

Community Perceptions and Barriers to Accessing Local Produce in the Dunbar-Southlands

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15 May 2015

Report prepared at the request of The UBC Farm in partial fulfillment of UBC Geog 419:
Research in Environmental Geography, for Dr. David Brownstein

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Executive Summary

Understanding a community's lived experiences is pivotal when preparing to engage, participate and influence the community's experiences. By asking the questions "*What are the community perceptions of local produce in the Dunbar-Southlands?*" and "*What are the present barriers or challenges that community members face in accessing local produce?*", the researcher partnered with the UBC Farm sought to understand the Dunbar-Southlands residents' views and access to local produce. Interviewing 3 residents and 3 experts, distributing a questionnaire to 40 residents and compiling demographic data provided answers that informed the recommendations made to the UBC Farm.

The research found that residents perceive local produce to be better than conventional produce. Experts and the residents revealed that freshness, quality, taste, supporting the local economy and lowered carbon emissions were the main motivations for buying local produce. The following barriers to accessing local produce were also revealed: residents find that it is not easy to physically access places selling local produce, the price of said local produce is higher than conventional produce, consuming local produce would make no difference to their wellbeing and limited education about local produce prevent some residents from understanding or justifying the expense. When asked, residents expressed a desire for more affordable prices, increased access to and more education about local produce.

It can be said that residents were of the opinion that local produce is better, but local is not necessarily accessible and is expensive. Among the residents that *do* want to buy local, the challenge lies in making it easier for them to do so – whether in terms of increasing general accessibility or providing them rational reasons for the expense. It is thus recommended that the UBC Farm (1) educate residents about the value of buying and consuming local produce, (2) bring local produce to the residents, (3) make local produce more affordable for the residents who can't afford to splurge on food, and (4) partner with small, experienced producers in the area to re-mould the residents' lived experience of local produce in an effective and far reaching way. Given the limited resources and narrowed scope of this paper's focus, future research might look into how these neighbourhood food experiences fit within the City of Vancouver "greening" ambitions and food strategies. Taken as a launching point, this paper's recommendations can begin to guide the UBC Farm in its ambitions to engage surrounding neighbourhoods and form more sustainable communities.

Introduction

The definition of “local”

This research project engages the topic of *local food*, as such it is important to immediately establish the definition of *local* and thus scope this research will cover. In this research project, the definition of the key term *local* will be adapted from the definition of *local food* provided by the Government of Canada’s Canadian Food Inspection Agency (2014):

local food;

Food produced in the province or territory in which it is sold, or; Food sold across provincial borders within 50 km of the originating province or territory.

Evidently, this is a large, provincial scale definition. It will be more feasible for my research question to spatially scale down to a municipal level and to focus on produce alone rather than the gamut of local food, given that the UBC Farm is using its own produce and community influence to explore the views and experiences of nearby neighbourhoods.

Tailoring the definition of local to my research question accommodates the limited scope of my study. The UBC Farm is relatively small scale and might not be immediately interested in the provincial or regional patterns of local food provision, even if large markets in the Dunbar-Southlands might be involved at that scale. At the same time, the Farm would be interested in interacting with and providing produce to homes within a very short distance from the Farm, something that supermarkets in the area might be unable to do. Tailoring the definition allows me to engage the research question in a meaningful way.

Statement of research question

As a researcher, my interests in this topic stem from the feasibility of local food as a generally accepted solution to future food crisis, and my interest in Vancouver’s aims to be the greenest city in the world. As an Environment and Sustainability Geography major, I am curious about the solutions to impending climate change driven challenges. The UBC Farm is presenting an opportunity to investigate one of those solutions at the scale of the Dunbar-Southlands neighbourhood and to observe the factors that play a role in its successful adaptation or general failure.

My representative for the UBC Farm, Victoria Hodson, articulated some of the questions and objectives the Farm was looking to investigate through this research. The twofold research question that touched on both my own and the Farm's interests is below:

*What are the community perceptions of local produce in the Dunbar-Southlands?
What are the present barriers or challenges that community members face in accessing local produce?*

A map delineating the proposed study area, the Dunbar-Southlands neighbourhood, in relation to the UBC Farm's approximate location can be found below:



Figure 1 Map indicating the approximate location of the UBC Farm and the location of the Dunbar-Southlands neighbourhood, Vancouver BC (Google Maps, 2015).

