Handpicked: Stories from the Field

Season 1, Episode 4: “We Know How to Survive on the Land”: Climate Change Adaptation, Food Systems and Life in Kakisa, Northwest Territories

Featuring Andrew Spring in conversation with Chief Llyod Chicot and Melaine Simba

# **Transcript**

**Speakers**

Amanda Di Battista: **AD**

Laine Young: **LY**

Andrew Spring: **AS**

Chief Llyod Chicot: **CL**

Melaine Simba: **MS**

{[Opening Music]}

**LY**: Hello and welcome to *Handpicked: Stories from the Field*, a podcast by the Laurier Centre for Sustainable food systems. I’m Laine Young.

**AD**: And I’m Amanda Di Battista, and we’re back with the second part of our two-part episode on food systems in the Northwest Territories.

**LY**: In our last episode, we heard from Andrew Spring, Melaine Simba, and Chief Lloyd Chicot of the Ka'a'gee Tu First Nation, about food systems in their small town of Kakisa, Northwest territories. They also told us about how climate change is impacting the community and their food systems, and how they’re adapting to the changes happening to the land.

**AD**: In this episode, we’re delighted to welcome back Andrew Spring, to walk us through the second part of his discussion with Melaine, and Chief Chicot, who work closely with Andrew and his research team, in a research partnership with the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems.

**LY**: Today, Melaine and Chief Chicot will tell us about 5 key themes in their research partnership: youth, community gardening, community mapping, land stewardship—or how the Ka'a'gee Tu First Nation care for the land—and waste management in Kakisa. Together with Andrew they offer reflections on what the research partnership means to the community, and how they see that work as a part of how they are adapting to climate change.

**AD**: This conversation was really an opportunity to foreground the relationships that have grown out of the research partnership between the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, and the people of Kakisa. The research coming out of Kakisa is an amazing example of how productive a community-driven research partnership can be—they are collecting ground-breaking information on the impact of climate change on the land, they’re looking at new ways of imagining Indigenous food systems, and they are supporting the transfer of traditional knowledge through research. But what comes out in this conversation, and what is so important to remember in all community-driven research, is that real people are working together to find real solutions to the real problems that impact their daily lives. And that work involves the cultivation of authentic and lasting relationships.

**LY**: For Melaine, Chief Chicot, and Andrew, those relationships are the most valuable part of their work together, and we are so privileged to bring you that conversation.

[Musical Break]

**AD**: Welcome back Andrew, we’re looking forward to hearing about some of the specific projects that you’re working on with the people of Kakisa.

**AS**: Thanks Amanda, I’m really happy to share the work that we do.

**AD**: Maybe we can start with a very quick recap of the last episode.

**AS**: Sure thing. In the first episode, Chief Chicot and Melaine told us about Kakisa, which is the smallest community in the Northwest Territories. So, they told us about their food system, which is built on the relationship they have with the land.

**AD**: Right, and you also talked about climate change.

**AS**: We sure did. Chief Chicot and Melanie outlined some of the drastic changes that are occurring in northern landscapes due to climate change. It’s really important to remember that while we've seen very small increases in average temperatures globally, in Canada’s north the impact of climate change is really undeniable—it is happening at a very accelerated pace.

**AD**: And those changes have serious impacts on Indigenous food systems.

**AS**: Absolutely, and these changes mean that communities have to find new ways to adapt.

**AD**: So, in this episode, we are going to focus on climate change adaptation; what adaptation means for the people of Kakisa, who’s involved, and how that adaptation takes shape in the community.

[Musical Break]

**AS**: In Kakisa, climate change adaptation starts with the youth. So, a lot of the work that we do in the community really revolves around youth and getting them engaged in the process. So, here’s Chief Chicot on why the community is so committed to engaging their youth.

