

“Go Local” Island Food Network: Using Email Networking to Promote Island Foods for their Health, Biodiversity, and Other “CHEEF” Benefits

Englberger L, Research Advisor, Island Food Community of Pohnpei, Kolonia, Pohnpei 96941 FSM Email: nutrition@mail.fm

Lorens A, Chief of Agriculture and IFCP Chairman, Pohnpei Office of Economic Affairs, Kolonia, Pohnpei 96941, FSM Email: pniagriculture@mail.fm

Pretrick ME, Environmental Health Coordinator and IFCP Vice-Chairman, FSM Department of Health & Social Affairs, Palikir, Pohnpei FSM. Email: mpretrick@fsmhealth.fm

Spegal R, Consultant, Micronesia Health Research and Development Center, Pohnpei, 96941 FSM. Email: opalpac@mail.fm

Falcam I, Former Librarian and Head, Pacific Collection, College of Micronesia – FSM PO Box 159, Kolonia, Pohnpei, FM 96941, FSM

Abstract

Dietary- and lifestyle-related diseases are problems of epidemic proportion in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Public health resources to help prevent nutrition-related problems are limited. There is also concern about biodiversity, neglect of traditional staple foods, and threatened loss of traditional knowledge. A “Go Local” campaign was initiated to increase production and consumption of locally grown foods, for their **Culture, Health, Environment, Economics, and Food security** (“CHEEF”) benefits. To provide updates and discuss local island food topics, the Island Food Community of Pohnpei launched an inter-agency email network in 2003. Interested members’ email addresses were recorded in distribution lists, weekly/bi-weekly emails were sent and from these messages, a database was organized to record email topic details. An analysis of all emails up to July 2009 showed that membership had expanded to over 600 listed people from all FSM states, other Pacific Island countries and beyond. Information was shared on topics ranging from scientific findings of carotenoid content in local island food cultivars, to discussions on how daily habits related to island food use can be improved. Over 200 men and women, aged 22 to 80 years, contributed items, some indicating that they had shared emails to a further network at their workplace or community. In conclusion, this email network is a simple, cost-effective method to share information, create awareness, and mobilize island food promotion efforts with potential for providing health, biodiversity and other benefits of island foods to populations in the FSM and other countries.

Key words: Nutrition, diet, lifestyle changes, non-communicable diseases, traditional staple foods, biodiversity, inter-agency, families, communities, attitude, habit



Introduction

Non-communicable diseases, including diabetes, heart disease, some cancers, and micronutrient deficiency disorders, such as vitamin A deficiency and anemia, have become problems of epidemic proportion in all four states of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM): Pohnpei, Chuuk, Yap, and Kosrae¹. The Pohnpei STEPs survey showed that 32.8% of adults, from 25 to 64 years of age, are diabetic². These health conditions are related to dietary and lifestyle changes, and the shift from traditional staple foods to refined processed foods, in particular, white rice, flour products, sugar and sweet foods and fatty meats. At the same time, there is concern about the neglect of traditional staple foods, banana, breadfruit, taro, and other crops, such as coconut; the loss of traditional knowledge about these foods and biodiversity loss³.

The reasons for the shift towards imported processed foods include changing lifestyles, cost, availability, convenience, status of imported foods, shift from subsistence to market economy, and changing tastes⁴. It is important to understand these reasons before tackling local food promotion issues.

FSM national policies sometimes recommend eating a healthy diet without specifically referring to local island foods⁵. Or, local foods may be mentioned in action plans and planning documents but few people may know about or use the particular document⁶.

Radio, newspaper and television have limitations as communication methods throughout Pohnpei and the FSM. Radio broadcasting equipment breakdowns in Pohnpei and Chuuk have sometimes led to a halt in broadcasting for months at a time. Newspapers, newsletters and television reach only a small proportion of the population with telephone and mobile phone as the most common communication methods in urban areas⁷. Although email is a new communication method, it is increasingly being used in government and non-government offices and educational institutions and, for many people, checking email has become a part of their daily routine.