Through the proposal Victoria graciously provided and in our in-person meetings, my community partner helped me to understand the UBC Farm's interests the research question above. The

Farm is located in a dense urban space, and thus has the opportunity to explore sustainable communities and the means in which they are achieved. The Farm is interested in engaging surrounding neighbourhoods, understanding their views on local produce, playing a role in influencing perceptions of local produce and overcoming the access barriers residents might be facing. Past student researchers explored why people joined the Farm's Community Supported Agriculture program, conducted a survey of CSA experiences and member demographics (Beck et al 2014), and began an inquiry into the possible avenues for collaboration between the Farm and the Dunbar-Southlands for strengthening food security in the community (Xiao et al 2014). This current research project is building on those past strides, heading in a direction to understand beyond the state of food security and the membership base, what neighbouring communities understand of local produce and how accessible it is to them. The many groups of people living in multicultural Vancouver will face different issues regarding what lifestyle choices they make. If the UBC Farm is to engage the views of its neighbouring communities and aid them in overcoming the barriers to accessing local produce, an understanding of those residents' experiences is pivotal.

Methods

Several methods were used to respond to the research question. Demographic statistics were used to illustrate the population of the Dunbar-Southlands and contextualized data gathered by other methods. In order to accommodate my limited research timeframe and to conserve my research efforts for more laborious data, the source that provided a spotlight on the Dunbar-Southlands and was used to acquire this data was the Vancouver Economic Commission. As Feldmann and Hamm (2015) found in their work on consumer perceptions and preferences for local food, the "inclusion of demographics...generated insight into some common characteristics of local food shoppers". The following attributes that could contribute to shopping behaviour and inclinations to purchase local produce were considered:

- Age distribution
- Family structure
- Family income
- Education

Three interviews were conducted with community residents and another three interviews were conducted with experts on the topic, allowing me an in-depth exposure to the population's

experiences with local produce. Within the time constraints of this study, interviews were a suitable tool that allowed a depth of understanding into the interviewee's views and encouraged further discussion into tangential but influential points that other methods might not have revealed. With this method however, I ran the risk of not acquiring interviewees, as this was a problem my community partner had stressed from past experiences with student research. As an alternative to not securing resident interviews, I planned to incorporate interviews with professors researching the topic, produce store managers in the area, food related organizations in the area and community coordinators. Failing the first hand information from residents, information from these sources would provide enough material to begin to illustrate the scenario in the neighbourhood.

As a means of gathering a wide snapshot of resident perceptions, the questionnaire (see Appendix A) was useful in supplementing some of the information that was reported in interviews. The questionnaire managed to receive responses from 40 residents in total. Requiring minimal effort from respondents, the questionnaire was a good tool for gathering many responses to form a representation of public opinion. The risk in this method was not gathering enough responses in order for data trends in people's experiences to appear, thus as many responses as possible were gathered. The information from the questionnaire, together with the interview data, was intended to provide as complete a picture as possible. Both methods made it possible to gather data that was detailed and covered the experiences of a large group of people.

Results: A statistical profile of the Dunbar-Southlands residents

With the statistical data gathered, a profile of the most prominent demographic characteristics of the Dunbar-Southlands residents can be created. Referring to data from 2005 on the Dunbar area, the numerically dominant age groups were individuals under the age of 20 years old, 20 to 34 years and 45 to 54 year old age ranges (Vancouver Economic Commission 2009), whilst nearly 40% of Southlands residents are 40 to 64 years old (Real Estate Weekly 2012). This illustrates a significant proportion of the Dunbar-Southlands residents as children, young adults and older adults in their middle years. This would be the age structure that can be expected if a neighbourhood has a high number of family units.

