

GEO 352

Slow Food Movement: Impacts of Social and Environmental Capital in Cowichan Bay and Region, BC



Genevieve Huneault

Vancouver Island University

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Introduction

Food: “Any substance consumed to provide nutritional support for the body. It is usually of plant or animal origin, and contains essential nutrients, such as carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins, or minerals. The substance is ingested by an organism and assimilated by the organism's cells in an effort to produce energy, maintain life, or stimulate growth” (Wikipedia, 2013).

A basic need like food is a resource that on a global scale is necessary for survival - food has become an identifier into culture, identity, ritual, and a source of business, which is why food is considered to be such a valuable and integral part of our health and daily lives. The slow food movement has been a 13 year long movement and lifestyle change that has altered the way many countries, cultures and how businesses choose to produce, deliver and incorporate into their daily lives. This case study is to better understand how the *Slow Food Movement* as an organization has gained recognition and a global following; what will be explored is a local example of how the ‘slow food movement’ has been adopted into the town of Cowichan bay and region. In addition what the capital impacts are from the sustainable alternative of food production and consumption.

The economic areas that will be explored from the impacts of the slow food movement are Environmental, and Social. By critically exploring the strengths and weaknesses of each one, this case study will be able to determine whether ‘slow food’ is a beneficial alternative to food consumption and agricultural methods of production, or whether the ‘slow food movement’ is a stepping stone or *one* consideration of many formulas for sustainable and alternative methods in food. Questions that are guiding the case study are

- ✘ How has becoming a ‘Cittaslow’ community shaped and altered the way they approach sustainability?
- ✘ How has food security and alternative approaches effected the social and environmental landscapes?

Accomplishments

The Organization has become very successful in the last decade with numerous locations around the world adopting the 'slow food' policies and hundreds of thousands of people becoming members. This massive following and change in perspective towards localized food has helped prevent degeneration of biodiversity, increased local economies, provided healthier ways of producing food and curbed the rapid domination of globalized food systems. Carlo Petrini, founder of the Slow Food Movement received the United Nations 2013 *Champions of the Earth* award in September of this year, in recognition of his work towards alternative sustainable food systems that have had a significant and positive impact on the environment (UNEP, 2013).

Accomplishments that should also be identified in association, but on a smaller scale is that Cowichan Bay is the first community to be titled in 2009 by the Slow Food Movement Organization as a 'slow community' in Canada (Sustainable Cowichan, 2012).

History

'Slow Food' is a global, grassroots organization with supporters in 150 countries around the world who are linking the pleasure of good food with a commitment to their community and the environment (Slow Food, 2013). The organization is a non-profit member-supported association that was founded in 1989 as a political outcry to the increase of fast food establishments in Italy. Since the political action took place many years ago the Slow Food Organization has attained over 100,000 members and a network of 2,000 food communities who practice sustainable production of quality foods.

Cowichan Bay

Cowichan Bay is located on Vancouver Island in the region of the Cowichan Valley. Linked by rich agricultural land, wineries, small business owners and beautiful bodies of water, the Cowichan Bay has become an increasing hot spot for local and international tourists. Cowichan Bay draws thousands of tourists per year to help them experience culture, arts, heritage and great cuisine (Tourism BC, 2013). The influx of tourism in Cowichan Bay also presented the

town with a few obstacles; predominantly the destination had caught the eye of many developers and in particular the fast food industry. Cowichan Bay felt that the introduction to large fast food chains and large box stores would mask and suffocate the local culture of the town and take away from small business owners (Slow Cowichan, 2012). In 2009 Cowichan Bay became the first *Cittaslow* (CHEETA-slow) community in Canada; this was their way of battling large corporate development in the area and maintaining a community that was unique and sustainable. The *Cittaslow* community can be characterized by people who:

- Take time to build community relationships
- Celebrate the community's unique history and traditions
- Promote craftsmanship and environmental stewardship
- Maintain the community's distinct character
- Engage residents and visitors by sharing in high quality living

Below is a map outlining the Cowichan Valley region, this illustrates the geographical area where most communities practice sustainable and 'slow' initiatives alongside with Cowichan Bay:



Figure 1 Cowichan Valley Region

Organizational Structure

Slow Food is an international member-supported non-profit association and a worldwide network of people committed to improving the way food is produced and distributed. A series of overlapping groups and entities make up our network (Slow Food, 2013):

- * 100,000 members in 153 countries
- * 2,000 food communities in the Terra Madre network
- * More than 10,000 small producers involved in Presidia projects

International

Slow Food International offices plans and promotes the movement's development worldwide, together with the association's Board of Directors (which is elected every four years at the Slow Food International Council) and the International Council which made up of representatives of countries with at least 500 members (Slow Food, 2013). Extending through a systematic structure of board of directors to community leaders, the slow food program is connected mostly by 'self-ownership' and practices are integrated into community development.