The FSM has had internet access fairly early on and is soon to have an even better internet access through the introduction of a fiber optic cable⁸. Despite a widely held perception that people in the Pacific do not email, there are growing numbers of FSM youth and adults who actively email⁹. Note is made of Alan Howard's work on the Rotuma, Fiji website and how he first started sharing messages via email with contacts and colleagues¹⁰. Social networking, which includes email, is an international movement and research shows that it can play a critical role in how people solve problems and achieve their goals¹¹.

The "Go Local" Island Food Network has provided two types of messages: 1) updates on Pacific island foods as well as relevant global nutrition/health/local food messages; and 2) comments by email network members on their perceptions on these updates and suggestions on actions that should be taken. The network reaches people living in Micronesia or other parts of the Pacific Islands where email access may be convenient, and also reaches people out of the region who are interested in obtaining more information on island food topics and keeping contact with people in the Pacific. Those who respond come from a range of backgrounds, health, agriculture, environment, both academic and non-academic, most often working people although not always.

The email network is in English, and thus is limited to an English-speaking group, not including the "grassroots" people who are familiar only with their local language(s). On the other hand, many network participants



indicate that they often later discuss the email topics in their local language in informal settings, such as the “Pohnpei sakau bar.” Some write that they copy and share the messages further in their offices, schools and communities. Some indicate that they have never before written items for sharing in mass media and are very encouraged to see their written comments shared with and praised by a large group of people. The major binding factor is that people are interested in island foods, with culture as an important driving force. People also share items that they have received from other sources, which foster an inter-active atmosphere. The email messages are usually short (a few sentences per message), and thus quick and easy to read. Websites are often provided, which give further visual content and in-depth information for those who are interested.

For these reasons, this method of communication by email networking appears to be better as related to social change than some other communication channels (e.g. articles in journals, newspapers, newsletters).

Development of the “Go Local” Island Food Network

In 2003, a small email exchange was started for the purpose of providing updates on island food activities to anyone interested. In 2004, the Island Food Community of Pohnpei (IFCP) was chartered as an FSM non-governmental organization, with a focus on promoting island foods and addressing the problems related to the neglect of these traditional foods¹². IFCP took up a slogan revived by Bermin Weilbacher in the 1980s, “Go Local”. This slogan was widely supported and has touched the hearts of many people, as it embodies cultural preservation and warm memories of the past.

Thus, as the Island Food Community of Pohnpei expanded its email distribution, people started referring to this email network as the “Go Local” Island Food Network. The network also expanded to participants in other FSM states, other Micronesian and Pacific Island countries, and beyond.

Usually emails were sent on a weekly or bi-weekly basis and filed in a separate folder. Later a database was organized to record email topic details. An analysis of the emails in 2009 showed that membership had expanded to over 600 registered participants.

Information was shared on topics ranging from scientific findings of carotenoid content in local island food crops/varieties, to discussions on how daily habits relating to island food use can be improved. Over 200 men and women, aged 22 to 80 years, based in all four FSM states and other countries, had contributed items, some indicating that they had shared emails to a further network, in their workplace or community.

IFCP’s vision statement mentions many benefits of island foods, in addition to those of health. In 2008, in order to remember these chief benefits of island foods in a simple catchy way, the acronym “CHEEF” was coined. This refers to: **C**ulture, **H**ealth, **E**nvironment, **E**conomics, and **F**ood security benefits. These “CHEEF” benefits of local island foods are explained at workshops and were presented in the local newspaper¹³.

Conservation of local food preserves traditional customs, and thus, culture, and helps ensure that traditional knowledge is not lost. Health benefits refer to the benefits related to the availability and consumption of fresh foods, with nutrients intact. Also, local island foods have been shown to be health promoting, rich in micronutrients and fiber, and furthermore, the production and harvesting of local foods involves physical



activity, which is important for maintaining good health and protecting against non-communicable diseases. Environmental benefits that result from greater consumption of local foods are the reduction of packaging materials which add to municipal waste accumulation, and the reduction of the fossil fuels required to transport imported foods. Fossil fuel emissions released into the environment contributes to global warming, a serious risk for small islands. The economic benefits that can result from greater use of local foods are realized by reducing food purchases, using home-produced foods, and making use of what one already has available. This can also lead to income generation through marketing of local island foods. Food security benefits are important as island food production ensures survival in the case of global economic instability, or transportation system disturbances.

