

Kelp Farmers of the Gaspé Launch Successful Business

“Will people even eat kelp?” wondered members of the Mi’kmaq Maliseet Aboriginal Fisheries Management Association (MMAFMA) in Quebec’s Gaspé Peninsula. The Association, an Indigenous non-profit, was looking for new ways to utilize the marine resources and create jobs in its territories back in 2012. It turns out that people love the products made with the sugar kelp farmed by the community in Chaleur Bay off the south shore of the Gaspé.

“We’ve grown from a small test project to an incorporated company called Salaweg that farms kelp and sells kelp products,” says Catherine Lambert Koizumi, MMAFMA’s Executive Director. The member communities involved are Mi’gmaq Nations of Gespeg and Gesgapegiag and the Maliseet Viger First Nation. Salaweg means “salted” in Mi’gmaq.

Kelp is a type of large brown seaweed that grows in cold, shallow and nutrient-rich saltwater off coasts around the world. Sugar kelp (*Saccharina latissima*) is a fast-growing kelp that contains antioxidants and a wide range of nutrients, including high levels of iodine. It is naturally abundant in the Chaleur Bay. It is also habitat for lobster and other aquatic species on which the local communities rely.

Part of MMAFMA’s mission is the conservation of the aquatic and oceanic ecosystems in its territories, so farming kelp was explored in order to avoid harvesting wild kelp and putting pressure on lobster habitat. “We weren’t doing any aquaculture so we had to learn new skills,” says Lambert Koizumi.

The community began by renting lines from mussel farms and attached kelp seedlings, with funding from Fisheries and Oceans Canada’s Aboriginal Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management Program, other federal agencies and the Province of Quebec. The seedlings are grown indoors at Fermes Marines du Québec and sown onto a string. In the fall, the string with its attached seedlings is spooled around the rented lines in Chaleur Bay. The lines run parallel to



Photo credit: Lina Condo, Ulnooweg Development Group

the surface and are submerged in winter to a depth of seven meters to avoid ice damage. When the ice melts, the lines are brought up to four metres so the kelp can benefit from a maximum amount of light to grow rapidly. Harvesting takes place in June.

The kelp is processed in the community’s lobster hut in Gesgapegiag, a collaboration that keeps production costs down. “Everyone has been enthusiastic to see this become a real business,” Lambert Koizumi said. “At the beginning even though kelp wasn’t a known product, the community was open to the idea and helped out with transport or anything else.”

The first harvests for Salaweg were not particularly successful but MMAFMA persisted and focused on developing recipes and products based on sugar kelp.

“We did a lot of marketing, working with chefs and participating in food fairs,” says Lambert Koizumi.

Following a good harvest in 2017, Salaweg launched four products: sea relish, tartar mix, fish spice, and meat spice.

Last year, Salaweg was incorporated as a for-profit enterprise and hired Frédéric Côte to bring more of a business focus. Côte says existing products will be made more commercially attractive and consistently flavourful. “We want people who have tried our products to continue to buy it,” he says.

Salaweg products also tell an important story of how the kelp is grown without chemicals in some of the purest ocean waters and harvested by First Nations. With a hoped-for harvest of six tons of kelp this year, Côte would also like to launch two new products. And with additional lines going in the water in October this year, production in 2021 should double to 12 tons. That should enable sales of some products to large supermarket chains, he said.

“In this time of reconciliation, there has been a lot of interest in the delicious products harvested by First Nations,” says Lambert Koizumi. This can also play a role in breaking the walls between Indigenous communities and the rest of the world she added.

Up to 10 people are now employed part time during the season with more being hired as the business expands. Lambert Koizumi attributes their success to the willingness of the communities to be proactive, persistent and open-minded.

“We’ve really moved a long way with this. I’m very proud of this project.”

Best Practise:
First Nation-to-First Nation Partnerships



Photo Credit: Mi'gmaq and Maliseet Fisheries Management Association