Among the Dunbar residents, 79% of the households fell under the definition of a census family (Vancouver Economic Commission 2009), a term that refers to married couples or common-law couples, with or without children, or a lone parent family (Statistics Canada 2015). 80% of families comprised married couples over the common-law couples and single parents (Vancouver Economic Commission 2009). Overall in 2005 Dunbar-Southlands households reported an annual income in excess of \$100,000 (Vancouver Economic Commission 2009, Vancouver Guide 2015), which contrasts the Vancouver average income of \$43,000 in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2010). In addition, the Vancouver Economic Commission (2009) reported that out of the Dunbar neighbourhood's population, 56% held a University degree, whilst 80% of the Southlands neighbourhood had a post-secondary education (BlockTalk 2015).

Results: Residents' Perceptions of Local produce

The questionnaire results showed that the overwhelming majority of individuals felt that local produce is better than conventional produce, and that they made an effort to purchase local produce. Interviews with the public showed that residents thought that local produce was fresher, supported local producers and reduced market monopoly. One resident noted that a downside to local produce is that it is often not packaged and is smaller in size compared to conventional produce, and so she felt compelled to buy conventional produce and get more for her dollar.

In his interview, Expert and Vancouver farmer Gabriel from Frisch Farms observed that freshness, quality, taste and supporting the local economy were the main motivations for buying local produce (Pliska 2015). Local was better than conventional because it resulted in less carbon emissions, ensured the farmer profits and produced a higher quality product. When asked who would care about buying local produce, Gabriel stated that young, educated families with spare income and leisure time would fit the profile he has observed among his customers (Pliska 2015). When asked the same question, expert and Vancouver farmer Kristoffer from Southlands Farm reported that young families living in condo apartments with no garden space were the most interested in allowing their children to participate in farm activities and engage in the ideas about the benefits of eating local (Korol 2015).

Results: Challenges and Barriers to accessing local produce

The questionnaire data revealed that residents sourced their produce mainly from their local grocery store and their farmer's market. In shopping for this produce, residents consider quality the primary factor they consider in their shopping choices, with the convenience of the shopping location as a second factor. Most residents bought local produce for its quality and for their health, whilst those who did not buy local produce felt it is not easily accessible, the price is high and it would make no difference to their health. Most people reported that they would like to have more access to, education about and cheaper prices for their local produce.

In depth interviews with the public showed that supermarkets and local grocery stores were the two main sources for produce. Convenience, price and quality were the three recurring points as to what factors drove the individuals to purchase produce, as well as what factors could inhibit them from doing so. One resident noted that even though people have differing budgets they are open to the idea of buying local, and would do so if the produce was brought to them and if buying local was made easier. Another resident noted that disposable income is a key factor in whether or not individuals would be willing to spend more on consuming local produce. A third resident noted that with her limited knowledge and concern for local produce, she goes for what looks good, is cheap and convenient; indicating that in the absence of education and access, local produce is not a compelling choice.

Expert interviewee Kristoffer added that whilst it is expensive to eat local in Vancouver, those who can afford to do so prefer to purchase from supermarkets with a wholesome image (Korol 2015). Their affluence was a barrier to individuals in the Dunbar-Southlands area purchasing produce directly from the farm, preferring instead the more polished supermarket. Overall both experts agreed that high price, low accessibility and poor education were the main impediments to people committing to purchasing and consuming local produce.

Discussion and Recommendations to the UBC farm

In light of the collected data, as per the Community Partner's request this paper will make the following four recommendations on how the UBC Farm might play a role in influencing perceptions of local produce and helping residents overcome any barriers to access.