Perhaps the most popular aspect of the “Go Local” Island Food Network has been the involvement of participants who contribute short items or offer comments on past items. One participant explained, “I really like reading the comments.” Another stated, “A great way to disseminate accurate and up-to-date information.” Some participants said that although they did not often comment, they regularly read the emails. Some printed and posted the messages in their offices, or used them in classroom teaching.

In “Go Local” Island Food emails, each message is given a short title in the subject line of the email, aiming at a meaningful or descriptive phrase. Each person providing an item is acknowledged by name, and sometimes, if the person is new to the group, information as to his/her island or home base is provided, in order to help readers interpret the comments.

Outreach and Topics Covered

Membership has increased, and by 2009, over 600 names/addresses are now registered. Some items were shared in other email list serves, including the Plant Genetic Resources (PGR) News and the Pacific Regional Medical Distribution List.

Updates have been provided on many related topics: research on the nutrient content of local island foods, previous IFCP newspaper articles (see www.islandfood.org), development of smokeless charcoal ovens, breastfeeding promotion, and rising food prices.

Comments have focused on many topics (Table 1), including attitude change, education and awareness, and the three “d’s” – discipline, determination and duty. The point has been made that it is essential to work together to revive the use of local foods, increase their status, and involve parents and the schools in this process. Many participants stress that the community, church and government must all be involved, and people need to be mobilized to work for the common good, and also work at defining roles and responsibilities. One participant shared his personal story in this way: “Ideas have power and can influence eating habits over time. Since 2004, two of my five children have joined me to live without rice. At the household level, we are still struggling to reduce rice, white bread, donuts, ramen, canned meat and other imported foodstuff. Many of the imported foods are still at the house because of acquired taste, cost and convenience.”

Another encouragement has been the involvement of youth. In 2006, a Let’s Go Local High School Club was organized at Pohnpei Island Central School, involving also Seventh Day Adventist High School students. The club was coordinated by the Island Food Community of Pohnpei with support by the Upward Bound program. These students promoted local foods through various community activities, eventually presenting about the benefits of local foods (focusing on Pohnpei bananas) at three local elementary schools. One



member later joined the United States army and wrote personal comments in an email message as follows: "I hope let's go local is still doing good.. bless y'all and y'all keep up the promotions... love y'all and love local food ..which I miss so much..".

Another result of the "Go Local" movement is that the cafeteria at the College of Micronesia-FSM National Campus now ensures that local food is served every day to the students and whoever eats at the college cafeteria. Also the College library promotes local food via posters and numerous other materials that IFCP has donated to the college library. These materials are often used in research projects.

Emphasis was made that network participants need to "act on the slogan [Go Local]", and "Walk the Talk", not to just write and talk about it. Another member enthusiastically stressed the use of the slogan: "'Go Local', the password, the byword, the healthy word...!" One member stated, "I read these comments each time, and learn from them."

Another member pointed out that one item that keeps surfacing is that parents and communities are the "springboard" for "Go Local" and that local leaders (traditional, church and government) need to become advocates of the "Go Local" theme.

Contacts in Kosrae, Yap, and Chuuk have stressed their interest in more "Go Local" activities and organized workshops to share information from Pohnpei "Go Local" experiences. The Island Food Community of Kosrae was formed in 2007; the Local Food Community of Chuuk was formed in 2008; and the Yap Inter-agency Nutrition Education Council formed in the 1990s has continued its efforts promoting local food. A Yap member wrote about the "Go Local" campaign entering the Pacific agenda, saying that, "I am very optimistic that soon it will become universal in scope. The "Go Local" Campaign is reminding us of the importance and need of going back to the basic fundamentals of living and to live according to the WILL of Mother Nature. There is no other way."

In February 2009, a sub-regional workshop organized by the World Health Organization (WHO) in collaboration with FAO, JICA, SPC, UNICEF and Fiji Ministry of Health, adopted "Go Local" as one of its final recommendations¹⁴:

"The 'GO LOCAL' theme and promotion rekindles the healthy traditional foods and its preparation including organic farming complemented by scientific research on their nutritional values. The initiative should be promoted and expanded to other countries with scope of further research in local foods."

