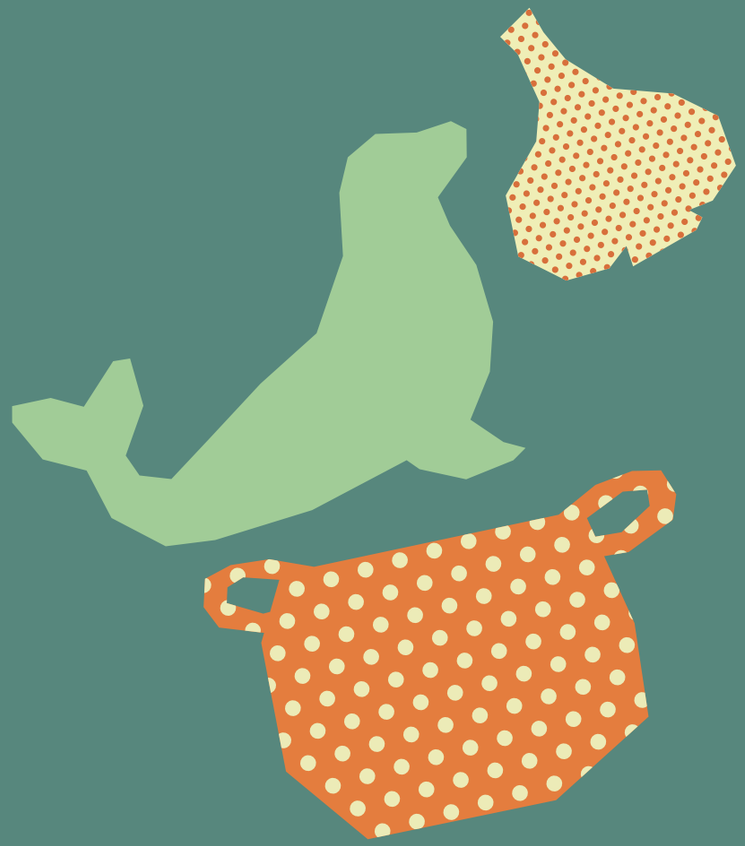
CHAPTER FOUR



Ken Paul, Wolastoqey Representative:
"If we do not maintain our natural food systems, we will not have a habitat in which to live"

By **Rodrigo Yáñez** [24]

24 The interview was conducted on Wednesday, July 2, 2025.

Interview with Ken Paul

representative of the Wolastoqey Nation of Neqotkuk, Canada.

An expert in fisheries and marine governance, he works to improve ocean governance based on the worldview of the peoples and nations of northern America, to balance relationships that currently harm Indigenous cultures and the environment.

What dishes, foods, or beverages does your community consider traditional, and why?

I live in a place where non-traditional agriculture has developed over many years. What my ancestors did was clear vast swathes of forest to create spaces where rows of land could be used to cultivate different crops. Among these, potatoes are one of the most important crops; many recipes can be prepared with them.

This area has many river valleys, and the river, of course, flows into the ocean. So various animals gather around the rivers according to the seasons, and thanks to this we have access to food. For example, in the fall, members of our family hunt. My nephew hunted a large moose last fall and shared the meat with the family. And that meat is a good source of food, much better than farmed beef. We know this because it is wild game. That animal is not being fed an artificial diet. Moreover, it is a delicious food for us. There are other animals to hunt here in winter, such as deer, but none compares to the moose.

In the spring, we have something here that we love, what I call fern shoots (fiddleheads). Some people also call them ostrich ferns and, I believe, strictly speaking, they are mosses. They are small green vegetables that sprout in a little spiral, which is also part of our cultural identity. They grow on the riverbanks, underneath, in the old grasses that become flattened. When the ice begins to melt, the rivers appear, and about two or three weeks later, these small fern shoots begin to grow. That's when families become active, and a whole social aspect emerges, going out to gather them; it is the end of winter, and many things are happening. And they must be harvested in time, because they grow quickly, and if they are not cut, they turn into ferns and are no longer suitable as food because they become too hard to chew.