**CL**: They are the ones that are gonna carry on the hunting and that kind of stuff. I feel, I feel good now like, just witnessing the hunt in the last two years or so, the guys are doing good; they can go out by themselves and do whatever, do the hunting and stuff. And the last couple of years I just sort of, just let them do the shooting and all the stuff. I just stood by, help the skinning and that kind of stuff. And that’s the way it was with the other elders. They stood by while we done the work. So, now it seems that the younger ones are starting to pick it up and they’re gonna continue. Which is good to me ‘cause I can see that happening for the next long while. So, that’s, so I guess that’s the whole goal of what the elders taught us and what we’re, my generation, wants to pass on to those younger people, so that this could continue. So, to me, it looks, the future looks good.

**MS**: Well, for me like, I’m grateful that what our elders and the Chief taught us growing up. Like growing up, they taught us survival skills and how to live and understand the changes in the land and animals and whatever all the survival skills that we learned. Like what Lloyd was talking about, that we have that instilled in us now, like it’s in, like, we know how to survive on the land now. Now it’s up to my generation to teach our kids like what we learned and, for me, I want my little guy to go on the land and experience all the work that I’m doing and just to love the environment and why I am doing the work that I am doing; like the water studies and fish studies and the Atlas program and everything that we have been doing for these past few years. And I think the next generation, from my little boys’ generation, I think they’re gonna be on the right path as we are now. Because what we are learning and all these meetings that we have, we try and tutor the youth and “On the Land Programs,” and all that, all combines with the science part of it too, and traditional knowledge. So, they’re on the right path, and what they learn in school, and they come to our meetings. We try to invite them to our meetings because everywhere you go they always say ‘it’s about the youth,’ ‘it’s about the youth,’ like we should have youth here. But if you go to these meetings you don’t see no youth. Like this climate change meeting, there’s no youth here, like younger people. Which is like concerning for me because people always stress it out that ‘we need youth,’ ‘we need youth,’ but they don’t include them as much as they should be included. So, but whatever I learned growing up, I am pretty grateful. Maybe it’s what we learnt growing up, taught us who we are today, because we are doing, our younger generations like how we learn the flows of the river, the lake and understand the difference in climate change and all that’s adapting I guess.

**AD**: Andrew, Melaine mentioned “On the Land Camps.” What are those?

**AS**: So, when we started our climate change adaptation planning with the community, the community really emphasized building opportunities for youth to get on the land and be with knowledge-holders and elders and learn about traditional skills. So, one of the ways we do this is through these ‘On the Land Camps,’ where youth, elders, community members, and often some of the researchers, go on an experience on the land together. We learn to fish, we do all sorts of traditional activities, sometimes we talk about the impacts of climate change and what researchers are doing to help monitor those changes. One of the concerns of the community is that a lot of this traditional knowledge is getting lost; as elders get older, again, some of them are dying in communities, and some of this knowledge is being lost with them. So, these camps create this place for youth and elders to get together around a camp fire to share stories about the land, how it used to be, um, things that they need to know when they are on the land, and just pass on that traditional knowledge to the next generation. And it’s all about, the traditional knowledge is all about how to access the food system. So, if we’re building the capacity of the next generation to have this knowledge, then they can access the land for their food system as well. It’s about building a sustainable food system through accessing and transferring that traditional knowledge onto the next generation.

**AD**: And you’ve brought students from the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems into the community to work on community defined projects, right? {Andrew: [That’s right]}. Okay. So, given that the relationship between youth and elders are important in Kakisa, how did they respond to having Laurier students doing research in the community?

**AS**: The community is so welcoming, and our students really become part of the community—they come in, they help out, and what really works well is that they engage with the youth. So, here’s Chief Chicot on his thoughts on this mutual learning opportunity.

**CL**: If those kids can learn from the students and the students can learn from us and the kids, then you know we’ve reached one other person that can, you know, look at this whole climate change and the whole land thing differently. So, that’s the goal I think of some of the elders back then.

