

Title: “Culture and Nature: Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems and Health.”

Presenter: Harriet V. Kuhnlein, Ph.D., Professor of human nutrition, McGill University and founding director, Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment (CINE)

Summary: Caroline Johnston

On April 12, 2007, Harriet Kuhnlein, Ph.D., professor of human nutrition and founding director of the Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment (CINE) at McGill University, gave the third presentation of the spring colloquium series. She discussed some recent research done by CINE in various indigenous communities, as well as basic issues related to indigenous health and nutrition.

Indigenous peoples, Dr. Kuhnlein noted, face a special set of risks to their nutrition and overall health. Poverty and lack of access to natural resources and political power, combined with a gradual loss of native food knowledge (e.g. a change to a more commercial diet), have contributed to the present state of affairs, e.g. grave health disparities between many indigenous and non-indigenous populations. In addition, many healthcare systems do not serve indigenous peoples' needs appropriately. Although the UN made its Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and there have been some initiatives to protect resources, such as Biodiversity International, more work is needed.

Dr. Kuhnlein presented a set of key definitions, as outlined by CINE. “Indigenous peoples” can be characterized as those who have a distinct territory and set of natural resources; are descended from the same area with a common language; and know how to derive a complete diet from their native region. “Health,” she explained, should be viewed in terms of four related components: nutritional, emotional, social, and spiritual. These kinds of definitions are needed for better understanding among academics, as well as advocacy, and questions of individual membership in indigenous groups.

As Dr. Kuhnlein emphasized, it is essential that researchers work closely with the indigenous people among whom they study, listening to their ideas about the connections between cultures and ecosystems, including them in the research process as well as in governing bodies. CINE is noted for such efforts. One of its roles has been to gather and disseminate data on specific groups' access to traditional foods. CINE also helps to set voluntary nutrition guidelines, advocates for the “right to food,” and contributes to efforts at protecting native food environments.

Dr. Kuhnlein concluded her presentation with a video featuring some case studies conducted by CINE. The groups included indigenous peoples of South America, Kenya, Nigeria, and the Pacific islands. Through these ethnographic studies, and the close ties fostered between academics and the communities in which they work, Dr. Kuhnlein and CINE are developing better ways to tailor services to specific indigenous needs, as well as building general awareness of indigenous nutritional issues within the global community.

Suggested Readings

Kuhnlein, H. V. (2004). Karat, pulque, and gac: Three shining stars in the traditional food galaxy. *Nutrition Reviews*, *62*, 439-442.

Kuhnlein, H. V., Receveur, O., Soueida, R., & Egeland, G. M. (2004). Arctic indigenous peoples experience the nutrition transition with changing dietary patterns and obesity. *The Journal of Nutrition*, *124*, 1447-1453.

Kuhnlein, H., Erasmus, B., Creed-Kanashiro, H., Englberger, L., Okeke, C., Turner, N., Allen, L., & Bhattacharjee, L. (2006). Indigenous peoples' food systems for health: Finding interventions that work. *Public Health Nutrition*, *9*, 1013-1019.