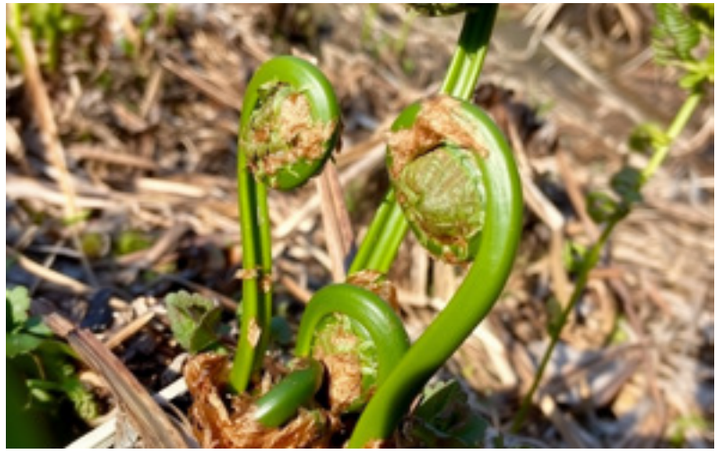
What do they taste like? Is there anything similar to them?

When people ask me what they taste like, I say they can be compared to asparagus.

These wild foods that we go out to gather are our connection to the land, a chance to go out as a family. At the same time, they are very tasty and nutritious. They are a good green vegetable that is only available in spring. My mother and sisters can them. They prepare the shoots and put them in glass jars, so we have some during the winter. Of course, when they are freshly picked, they have much more flavor.

The fern sprouts are a sign that summer is coming soon and that another type of animal is coming to our territory. Traditionally, our people have been associated with the Atlantic salmon, which lays its eggs in our rivers. When they are fertilized and begin to hatch, growing into small fry and other early stages of a salmon's life, they wait about two or three years and then migrate down the river and out to the ocean, and then head north. No one really knows how or where the salmon go, or what happens on their journey once they leave our rivers. But they go north and, then, after a couple of years, they migrate back to our river systems and then to the ponds and lay eggs. And when they return, we traditionally catch them and are able to eat them.

Many of our traditional foods come from roots, berries, plants, fish, and hunted animals. However, it is difficult to maintain that traditional diet, so many people in our community go to regular grocery stores. This happens in many cultures, doesn't it? But every time we have some kind of gathering, if there is a wedding or a celebration for a new birth or someone's passing, the community leaders, who are usually women, gather all the families and we have a potluck, and everyone brings a pot with some of these foods.



Is there any other special day for your community that is celebrated around food?

Yes, the community gathers and holds community feasts at least once a month. At the end of summer there is a Canadian provincial holiday. We have games, such as softball tournaments and other activities. We take advantage of those occasions for our artisans to set up. Many people from the communities who are facing economic difficulties manage to earn something there and share in community traditions. We encourage people to bring their families; it is a way to bring people together.

At least once a month, there are elders' meetings in our community, and they are always given food and tea. The elders, of course, enjoy traditional food, so something like corn soup or cabbage rolls is always served, which are foods that are eaten and greatly enjoyed by the oldest members of our community.

And then we have the larger gatherings, such as high school graduations. These are family events where 50 or 60 people gather, including relatives and friends, and it is necessary to feed them. Usually, at these larger gatherings, people prepare traditional foods. Some people store frozen products in order to provide for so many guests, or in case the celebration takes place during seasons when there is limited access to many foods. Or sometimes people go and speak with other nearby communities, because we have a close relationship with many Indigenous communities. For example, if they have moose meat, sometimes we pay them with a bit of salmon.