**AD**: That sounds like a relationship that benefits everyone.

**AS**: It is. And a lot of the work that we’re able to do is to help the community directly build and support their vision for a sustainable food system. {Amanda: [awesome]} In Kakisa, they’ve identified the importance of traditional food, so breaking down the barriers to help traditional knowledge flow to the next generation—through time spent on the land and other activities, and learning the culture and language—is super important. Working with the community to help develop tools and resources, is the kind of community-based research that we do in Kakisa, and really this helps them achieve the food system that they want. {Amanda: [okay]}. So, through this work we’re trying to grapple with the idea of ‘food sovereignty’- the right of peoples to healthy, culturally appropriate food - and to define their own food systems.

**AD**: I’ve heard this work called “reconciliation in action”—is that right?

**AS**: Yeah, and I really like that. The aim of a lot of the work that we do in Kakisa is to shift the control back to communities so they can determine the food system that they want, and how to achieve those goals.

**AD**: So, you’ve described some of the work that focuses on ensuring that youth have opportunities to learn traditional knowledge. Can you give us an example of another project that is the result of community-led visions of a sustainable food system?

**AS**: Sure. Why don’t I tell you a little about the community gardens in Kakisa?

**AD**: Wait, there’s a garden in Kakisa, that far north?

**AS:** Yeah, there sure is! And there’s actually a long history of growing food in the Northwest Territories. But the garden in Kakisa was one of the first projects that we were able to help the community with. During our initial workshops in the community, they identified the need to grow food. So, we were actually able to mobilize a little bit of funding very early on, and two garden beds materialized within the first year of our work there. {Amanda: [amazing!]} Yeah, as we discussed in the first episode, getting food from the grocery store is a real challenge in Kakisa. So, having better access to fresh healthy food was seen as a priority.

**CL**: There’s a few families in the community that had gardens before. You can still see the outline that my grandparents, Melaine’s Grandfather, and there is an older guy that lived there, Mackenzie there, they used to have gardens, but him he had a little bit more: strawberries, raspberries, turnips, carrots, potatoes. And you could see the potential there. All the harvesting stuff we have been doing, we’ve been getting the potatoes from the Cree because they have lots of potatoes there. With all the work that we have been doing, we are starting to realize that why are we getting all of this stuff from the supermarkets? We are eating a lot of traditional food and stuff like that, but all we need is vegetables and stuff like that. And some people are starting to think about it now more. With the recycling, I didn’t realize people were dumping all that stuff in the behind in that thing there, and I guess the stuff that we have been doing, what we’ve been talking about, seeing you guys in the community is starting to get people thinking and stuff like that. So, that’s where we are. It’s not like there is not any interest, people are starting to realize what we can do. So, they are starting to think.

**AD**: So, the gardens have been a really interesting discussion with the community. There have been some mixed experiences with gardening in the community in the past, some negative and some positive obviously. There is this legacy of people starting a garden or a greenhouse without really working with the community to build that capacity. So, our work is really to kind of develop this capacity from the ground up so that gardening and growing food is part of the community’s food system. We wanted to take a different approach to building capacity in the community to ensure that they really take ownership over the gardens. So, I wouldn’t say these gardens have been a smashing success you know, we are still looking for a champion in the community and we’re still looking for more community buy in and support. But we’ve learned a lot of things along the way, and we now have a good sense of what skills the community has taken up and really enjoyed, and what skills they still need. {Amanda: [Great]}. We are also working together with the community to overcome some of the negative associations with gardening—past trauma from residential schools really does imprint on gardening and the introduction of agriculture in the Northwest Territories. So, we’re trying to frame growing food in a more positive way, and a more culturally relevant way to the community. And again, this is part of our ongoing process of reconciliation.

**AD**: So, it sounds like while gardens are an interesting addition to the food system in Kakisa, a lot of the work still really revolves around maintaining access to traditional foods like fish and moose. Do they sell traditional food in Kakisa?