Recommendation 1: Education in the community

The residents' desire for more education on local produce was strong throughout the questionnaire responses. Gabriel from Frisch Farms stated that education was a strong factor in altering people's perceptions about local produce, that if residents understood local produce they would support it (Pliska 2015). Discussing her own personal experience, an expert interviewee relayed how she unknowingly fed her child produce from a roadside farm whose soil was contaminated by heavy metals (Anonymous 2015). Had she known about this hidden aspect of the produce, she stated would not have fed her baby the contaminated food (Anonymous 2015). There is value in knowing more about the produce we eat, and having a full understanding of where that food comes from frees us from the risks that lie in *not* knowing. Knowledge and education give consumers the ability to know better and empowers them to make informed choices. Kristoffer from Southlands Farm also conveyed a similar importance in education, as the farm holds programs that aim to shift families' values surrounding local produce via educating young children about food (Korol 2015). Stating that education is the solution, Kristoffer finds that education has been the effective tool in affecting how residents viewed and experienced their food (Korol 2015). In order to make a shift that requires financial and personal commitment, individuals must be provided the information to make educated and rational choices. As such, my first recommendation to the UBC Farm on how the Farm might play a role in influencing perceptions of local produce and overcoming access barriers is to educate the community about the value of buying and consuming local produce.

The questionnaire shows that among the residents who don't buy local produce the high prices, low accessibility and the lack of a valid justification were limiting factors. If residents are provided rational reasons why they should commit the effort towards acquiring local produce, consumption of local produce might increase. Though it can be argued, as Penney and Prior (2014) found, that consumer interest in local food does not always translate into behaviour; it is more arguable that a complete absence in education fostering this interest will leave consumer behaviour unchanged. A Canada-wide study by Campbell et al. (2013) revealed that consumers were receiving mixed messages and are confused between the concepts of 'local' and 'organic'. This is an instance where education can play a role in not only diffusing consumer confusion about what local means, but also help them understand the benefits that would outweigh the costs they will incur in consuming local produce. Wilkins et al. (2002) found that individual interest and exposure likely accounted for consumer understanding of the terms 'local foods'

and 'seasonal foods', thus making a case for wider education in order to ensure that a community's knowledge about food is not contingent on individually sparked interest and self-education.

This education can take many forms and, looking at the collected data, at the initial stages of the educational programs it is important that the information is easy to distribute, compelling and easy to understand. The large number of questionnaire respondents who desired increased education indicates that the information must be capable of reaching a large number of people. This means the information is best presented in a lighter medium, like fliers and posters that are capable of being widely distributed. The practical barriers of price and convenience indicate that the information must be compelling and truly viable in the residents' day-to-day life. This means the information must present rationalisations that will be realistic to people's lives, given the goal is to make conscientious shoppers choose local produce over the other benefits of conventional produce. The recommendations presented must be grounded in the shopping experiences residents actually face. Given that not all residents are experts in agriculture, the information must be easy to understand and be presented in layman terms. This means that the information must avoid heavy academic and industry wording and, if applicable, provide definitions to key concepts. With these suggestions, it is therefore recommended that the UBC Farm produce fliers with simple and convincing information about the benefits of eating local produce. Further on, the UBC Farm could develop this format to afterschool programs and sessions that provide more in-depth dialogue with residents. Looking ahead towards my fourth Recommendation "Partnering with smaller farms in the area", working together with producers in the Dunbar-Southlands currently pursuing similar community initiatives in order to host educational events and programs at the UBC Farm is a possible direction beyond the initial stage presented above.

Recommendation 2: Bring produce to the consumer

Residents' limited accessibility to local produce was a recurring theme throughout the interviews and questionnaires. With Broadway and Broadway (2011) finding that urban agriculture efforts in Metro Vancouver "have not significantly affected the availability of locally produced food in supermarkets", the issue of conveniently accessing local produce is evident. Of the many questionnaires that reflected an interest in and high opinion of local produce, a large sum pointed towards factors of physical convenience inhibiting consumption. In order for the UBC Farm to help the Dunbar-Southlands residents to overcome this accessibility barrier, my second recommendation would be to bring the local produce to the residents. It can be argued that

residents might be perceiving accessibility to be low in a case where facilities are abundant, in which case it might become more about convenience of location. Moore et al. (2008) found that when comparing GIS-derived densities of stores and the availability of healthy food reported by community residents, perceived availability was positively associated with the densities of supermarkets or small stores in the area. As such, it can be believed that Dunbar-Southlands residents have a credible sense of what facilities are accessible. Therefore where the reported resident experiences relay that access to local produce is low, the UBC Farm might then consider in what ways it can work to bring that produce to the consumer or highlight the existing facilities.