Conclusions

The "Go Local" Island Food Email Network has attracted growing interest, as seen by the increasing number of participants submitting items for sharing and comments to previous emails. Changing habits and bringing the issue of the importance of local food production and consumption into the social mainstream requires a broad consensus by people of all ages, dedication and commitment. Thus, a wide range of methods is important for shaping new attitudes and providing information that can be used to further mobilize island food promotion efforts and share information about the "CHEEF" benefits of local foods. Email offers a simple cost-effective communication method, in which updates can be shared and many various topics can be discussed. It requires a minimum of resources, while providing substantial potential to strengthen the commitment to promoting local food. Support is needed for continuing this activity....So let's work together, and let's go local!



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Table 1: Selected “Go Local” Island Food Emails from 2005 to 2009

Date	Email Subject Titles	Contributor
6-28-05	Women of Mand share traditional recipes	AL (f)
7-28-05	Comments on Breadfruit has health benefits	HS (m)
7-30-05	New video “Going yellow” for promoting island foods	LE (f)
11-1-05	Governor’s Proclamation of Karat as State Banana	LE (f)
1-20-06	“Go local” billboard promotes local foods	LE (f)
12-7-06	Carotenoid and vitamin content of Karat and other ..banana cultivars	LE (f)
3-8-07	Only eat what you can burn up!	MK (m)
3-22-07	Information on Go Local is passed on	RW (m)
3-26-07	Step up the campaign for breastfeeding!	WB, YG (m)
3-26-07	Midnight eating may be putting lives of Pohnpei mothers at risk	RA (m)
4-6-07	Parents’ role in shaping children’s eating habits	PL (f)
4-10-07	Change your destiny!	CA (f)
4-12-07	Education is the most important tool	MK (m)
4-13-07	Keep hammering with good examples	HS (m)
5-1-07	We simply cannot live without agriculture	SS (f)
5-4-07	Comments are educational, encouraging, and challenging	AL (m)
5-4-07	Breadfruit- maintain and rekindle interest in this fantastic food	BS (m)
5-6-07	Part of the solution...is within us in our capacity to go local	BW, MM, WB (2m,1f)
5-6-07	Let’s see how we can change the habit of ramen to banana	MW (f)
5-9-07	Advise one another and build up one another	YY (m)
6-5-07	Coconut uses and how important coconut is	JP, ST, LK, RJ (m)
7-5-07	Understanding [about health] is a more effective, long term fix	BI (m)
7-6-07	Let’s stay away from unhealthy imported goods- go local on healthy kinds	EI (m)
7-13-07	Breastfeeding can protect against obesity	JM (f)
7-21-07	Being creative to promote our important local foods	TR (f)
7-27-07	Carotenoids and protection against cancer	LE (f)
9-23-07	Carotenoid - mineral content of Micronesia taro (<i>Cyrtosperma</i>) cultivars	LE (f)
1-25-08	Eat local and be an active local	FL, ST, SS (m)
2-7-08	Drive in the message, changing mindsets, and sharing	JH, FL, JB (2m,1f)
2-10-08	Physical activity- why not plant more banana, taro, vegetables	RA (m)
3-28-08	Think health and plan that change can take place	FL, RJ, LK, MK (m)
3-29-08	Let the food you eat be your medicine	GS (m)
4-1-08	A personal garden is possible	SS (m)
4-3-08	Change of mentality is the key	HS (m)
7-7-08	Think global, eat local	MT (f)
7-23-08	Discipline, duty and determination for local foods	RJ (m)
7-25-08	Vision and WALK THE TALK	SS, RJ (m)
7-29-08	Good ways to promote local food	RM, SP, JC (m)
8-29-08	Breastfeeding support comments and study	YY, LO, DO, JM (2m, 2f)
12-3-08	Bananas planted	DLL (m)
1-17-09	Develop the taste for local food and live on it on a daily basis	HS (m)
2-28-09	Pohnpei’s cookin’ with charcoal ovens	KL (f)
4-17-09	Go local and heart-healthy breakfasts	LBK (f)
4-24-09	Living the GO LOCAL slogan	RJ, SS (m)
4-29-09	Ideas (on local foods) have power	AL (m)

Note: Contributor’s initials and gender are presented in order to help show that there was a wide range of different contributors. Most, but not all, contributors were based in the Federated States of Micronesia.



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