**AS**: That’s a bit of a long story actually. The community does have a commercial fishery, so they are able to sell fish. But, the sale of traditional foods is not really part of their culture and what they do, and it’s actually restricted as part of some of the original treaties that they signed. So, looking at new ways of exchanging food through what we might call a “food hub,” is one of the ideas that we’re floating around in the community.

**CL**: Some of the stuff we’ve been talking about, like we used to, I know a lot of our people used to make dry fish, dry meat and exchange with the Hudson’s Bay in Providence for other food. So, we’re talking about a food hub, and I’ve been talking to some of the people, maybe we could start that whole, maybe we don’t need a convenience store, maybe we could do an Aboriginal thing like we were talking about. Do the food hub exchange, rummage sale, or you know it’s a day where people don’t work and things like that, they just wanna - maybe we could designate a day like that, maybe four times a year, or once a year to start that process of exchange. {Andrew: [Exchanging between communities?]}. Trading, yeah. That’s what we are thinking about. I’ve been putting the word out and some of them wanted – I think the last go around we had in February that wellness thing there. I was really impressed because we had like thirty people come out and a lot of the young people they wanted to see these changes and the things that we’ve been doing, and the stuff that we’ve been talking about, they are starting to – they are actually feeling it, I think. They want more music and drumming and music festival, that kinnda stuff, more cultural stuff. More of them want to do {Melaine: [On the land stuff]}, yeah, harvesting. They don’t want so much as to do a lot of school activity but to do more on the land stuff. So, that’s some of the things that came out.

**AD**: So, they would exchange food instead?

**AS**: Yeah, and here’s Melaine with more:

**MS**: Yeah, a lot of people in other communities do that. {Chief Chicot: [They harvest and then they sell]}. But that’s not who we are. We are sharing, you know, what we have what we get, we share with each household. That’s how we do it in our community.

**AS**: Yeah, so, the solution in Kakisa might be using different economies— so the formal economy, social economy, and the bartering economy—to move food around. And this is kind of the vision for the food hub in the community. So, food sharing is very strong in Kakisa, and it certainly is a wonderful practice, and it’s something we want to highlight as part of this food system moving forward. Unfortunately, climate change is making it more difficult for people to access traditional foods. It now requires more resources, more time, and there is a lot more risk associated with travelling on the land due to climate change. This makes the informal economies of food, like the sharing economy like Melaine described, so vital.

**AD**: Are there other tools that the community is using?

**AS**: So, the gardens are seen as a modern tool to help the community build a more sustainable food system, but the community is also using maps and GIS tools that allow them to get more information about what is happening on the land. We started a project called the Ka’a’gee Tu Atlas Project a couple years back, and it uses these tools to give the community more information to better adapt to the changing conditions on the land. It combines traditional, and scientific knowledge onto one map so that the community can use it for decision making. I asked Melaine about the project, and how it benefits the community.

**MS**: I think it’s a good tool because it not only captures old stories and traditional names but it gives a good insight for the future like how changes are happening to our land. And if someone goes out on the land, they see something, they come back and they take a picture and they can just put it on Atlas for safety reasons pretty much. Because right now you can’t predict how the weather is going to turn out. Things are happening fast, and elders too can’t even tell what’s gonna happen with the weather. Even the ground too is not frozen; it’s softer ground. And the snow’s texture is different. So, I think it’s a good tool in the future to help harvesters to see changes out in the land. If someone went out and they came back and showed a big hole in the ice or something, that person will know what to expect when he or she goes out on the land.

**AD**: It’s alarming to hear that climate change has caused such significant impacts to the land, that there are now safety concerns.

**AS**: It is, and I’ve asked Melaine and Chief Chicot about their experiences with changes to the land. For context, Dawson and Tarek are two community youth. So, here’s Melaine talking more about taking youth on the land.

**MS**: It gives the younger people too the experience of how our ancestors travelled and how hard it was to get from one place to another, and to portage. Just to have the experience and see everything because we fly over that river from Kakisa to Tathlina, so, we see that river, but we’ve never been on that river.