Strengths

The Slow Food Movement has a plethora of literature expanding on how successful the organization has become, furthermore Cowichan Bay is a great example of how they adopted the slow food principles to accommodate a more sustaining community. The main aspects that will be focused on in this section are the positive attributes and impacts on the environment through the slow food movement, as well as the positive social impacts occurring from the sustainable initiatives.

Environmental Capital

Positive impacts on the environment in Cowichan Bay and region have significantly altered how many neighboring communities are starting to see the direct impact of local food production and healthy/sustainable practices. Cowichan Bay has become the model community and leading community for many sustaining energy, food, ecological, social/cultural, and economic initiatives. Focusing on Environmental Capital the following are the strengths recognized and constructed by practicing slow principles:

Supporting Local Food Helps Preserve Cultivar Genetic Diversity:

Cowichan Bay and most of the region has adopted the organic method of farming compared to a conventional system that many non-sustaining industrial farmers use. The authors Hole and Perkins state that by implementing organic farming systems it has protected biodiversity on agricultural lands and geographical surrounding areas, whereas conventional farming systems has decreased biodiversity and health of the area (Perkins, et al, 2005).

“The Cowichan Region is one of the most biologically diverse and productive areas in Canada. This region consists of a complex mosaic of bio-geoclimatic zones and species - some found nowhere else on the planet. This rich biodiversity helps lend stability and resilience to component ecological communities” (Sustainable Cowichan, 2012)

Eating Locally Helps Preserve Local and Small-Scale Farmland:

There are currently 700 farms in the Cowichan Valley. 11,559 hectares of land is being farmed, down 38 percent from 1991 levels. Trends are moving towards smaller, more intensively-run farms, and organic (both certified and uncertified) growing practices are on the rise (Cowichan Green Community, 2010)

In interesting link among the literature is that in the year 2009 West Coast Seeds (a general supplier for personal growers) found that bulk quantities of seeds were selling out. This could be a direct link to the slow food movement initiation that year, which in return indicated that more people were starting up small-scale farms using ‘heritage’ and organic seeds. “Keeping with the local trend towards smaller, more intensively run organic farms. Highest increases in seed sales came from new gardeners /farmers and people under 40 years of age.

The map below illustrates the locations in the Cowichan Valley where local farmers and producers are located:

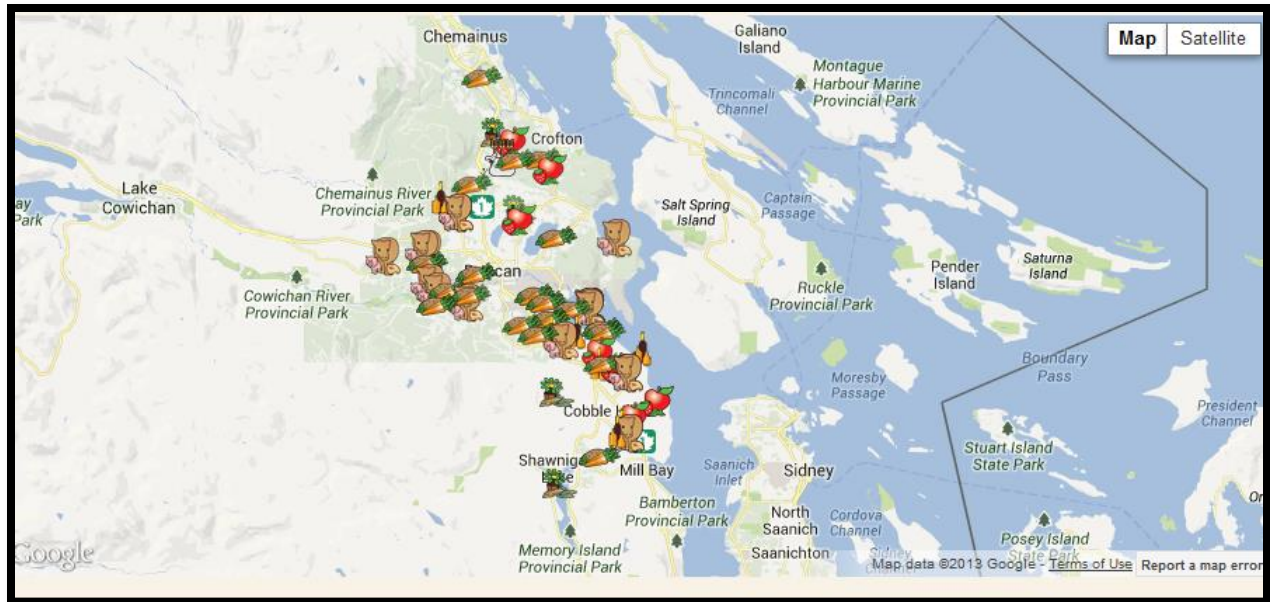


Figure 2. Local Farmers in Cowichan Valley

In 2011 Cowichan Bay developed a Master Sustainable Economic Plan which included strategies to incorporate the slow food movements policies and ideologies into a functional reality for the community and region. A large section was agriculture and environments; Goal 6 indicated goals of community involvement with agricultural practices, for the region to have a standard of excellence in regards of quality food and production, and to educate the public about agriculture (Commission, 2011)

Social involvement is important for the conservation and sustainability of agricultural environment as we are the leading cause of damaging it.

Goal 6: Thriving and Diverse Agriculture Industry

24. Implement actions from the Cowichan Region Area Agricultural Plan.
25. Continue to encourage greater participation in community-supported agriculture programs.
26. Partner with local farmers and agricultural landowners to explore options for succession planning.
27. Strive for the Cowichan Region to become a centre of excellence for food and wine.
28. Educate the public and promote agriculture

Figure 3. Objectives in the Cowichan Sustainable Economic Development Plan

Social Capital

The Slow Food Movement would not be successful without the engagement and attention of community residence and loyal members. The movement not only ensures practices that promote healthy sustainable initiatives, rather it provides a space for people to feel empowered, educated, healthy and together. Social Capital can be positively measured by the following basis that slow food has had an impact on Cowichan Bay.

Getting to know your local producers gives you a stronger sense of place, relationships, trust, and pride within your community:

Cowichan Valley is home of a large number of local food providers, this has established a place and opportunity for many people to source fresh, local and organic food. Not only does this provide diversity among where you buy your food, but it has become a trend and a social event in the valley for residence and visitors alike. Many farmers markets flood with people from the island to buy and consume the products available, many feel this is a place of gathering and space where they can develop relationships with new people and share perspectives with like-minded people (Starr, 2010).

“As a producer of social and cultural capital, the Slow Food movement presents us with a way of thinking about how consumption choices made by an individual form part of an interdependent network within a social economy. Individuals gain identity through their consumption of food. Slow Food advances a philosophy in which taste can be developed as a form of human capital and common consumption practices allow one to acquire a form of cultural capital” (Pietrykowski, 2004).

A survey was conducted by the Cowichan municipality while developing their OCP to better understand the slow food values in relation to the importance to the residence. The table below shows that the largest level of importance was local resources and biodiversity, in addition social conditions improvement (although not ranked in the top 3) demonstrated a high level of positivity (3=47, 4=34, 5=20) with an overall mean score of 3.45.

Slow Food values	Importance scaling					mean
	1	2	3	4	5	
Use of local resources	6	1	26	37	43	3.97
Biodiversity	9	2	25	44	33	3.80
Reduction of chemical inputs	8	5	35	34	31	3.66
Access to food	10	1	38	39	25	3.60
Social conditions improvement	11	1	47	34	20	3.45
Managerial skills	15	1	48	33	16	3.30
Income	15	5	46	30	17	3.26
Access to credits	19	12	64	12	6	2.77

Note: 1 = Very Negatively; 5 = Very positively

Figure 4. Slow Food Values Chart

You gain insight into your food's story through talking with the people who grew and/or made it:

The relationship people built with their local farmers increases the trust between consumer and producer. This is a positive impact on social capital because of the space and landscape in which market places and small-scale farms provide. Establishing that connection allows for not only the consumer to benefit, rather there is a mutual benefit socially and economically. The adoption of small-scale farming has allowed the farmers direct contact with the consumers, this creates a tangible and understandable view when it comes to price and livelihood (Lewis, 2013). The consumer can see that the product is grown in a sustainable manner, and that the person that grew it is selling you the product. This invites a better understanding for fair-trade or fair-pricing for food as the trust, relationship, social and education aspects are all included in the process of purchasing food from markets and/or farmers.

Another social strength or benefit is the product itself on social dynamic. Farmers markets often feature organic foods. Organic produce have been found to contain higher levels of antioxidants, substances attributed to cancer prevention in humans, than non-organic foods (Link & Ling, 2010). This leads to the overall social happiness and health of Cowichan Bay to potentially have the opportunity to actively increase their health and lower their chances of illness.

