

# American Eel (K'at) and Sharing (Utkunajik) - A Key Mi'kmaq Cultural Characteristic

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Court decisions recognizing Mi'kmaq treaty rights to fish for subsistence, ceremonial and 'modest livelihood' purposes mean much more than only assured access to marine resources. For the Mi'kmaq these rights enable and support the expression of critical practices residing at the heart of the culture. The practice and the place of sharing (utkunajik in Mi'kmaq - pronounced \_tk\_nagik) among the Mi'kmaq and within Mi'kmaq communities involves more than just material items and considerations. It is a form of communication responsible for the existence and state of our culture. Our whole lives and the knowledge we possess are actually a result of our ancestors sharing stories, legends, food, and friendship, that is sharing equates with our way of life. Yet, this practice of passing down knowledge and sharing is being inhibited by a number of factors such as declines in natural resources, dropping levels of fluency in the Mi'kmaq language, exposure to non-Mi'kmaq cultural practices and technologies (e.g., T.V.), and the decline in consumption of traditional foods. In order to better understand these processes and to document experiences, the Paq'tnkek Fish and Wildlife Society is documenting our community's knowledge regarding the fishing, consumption and use of K'at (ka:taq- American Eel).

Throughout our research, community members have been asked to share their experiences, knowledge, stories and family histories associated with fishing and using K'at. This study has been designed to explore and to document the details of our

community's knowledge, including knowledge passed down by our ancestors.

This study has revealed some very interesting findings related to sharing (utkunajik). Evidence clearly indicates that a strong sense of sharing (utkunajik) remains present in our community. For example, the percentage of our community who fish K'at is 26.1% yet, 54% report eating K'at. This difference shows that a great amount of utkunajik is taking place within our community. When those who fished were asked: "What did you do with the eel you've caught?", most indicated they used K'at for food. But, "gave away" was the second most frequently mentioned use. Mi'kmaq men were more likely to give away catches than were women. This reflects the fact that within Mi'kmaq culture males have a responsibility to provide certain sorts of foods for his immediate family and community. Notably, sharing of K'at was specified by many regardless of where they were born and raised, showing that sharing of basic foods such as K'at is truly a cultural characteristic of the Mi'kmaq people.

Another interesting example of utkunajik is expressed in the special learning and caring relationship many noted as existing between the mothers' brothers and the mothers' children. Many among those who fish or fished informed us that they first learned how to fish eel from one of their Mother's Brothers (Uncles). This demonstrates a Mi'kmaq cultural practice where the mothers' brothers play a vital role in the teaching skills and the sharing of knowledge between generations within families and communities. This sort of special relationship and its meanings are surely another cultural characteristic of

the Mi'kmaq people.

Paq'tnkek elders have also told us there was a time when entire families would go down to Bayfield Beach on the evening of the first full moon in June. It is said that specifically at this time, when the tide goes out, the lobsters and eels would hide under the rocks along the beach or under the seaweed surrounding the rocks. Families would then search for the lobsters and eels by turning over rocks and/or peering under the seaweed. Often a homemade spear would be used to catch them. This consisted of a flat piece of wood with protruding nails (see the picture above). These families were certainly sharing an experience together and passing down knowledge while in the process. Upon their return home, they most likely also shared their catches with their families and other community members.

There are also other historical reasons behind the sharing of K'at within our community. "Paq'tnkek" in Mi'kmaq means "by the bay" which holds a significant definition, for it was once a Northeastern Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq winter campsite. It has also been noted to be the place to fish and get eels. "Paq'tnkek is the place to get eels. People often came either to ask for eels or to be shown where eels were fished at in the nearby waters" (Interview with Mi'kmaq Elder, October 11, 2003). This indicates our community also shared with other communities. It was not a coincidence that Paq'tnkek was the area where eel fishing led to the Court challenge that affirmed the Mi'kmaq treaty right to fish commercially.

Utkunajik is also a key aspect of the Mi'kmaq concept and practice of Netukulimk, that is, engaging respectfully and responsibly with all aspects of nature, including other

human beings. Within Netukulimk, sharing provides that all of nature's gifts are used in assuring that no one is left without. As an everyday way of living, utkunajik expresses and encourages positive, supportive, and respectful relationships and social values.

Overall, although there is a strong presence of utkunajik still expressed in our community, it seems that many are forgetting the origins and importance of sharing. Sharing begins with creation and creation is happening around us all of the time - every time a new seed takes root or when a new baby is born. We, as Mi'kmaq people, need to be more culturally responsible for our actions. It is specifically for this reason we should appreciate and encourage the practice



Spring tide during the first full moon of June brings Mi'kmaq families together to seek lobster and eels from amongst the rocks and sea weed of Bayfield Beach. Events such as this enabled our people to pass down knowledge from generation to another. Pictured above are Mr. John R. Prosper and Mr. Benjiman'o'q Paul from different generations of the Paq'tnkek Band. Thanks goes out to Mr. John R. Prosper for playing a vital role in preserving our community's knowledge with his contribution of the above photograph taken in June of 1958.


of utkunajik.

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