Providing the produce in places residents frequent will make it easier for residents to purchase, as their consumption of local produce will no longer depend solely on what their regular store offers. The residents who reported shopping at supermarkets and grocery stores would need to travel further to intentionally source local produce. As mentioned by expert Kristoffer (Korol 2015) and as revealed by the demographic data, the affluent population living in the area next door to the Southlands farm preferred not to go directly to the farm as a matter of appearances. As such, adding a convenient and approachable vending spot in the neighbourhood that appeals to and engages residents, whether a weekend produce stall and the like, will add to the accessibility of local produce. The Farmer's Markets in the area are a step in the right direction, and alternative methods of selling produce can also be explored. One such alternative is the 'pocket market model' approach examined in the context of Metro Vancouver by Evans and Miewald (2010), where community-based organizers act as intermediaries selling food from producers to consumers in small, portable markets. This method boosted consumer education and increased food accessibility, and as the local food movement progresses, the authors concluded that the benefits of pocket models will impact farmers, consumers and community organizers alike (Evans and Miewald 2010).

Recommendation 3: Make produce more affordable

As the demographic profile generated by the statistical data showed, the Dunbar-Southlands neighbourhood is composed of affluent families. In 2005 households allocated 10% of their annual income, that is \$12 000, to food compared to the 12% and 11% allocated on the Vancouver and Metro-Vancouver scale, respectively (Vancouver Economic Commission 2009). Given that other expenses like taxes (26% of income), shelter (18% of income), transportation (11% of income) demand even more money (Vancouver Economic Commission 2009),

increasing food expenditure is unlikely to be welcomed if other living expenses are high. While the statistical average might be the 'affluent family', just fewer than 50% of households make less than \$80,000, and around 20% of residents are not census families (Vancouver Economic Commission 2009). As the expert interviews by Kristoffer and Gabriel revealed that younger, educated people were most likely to care about produce locality (Korol 2015, Pliska 2015), the price barrier should be reduced in order to free those who are more likely to know and care about local produce.

Throughout the interviews and questionnaire, the frequently higher price of local produce was a principal barrier in why residents choose to not purchase local produce. As such, my third recommendation would be for the UBC Farm to make the local produce it sells more affordable for residents of all income levels. If local produce were sold at more compelling prices, residents might be willing to overcome the other obstacles it takes to purchase it. While it can be argued that prices are difficult to reduce and that prices might already be as low as possible, the important aspect is that residents are voicing that the produce is still unattainable. The majority of the residents in the questionnaire reported perceiving local produce as better, but yearned for lower prices to enable to act on those values they hold. In the cases where these prices cannot be reduced further, the education recommended above would help provide transparent explanations to residents, allowing them to decide the costs they are willing to incur for themselves.

Recommendation 4: Partnering with smaller producers in the Dunbar-Southlands area

As an additional step in moving forward, the Farm might consider partnering or looking towards the smaller and more experienced farms in the Dunbar-Southlands area in terms of how to engage this community. Producers such as the Southlands Farm that places emphasis on engaging young children in afterschool programs and summer camps might provide insight into how the UBC farm might approach providing more education on local produce in the area, given the large number of families in the neighbourhood. In this process, the Farm might consider evaluating how other producers in the Vancouver area engage their communities on the topic of local food and uncover the steps for the Farm to follow suit. In his expert interview, Kristoffer (Korol 2015) revealed the financial and logistical limitations smaller educational programs, such as those run by the Southlands Farm, face. Some of these limitations are the often small budget used to run the farm, the restricted amount of free time available to educate the children, the limited amount of paid staff available to help volunteers and the small property available for

these activities. By partnering with nearby producers with similar community objectives, the outreach expertise of the smaller farms and the wider resource pool of the UBC Farm can unite to re-mould the Dunbar-Southlands' lived experience of local produce in an effective and far reaching way.