**CL**: In September I took, me, Tarek, and Dawson, I took them on that river. It’s always been damp. We went over it and we paddled up at that river and went to areas that they named before and there you could see where, nothings been there a while. There’s moose and there’s wolves in there but, you see all the chopped trees. And there’s a whole bunch of trees that were harvested in that area, and they’re still standing, like their stumps, and there used to be whole families there. So, those kinda stuff, there’s areas like that one little island there if you go just on this side of the rapids in Kakisa, you paddle down, and you’ll see that island. That little island is really, it’s just like something has always been there, it’s just flat and it’s a really nice place to stay. So, I remember that {Andrew: [yeah]}, nothing grows there, like no weeds, it just stays flat.

[Musical Break]

**AS**: There is a lot of emphasis in the Northwest Territories on communities protecting their lands. If your food system comes from the land, then protecting that land means that you're also protecting your food system. So as Kakisa is located in the Dehcho region of the Northwest Territories, they don’t actually have a comprehensive land claim, so there is limited protection of their lands. So, here’s Melaine and Chief Chicot again talking about what the community is doing to help protect their lands.

**MS**: Taking care of the land plays a big role in our community and how we want it to be pristine and the way it is, with the animals kept healthy and the water kept clean for future generations. We want all that protected for future generations so that’s why we want that to move forward.

**CL**: I think it’s a different view of what the government wanted and what we’d wanted. We didn’t want, the elders wanted an area where – that big protected area there – they wanted to include all the areas where the fish spawn, up the main rivers on Tathlina, in Kakisa, and on Beaver lake there. And I guess every area where the fish spawn there’s beaver, moose, and all that kind of stuff. We didn’t want any of that stuff. We wanted it just to be the way it is so people could continue harvesting, the traditional way of living and that kind of thing. But we ran into, one of the things that the government, the way they wanted to do, was to totally just cut everything off, nothing in there. But we’d wanted to protect it so that we could continue this way of lifestyle for the future, to continue doing those things and we have been taking care of it. We have been monitoring the animals, the fish, going out there, checking it out every year. Three-four times a year we are going out doing stuff, and we are already taking care of it so why would we want to close it off. And part of that whole scenario was to get the Metis and other communities involved in helping us manage the area. But their concept of management is a little bit different than what the community is thinking about. So, we did sort of clash. I guess what we wanted didn’t really reflect any of the things that we wanted to do. So, they are re-drafting the legislation to incorporate a lot of that. {Andrew: [It’s a long process, eh?]} Yeah, yeah, but that’s what the elders wanted, and that’s what we wanted for the future.

[Musical Break]

**AS**: One of many remarkable things about Kakisa is that, even though they are a tiny community of only about 50 people, they actually have one of the only municipal recycling programs in the Northwest Territories. Recycling was one of the first projects that we worked on together and it required us to build the infrastructure and capacity from the ground up. I asked Chief Chicot and Melaine why waste management was so important in their community. Take a listen.

**CL**: You see the community it’s nice and clean. People don’t like to throw, well, some of us don’t like to stuff away, make a big mess like at the dump. I try to tell people that but it’s the ones that live in the bigger communities that come in that don’t really care about that kind of stuff, they’ll just dump everything in the garbage, and it ends up at the landfill. But you can’t approach it like that; you have to look at it differently.

**MS**: Just like when you go on the land, you go on the land and the land’s clean and you go there, and you go camping and you set up your camp and everything and when you leave you want the land to look the same way as you went there so it all stems down to taking care of the land. It’s always been that way so.

**AD**: That’s really interesting, I can’t imagine that’s what you anticipated doing in the community when you first got there.

**AS**: For sure, and I was certainly surprised. But waste management is part of the food system too. And the community had significant concerns about how waste might impact the land and their traditional food system. It also comes back to them taking care of the land, and they felt that recycling was one of the easiest things that they could do.

To end our conversation, I asked Melaine and Chief Chicot: what was next? You know, where do we go from here?