Weaknesses

The slow food movement in Cowichan Bay has gained a lot of public, national and international approval. Many articles and academic articles focus on the benefits of introducing slow food principles into a community. However there is little to no research conducted on the negative impacts or weaknesses of the organization of movement. That does not mean that there are no implication to adopting food security alternatives, this section describes a few of the potential and real weaknesses to the slow movement in Cowichan Bay and region.

“Slow Food, along with other similar organisations, have not to date been able to develop a full-fledged citizen-based political mobilization nor address the issue of marginality in the food system” (Hall, 2011)

Environmental Capital

The Cowichan Valley Region has greatly emphasized the beauty of their landscapes, fresh food, and their unique arts, culture programs to tourists on a global scale. This tourism development has many beneficial economic gains for the region, however if not managed properly the region could be set for a ‘mass tourism’ overload. This can cause many environmental implications on nature land and agricultural lands.

Agri-tourism is an increasing niche segment of tourism in the Cowican Valley; where people come from rural areas to experience how land is cultivated and methods of growing and managing famer lands (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2013). This affects land use: if tourism is the focus on farms and agricultural practices, then how are the farm lands maintaining quality practices, and productivity? In addition tourists often cause increased garbage, emissions to increased food supply demand. These consumer demands and usages are likely to have a negative effect on Cowichan Bay and region due to lack of supply and stress factors on the environment; the size of the farms cannot produce the amount of ‘goods’ needed to support both host and visitor (Hall, 2011). Also associated to damaging the environment is carrying capacity of the influx of tourist. This directly relates to environmental stain because of viable population in an area.

Social Capital

The impacts to social capital from slow food are minimal; most studies indicate how productive, sustainable and positive local food systems are to social capital. When reading through Cowichan's Sustainable Economic Development Plan there was a section where residence had expressed that the costs of living in Cowichan Bay were too high (Commission, 2011). This could link to the costs of purchasing organic foods and how it is overall affected the residence wallets. The cost of eating and the cost of food in BC have risen by 1.9% between October 2008 and October 2009 (Cowichan Green Community, 2010)

Cost of food as a proportion of the Support allowance for a reference family of four, 2005 - 2009				
Family of 4, income assistance	2005	2006	2007	2009
Support allowance	\$401	\$401	\$401	\$401
Cost of food	\$654	\$653	\$715	\$872
Cost of food as a % support allowance	163%	163%	178%	217%

Figure 5. Cost of Food for a Family of 4

How this links to social capital is the less disposable income a family or individual has the less likely they are to participate in social events, and be seen in social environments, which ultimately decreases their ability to build relationships outside of home and work.

The slow Food Movement has many members and slow communities often host events to promote and support the slow food organization. This is a great way to promote the initiatives and principles that the organization are involved with however this can also be seen as a weakness due to contradicting concepts in vision and reality. Expanding further, the organization has had up to 2,000 members attend their events. This would cause a large amount of food, energy, transportation etc. use to accomplish an event such as one that size. This is not feasible in regards to their 'slow food' and 'slow community' principles. How this relates to social capital is the amount of visitors to an area for the event can cause social disturbances in the community, such as overcrowding and increased traffic.

Conclusion & Lessons

Slow Food Movement in Cowichan has directed the region/community to practice more sustainable initiatives, and maintain an improving balanced economic state through the slow food Movements visions and philosophies. Key concepts that have been identified through the case study are that the partnerships between farmer and consumer are an integral part of keeping a sustainable practice and growth of local food. It helps maintain environmental standards and organic systems in order to provide quality and healthy options for community members. Also the relationship between both parties has established a social platform for like-minded sustainably conscious people. In return this allows for fair-pricing of products, education, awareness and Increased culture and atmosphere through markets.

Although limited material is provided on the weaknesses of the Slow Food Movement there are areas that need to be considered when looking at the larger scope of the partnership of tourism and a slow food community. Preventative measures for mass Agri-tourism and carrying capacity should be taken into consideration to ensure environmental degradation and negative social impacts do not occur.

Future Considerations

A less bias approach to researching the impacts of alternative food security systems is a must on a local and global scale. Although seemingly the better alternative than industrialized farming and mass production it is integral to have a better and more balanced perspective on how slow food and other initiatives are 'measuring up'. Do their systems truly preserve ecological damage? Are the reducing Greenhouse gasses and energy consumption? More fundamental questions with respect to population growth, income (re)distribution, and restrictions of consumption outside of the food domain are not yet asked within the Slow Food mantra, and therefore the question of how sustainable is slow food and slow life in terms of long-term?



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