Overview of Recommendations

The literature review by Feldmann and Hamm (2015) analysed 73 studies in English published between January 2000 and January 2014 in order to discern customer perceptions and preferences for local food. In the studies analysed, the authors concluded that the unstandardized definition of 'local' food, demographic characteristics influencing personal characteristics on attitudes and behaviour, increased knowledge reinforcing existing values, contextual factors such as seasonality and convenience, and attitudes to certain types of food motivating decisions to purchase are all factors that determine local food purchase behaviour (Feldmann and Hamm 2015). The UBC Farm can utilize the above four recommendations to act on the patterns Feldmann and Hamm (2015) uncovered in their large meta-study. By implementing increased education, bringing local produce to the consumer, making local produce competitively affordable for all and collaborating with the small groups involved in similar initiatives, the UBC Farm can begin to act on influencing perceptions and helping residents overcome the issues this paper and Feldmann and Hamm's (2015) paper uncovered. The importance of price, access and educated motivations is further echoed by a paper by Chambers et al (2007) that found that price and inconvenience were the main barriers preventing UK citizens from purchasing local products over national and imported ones.

Research Limitations and Future Research Directions

This paper faced several limitations. Due to limited resources, research efforts had to be focused on emphasising local produce rather than the full spectrum of local food. This provided only a snapshot of the residents' experiences with local food, since produce includes issues such as freshness and ripeness that are uniquely more emphasised. In addition, the demographic components of this research had to rely on secondary sources, some of which were not ideal. Some demographic information needed to be secured from indirect organizations that aren't immediately involved in population statistics. Whilst these organisations have an interest in wholesome data, it would have been ideal to either collect this information as primary data or as

secondary data from a government source that provided such information on this small, neighbourhood scale. Overall, the consensus between the different sources encountered lends some credibility to the picture the demographic data presented.

In terms of the UBC Farm's future steps and moving forward from the recommendations, the Farm might investigate how these community experiences of local produce sit within the context of The City of Vancouver's food strategy, *What feeds us*, published in 2013. This evaluation of the city's intentions compared to the lived experiences of residents might provide a contrast that contextualises the neighbourhood experiences that papers, such as this one, have uncovered.

Conclusions

In conclusion, given that Weatherell et al. (2003) argue that that alternative food chains are often operated with little analysis of likely customers, the nature of their food-related perceptions and concerns, and their reasons for buying local; the UBC Farm's interest in the experiences of Dunbar-Southlands residents is an important preparatory step in deciding how best to play a role in influencing the perceptions of local produce in this community and helping those residents access it. The Dunbar-Southlands area is a neighbourhood that would benefit from the participation of the UBC Farm. If from a wider perspective the UBC farm intends to explore the concept of local food as a means of achieving sustainable communities, understanding the experiences of the surrounding neighbourhoods and their Vancouver context is important. This paper's focus therefore represents a launching point into discussing the UBC Farm's role in shaping those sustainable communities and providing informed and realistic solutions on how the residents involved can find those sustainable communities livable.

APPENDIX A: Residents' Questionnaire

Please circle the response that applies:

1. Where do you regularly buy your produce? Please choose one.
 - a. A chain supermarket
 - b. A local grocery store
 - c. A farmer's market
 - d. A local farm
 - e. I grow my own produce
 - f. Other: _____
2. What is the most important factor you consider when purchasing produce?
 - a. Convenience of location
 - b. Quality of produce
 - c. Price of produce
 - d. Time
 - e. Other: _____
3. Is local produce better than conventional produce?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. Do you make an effort to purchase local produce?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. If you answered "Yes" to Question 4, what is the main reason you purchase local produce?
 - a. My health
 - b. It is easily accessible
 - c. Quality
 - d. Price
 - e. Other: _____
6. If you answered "No" to Question 4, why do you not purchase local produce?
 - a. It won't make a difference to my health
 - b. It is not easily accessible
 - c. There is no difference in quality
 - d. The price is high
 - e. Other: _____
7. What would you like to have more of:
 - a. Education about local produce
 - b. More access to local produce
 - c. Cheaper local produce
 - d. Other: _____
8. Would you like to be contacted for an interview? Please provide your email and phone number here:
9. Do you have any other comments? Please use the back of the page for your comments.

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