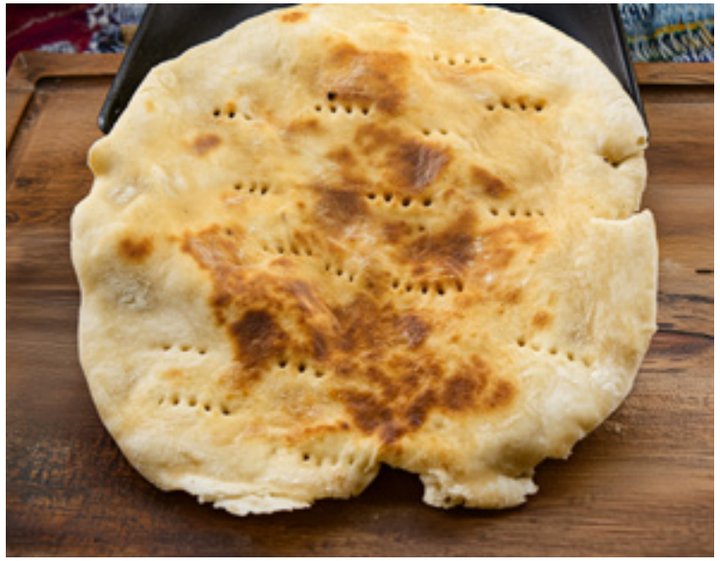
These exchanges of food are quite common. The other day, I was visiting another community and a man approached me and said, *"Ken, I know your father, a few years ago he did some work for me. Wait here, I'll be right back." And he went to his house and came back with a large Atlantic salmon. "Give this to your father because he helped my daughter and me."* And I was delighted. I was tempted to go home with the salmon myself, but no, I gave it to my father.

Could you tell us about the changes that have been observed over time regarding these food practices, their production, their exchange, and consumption?

They are different and of a different nature. For example, I mentioned the importance of rivers, and how spring is marked by the emergence of fern shoots, initiating a series of activities. There are hydroelectric dams in our river systems that have altered their behavior and affect the beings that inhabit them. In the case of fish, engineers have created passageways called fish ladders, which are small paths or channels that allow fish to pass through so they do not become trapped. However, these techniques have not been very successful, nor have they yielded good results; much work remains to be done for continued improvement in this area.

This is not the only cause, but we know that the salmon population is disappearing. Although in some rivers and communities, wild Atlantic salmon have not been seen in the wild for literally a generation, we still discuss salmon in almost all our meetings. It is like a kind of genetic memory for us. So we are making a great effort to mitigate some of these problems in our territory. And this is part of our larger struggle as a nation to stay ahead of science and work with hatcheries to try to bring back salmon in healthy numbers.

Another threat is agriculture. Modern agriculture uses pesticides and fertilizers, and when the rains come, these products run off into our river systems. So there are some areas where we do not recommend that people collect fern shoots, because we don't know if the river contains toxins. We also question the condition of the fish that remain in our river systems, such as brown trout. We are always asking ourselves, where do we catch these fish? Because there are some areas we know are fairly clean, but we also know that others are not. We know there are all kinds of harmful chemicals that we don't trust, even though they are approved and certified, and we cannot drink the water in these areas. In some places, people are even advised not to swim there.



Bannock, a traditional Métis food. It is traditionally made with flour, water, and lard, sometimes with egg as well.

One element that marks our history and that also changed the food systems is our location on reservations. There was a forced displacement of all our communities onto small tracts of land. This was a policy that existed in Canada for more than a hundred years. And when this occurred, traditional migratory routes were cut off. Thus, the way we traditionally lived—along the rivers, in the valleys, moving between seasons to hunt, fish, and gather food in rather small groups—was significantly changed. In small groups it was easier to have shelter, heating, and to supply ourselves. When the ice broke, we would go and begin fishing. Then, in the summer, we would move toward the coast. We traveled throughout the territory, making our way along the river systems in our canoes and canoe families.

We generally have our largest gatherings on the coast. And it is in these coastal areas where we have traditionally depended on seafood, such as lobster, clams, and mussels. The summer diet consisted of seafood. And then in the fall, when things began to cool down again, that is when we would start to migrate to the river systems. This is how our culture and our food security functioned; it was linked to movement across our lands.

With the reservation system and colonization, all of this was disrupted, and many of the practices we had were lost. For example, today we have returned to lobster fishing, but with modern methods. We have members of our community who actively fish with traps on lobster boats. This generates some economic benefit for the community and allows for the distribution of food a couple of times a year, because on those boats they dedicate about two or three weeks' worth of catch to the community. So we all gather there, and when we are all together and once again eating our traditional foods, it is a very happy day. But today lobsters are caught differently.