**CL**: We don’t want it to stop. We are educating people; people are educating us. You know it’s the relationship we’ve built, it’s something that we want to continue. I think, to me, we want to continue that process. Everybody is learning from it. And you know the thing is, once you stop learning I guess you die, you go into the ground. So, I think, to me it’s, we continue to work on a lot of these things, we support one other. And maybe if we can help one person to look at the world differently, maybe from Ontario or somewhere then the more the better. And for us it’s educating us and how we can do things differently, better, more efficiently, and that kind of thing. Getting help for, not just ourselves, but for a lot of the younger people. They can teach other people and they can be taught different things, and they can look at the world differently better than us because we were never given that opportunity. So, the opportunity is there for us to open doors for other people to come in and open doors for our members to go out there and explore and see how we can do things more better and more in-tune with nature, I guess.

**AS**: The key to adaptation is knowledge, so bringing these different knowledges to the table is very important. So, knowledge sharing, and the relationships, are the most important things that we’ve built in the last five years.

**AD**: So, Andrew, what do you think the biggest success of this research partnership has been?

**AS**: To me it’s really been the friendships and the relationships that we’ve built. Working with this community has been a wonderful experience, and we really support each other, and the products of our work are something tangible that you can see in the community. We really like to take opportunities like this to kind of share with other people, what is possible when you have this really, um—I’m trying to say that, because we’ve built this, we’ve been able to do so much, it’s really important to share that with other people. We really want to leave this legacy of how these partnerships can work. So, you asked me “what was the most important thing?” I asked Melaine that question as well.

**MS**: My friendship with Andrew and, yeah, the relationships that we created with researchers is something to teach other people, I guess. That it’s not all about work, it’s the friendships and stuff like that.

**AS**: Yeah, that’s really great to hear. But you have to remember that these relationships take time, okay? And sometimes you take baby steps, but we take those baby steps together and we’re all moving in the same direction, and that’s part of the most rewarding thing about what we do.

**AD**: That’s such a nice way to end this. Thanks so much for coming to talk with us, Andrew, we really appreciate it.

**AS**: Thanks, it was great to be here.

{[Outro Music]}

**AD**: And that concludes our episodes on Indigenous Food Systems research in the Northwest Territories. We are delighted to have been able to tell you about the rich research partnerships and interesting work being done in Kakisa, and we hope that you got a strong sense of what an amazing community it is. Thanks for listening and we hope you tune in for our next episode. Please subscribe to Handpicked wherever you listen to podcasts, and maybe share it with a friend! If you’d like to help out the show, write us a review on iTunes so more people can find us.

**LY**: You can follow us on twitter at @handpickedpodc, search our name on Facebook to join the group, or send us an e-mail at handpickedpodcast@wlu.ca

**AD**: Thanks to our guest producer, Andrew Spring, and to Chief Lloyd Chicot and Melaine Simba for sharing about their community.

**LY**: This episode was hosted and produced by us Laine Young, {Amanda: [and Amanda Di Battista]}, with research and editing by Adedotun Babajide, Chiamaka Okafor-Justin, and Jake Bernstein. Our music is composed by Keenan Reimer-Watts. We wouldn’t be able to do this without the support of the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, Wilfrid Laurier University, the Balsille School of International Affairs, and the Centre for International Governance Innovation.

**AD**: Please check out our show notes for a bibliography and links to other relevant information we used to produce the episode. Make sure you check out our website for other ways to engage with us.

**LY**: We would like to acknowledge that this episode was recorded on the lands of the Ka'a'gee Tu First Nation, and produced on the lands of the Neutral, Anishaanabe and Haudenosaunee people. We encourage you all to click the land acknowledgement link in the show notes to learn more.

**AD**: As always, I’m Amanda Di Battista,

**LY**: and I’m Laine Young and this has been an episode of the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems podcast, *Handpicked*.

**AD**: Make sure to tune in next time, for more freshly picked stories from the field.