Indian Health Institute in Seattle, WA. The results were examined for any significant findings and trends among five main topic areas: 1) demographics; 2) food access, resources, and assistance; 3) health; 4) traditional plants and foods; and 5) Cowlitz land and community food systems.

Since this was the first food sovereignty assessment to be conducted, this report only highlights findings from 'all respondents' and 'respondents who identified as an Elder'. However, further assessments can be conducted and analyzed in the future that stratify survey responses by varying subcategories such as by age, gender, location, or education. The results reported in this document highlight most of the findings from the survey, though not all findings are represented by a chart.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Thirteen interviews were conducted with Cowlitz tribal department employees representing Health and Human Services (specifically the Wellness and Diabetes Program, Pathways to Healing, the Senior Nutrition Program, the Culture Department, and department leadership), Tribal Management, and Natural Resources. These semi-structured interviews explored the historical context of the Cowlitz food system and preservation, the role of traditional foods and food practices connecting tribal members and descendants to their traditional lands and cultural practices, partnerships with local farmers or organizations as well as state and federal agencies that leverage or enhance food distribution and production, integration of traditional foods and meals in tribal programming, and plans and ideas for future programming that incorporate traditional and nutritional tribal community food practices. Eight of the interviews took place in-person over the two-day site visit and were attended by the Wellness and Diabetes Program Coordinator and Health Education Assistant. The remaining interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom or over the phone by the Lead Evaluator. Information collected through these interviews helped to inform the development of the food sovereignty assessment tool.

SITE VISIT

In October 2020, a two-day site visit was conducted by the Lead Evaluator to better understand the current landscape and food system in the Cowlitz tribal community. Additionally, it offered an opportunity to learn more about the relevant internal departments and the external partnerships that contribute to Cowlitz's food sovereignty network. Over two days, the Lead Evaluator toured tribal departments and properties located in Longview, Toledo, and Ridgefield, WA. Properties visited included the Cornelius and Five Owl Houses, tribal offices in Longview, the Cowlitz Tribe Community Wellness Garden, Cowlitz Tribal Housing, and the Olequa property.