And in your conversations with the communities, have you identified other factors?

Yes, well, the influence of the global economy and the commodification of food, which is not seen as a human right, but as a necessity to concentrate wealth in a few hands. I heard somewhere, years ago, that the morning breakfast of cereal, which is common in North America, was fabricated as a need so that wheat-based cereals could be sold to support the wheat industry, which was not a native industry in North America. And now we have three meals a day.

I also believe it makes more financial sense to have a greenhouse with artificial lights to grow tomatoes than to have a natural tomato garden. Producing year-round is more profitable monetarily, but we do not measure the quality of the food and tend to relegate nutritional value to a secondary position. All of this accelerated, I believe, primarily after the Second World War, when food began to be an issue for industries. This is what happens with elements processed on a large scale; everything possible must be done to sell them.

I know that many studies have been conducted on the type of diet we follow. But despite all of that, it is cheaper to buy something that has been processed than to buy a fresh product at a market or something organic. We have a nutritionist here in my community, and I went to talk to her about my personal diet, because I wanted to know how I could eat better. She told me that in many poor households, like the one I grew up in, because there was not much money, we tended to serve a lot of potatoes, a lot of rice, and a lot of pasta, such as spaghetti. I told her yes, that was how it had been. All those foods are tasty. I remember growing up with all of that, and it is cheaper to feed a large family with a lot of children. When there are many mouths to feed, decisions are economic, but all these foods are carbohydrate and starch-based; they satisfy and stretch meals, but maintaining a diet based solely on them is not healthy.

Therefore, a question we ask ourselves is how, as a society, we ensure that poorer households can access a diversity of foods, so that they are not nourished solely on the basis of two or three things. But it is very difficult to achieve this, because of how our modern food system is structured. It is easier to buy processed foods; moreover, they are subsidized by the State.

Does climate change have any place in your conversations in the communities?

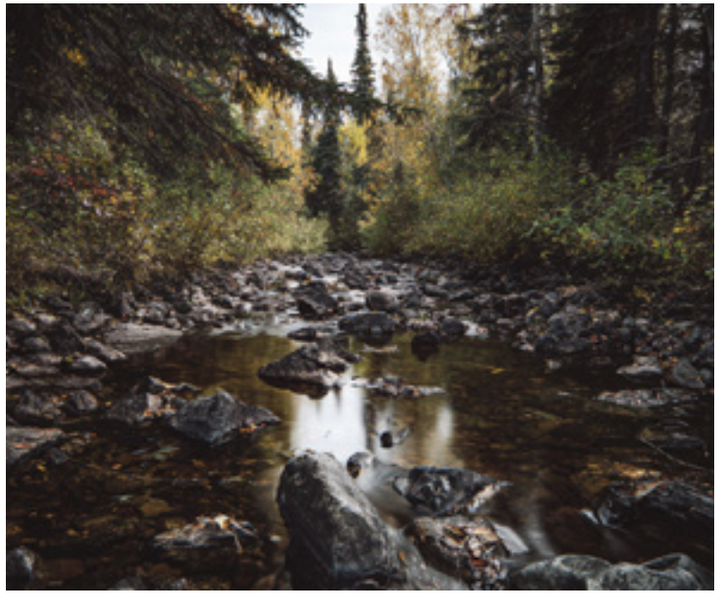
Yes, it is an issue. I work on national policy, in groups for my native nation, analyzing laws. I work with many lawyers. And what I see, and where I can contribute, is that it is necessary to empower native nations, Indigenous nations, in this area. I work on oceans and climate change, and what Indigenous peoples have to say about coexistence with the oceans and biodiversity is of great interest; we possess knowledge that can contribute to addressing these climate challenges.

What is happening is a consequence of the actions of others, not the actions of our nations. But there is an understanding that our native nations know or do something that has allowed us to sustain ecosystems despite all the problems we have had during centuries of colonization.

In my opinion, and this is what I try to explain to people, this traditional knowledge is not really information that you can take and use to fill the gaps left by your own scientific information. There is an entire methodology. It is a different knowledge system, which is maintained by the value system that the native nation has within its culture, within its spirituality, within the way they work with one another. So, if you take the information out of that system and try to introduce it into another, it may not work, because it is out of context.

People who want to visit our elders, if they go on their own, are often disappointed because they do not understand why the elder is telling them stories or talking about other things, because they do not really comprehend the context of what is being shared. And I believe that if our native nations, our Indigenous nations, were increasingly empowered to lead ideas about food production and food security, we would realize that it is not only about food, but also about the habitats and the practices with which we truly do things.

We do not like to throw away anything that comes from nature. We try to use all parts. So when they started introducing composting programs here in Canada, for me that is just common sense, something we have always done. We know that everything is a cycle, and that one must take what can be taken, which makes fishing difficult because, on the open sea, it is an extractive industry. But how can we improve the habitat of fish and lobsters, for example? There is habitat restoration that we could do in our river systems for some of the salmon, removing logs, making sure there is good shade in some of the rivers so it is not too hot for them, among other things.



Climate change comes up in these discussions. How do you organize yourselves? How do you envision your life in the territory?

What we try to do is encourage and support any Native nation that is asserting its own sovereignty. From what I have seen, the difference between working with a non-Native community, a non-Indigenous community, and an Indigenous community is that Indigenous peoples always talk about long-term environmental impacts. So in North America, among many Native Americans and First Nations, we talk about the seven generations. We think about how our activity today will affect seven generations into the future. This helps greatly, and has always helped, to be much more responsible. Even, if we put ourselves in a modern context, we go beyond what is required for an environmental impact assessment. So when we are determining whether or not to carry out a project, we exceed the minimum environmental standards. I see this; it happens constantly.

Another thing our Native nations always talk about is what the benefits of the projects will be for the members of our community. You do not always see that when working in business or politics. They talk about the benefit for shareholders, right? But in our case, even though we have businesses, even though we are involved in that monetary system because we have to pay for our homes, food, clothing, and travel, we will do it while thinking about the impact a project may have on nature. I have seen many Native nations in Canada that do not fully benefit from the total economic impact of a project because it has a negative environmental impact. In these discussions, climate change arises, in how we organize ourselves, in how we envision our life in the territory.

A few days ago, I was speaking about the ocean sector at a meeting, and we were discussing the fishing industry. And I said what I had to say out loud. Who speaks on behalf of the fish? I know we want to help protect our fishermen if we undertake certain kinds of scientific interventions. But if there are no fish in the water, then it does not matter if we are taking care of our fishermen. We must have fish.

And fish are also part of our ecosystem, of our body; fish are like the messengers or the platelets that flow through the blood, through the veins and arteries. We need healthy fish in our river systems because they help nourish the soils when they die. They help feed other animals in those areas, such as bears, for example, or otters, or any kind of rodent. Studies have been conducted on the east coast of Canada, in areas where there were healthy salmon corridors, and it has been observed that they had healthy trees because the bear eats the fish and leaves the bones on the ground, and those bones become fertilizer. So if a tree is cut down, it is possible to tell by looking at the growth rings whether there were healthy salmon corridors in different years, based on this kind of activity.

That is just one example of this complex web, which we do not fully understand. There are a lot of ducks, geese, eagles, and hawks around here. All those birds depend on the fish. Each has its own ecosystem. And these birds, of course, feed other predators, such as coyotes and other types of carnivores, like foxes.

So if we do not maintain our natural food systems, on which we depend, then all of this will disappear, and we will not have a habitat in which to live. That is what is important. And this dispute is so crucial that I feel the value system of Indigenous peoples is something we have to be a little more open to sharing.

And hopefully, people will begin to adapt to that because I do not believe the economic system that provides our processed foods is sustainable. It is not sustainable in terms of produc-tion value and it is not sustainable for us in terms of individual health. I know it makes a lot of economic sense, but if you look at the long-term factors, what happens if you do not have people to sell your products to? Then your economic model is going to collapse.