

Let the Mi'kmaq manage resources

Turning over hunting, fishing management to natives would redress wrongs, solve health problems

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THIS SUMMER has witnessed a couple of extremely meaningful events for Nova Scotia

Mi'kmaq. The residential schools truth and reconciliation process was launched and the 400th anniversary of Grand Chief Membertou's baptism was celebrated.

These were accompanied by re-expressions of apology for the misery visited upon Canada's Aboriginal Peoples and of intentions to right these wrongs.

Well, talk is cheap and apologies are hollow if we fail to reverse the consequences of cultural genocide.

Among these consequences is type II diabetes. Type II diabetes is an epidemic among Aboriginal populations, including the Mi'kmaq. Almost 15 per cent of the on-reserve population is diabetic, with type II accounting for over three in four cases. Rates among aboriginals are three to five times higher than among the general population. The consequences are catastrophic. The epidemic is dramatically increasing cardiovascular disease, organ failures, and early death.

Even more troubling, the disease is occurring at increasing rates among children and adolescents.

What is causing this epidemic? What can be done to help the Mi'kmaq conquer this and related crises?

Type II diabetes can be caused by unhealthy diets and lifestyles, which place enormous stress on key metabolic processes and organ functions that trigger the disease. Dietary changes and exercise, in addition to drug treatments, are commonly prescribed. But this approach treats symptoms, not causes.

Cultural genocide

The exceptionally high rate of type II diabetes among Aboriginal nations shows that qualities unique to indigenous groups are underwriting the epidemic.

Here we see the consequence of the



(Courtesy N.S. Archives and Records Management)

Mi'kmaq guide with a party of sportsmen fish from four canoes in Sixth Lake stream, Digby County, in this photo dating from 1899.

COMMENTARY

unrelenting 400-plus years of assault on Aboriginal Peoples. It is impossible to relate the depth and consequences of the devastation.

Capacities to resist, including family and kin support systems, were destroyed by the disease holocaust that swept through all North American Aboriginal Peoples soon after contact with Europeans.

A desperate people in a desperate situation, the Mi'kmaq were left shattered. Powerless, poor, and immersed in clouds of racism, the Mi'kmaq experienced colonization, victimization, and cultural genocide. The cumulative consequences explain much about their health crises.

Colonization limited the Mi'kmaq's capacity to hunt, fish and gather. From a traditional diet high in animal pro-

tein, fat and marine-based nutrition, they were compelled through forced settlement and government paternalism to adopt a low-quality Western diet dominated by carbohydrates and starch (e.g. potatoes, flour, and sugar). Furthermore, colonization dehumanized the people by destroying their sense of identity and dignity. High-calorie foods provide feelings of well-being that offer solace in the face of such misery.

Reserves overcrowded

The type II diabetes epidemic is but one result from these experiences. Drug and alcohol abuse, suicides, and violence are several others.

Recent judicial decisions have affirmed treaty-based rights to hunt and fish for subsistence, ceremonial, and livelihood purposes.

The Mi'kmaq possess the right to hunt, gather, and fish while other

users participate through government issued licenses. This distinction provides the Mi'kmaq with an antidote that offers permanent solutions.

Nova Scotia holds 13 Mi'kmaq bands. These have almost 15,000 hectares reserved for their use. Reserved lands comprise less than .003 per cent of Nova Scotia (5,528,300 hectares) while status Mi'kmaq comprise a little over 1.9 per cent of the population (18,145 of 940,397 persons).

Mi'kmaq are grossly under-provided in lands reserved for their residence and use. Most Mi'kmaq communities are also crowded.

Given that over 50 per cent of the Mi'kmaq population is under 25 years of age, crowding will worsen and health risks will increase without effective interventions.

Most reserves' rural locations also

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pose major economic challenges. Mi'kmaq reserve lands are resource-poor, with limited access to shorelines and watercourses. These attributes limit economic prospects. Mi'kmaq material conditions must be improved to tackle the causes of the health and social crises. Increasing Mi'kmaq access to land and marine resources are key components for this.

Expanding reserve lands, combined with stewardship over Crown lands and resources, would create conditions for improving Mi'kmaq health and well-being. This would reacquaint Mi'kmaq with their traditional diet, one high in animal proteins and fats.

Respecting Mi'kmaq treaty entitlements would also advance self-reliance built upon customary knowledge and practices.

As the only people with legal entitlements, the Mi'kmaq should become the natural resource stewards throughout all Crown jurisdictions. Nova Scotia's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is the arm of government responsible for these functions. With a 2009-10 operating budget of almost \$92 million, DNR employs a full-time equivalent staff of 845, very few of whom are Mi'kmaq. This department establishes wildlife and fishing policies and regulations and sells licences to resident and non-resident hunters and fishermen. A Mi'kmaq stewardship, financed through a redistribution of the DNR annual budget, would create game-changing employment and economic development.

Resource stewardship

DNR revenue in 2008-09 from licences was projected to be almost \$7.4 million. Licence fees are low relative to the value of the resources and experiences. For example, in 2009 licence charges for deer were \$28 for residents, \$139 for non-residents; for bear, \$27 / \$126, and for small game and birds, \$17 / \$63.

These fees grossly undervalue wildlife and the hunting experience. Substantial licence fee increases would provide the revenue for a Mi'kmaq resource stewardship authority.

A resource stewardship approach would situate Mi'kmaq management

squarely within Mi'kmaq culture and practice and in turn, would bolster cultural revitalization. The Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources moose management initiative is one such Mi'kmaq-led stewardship initiative. Years of research and community consultation developed resource use guidelines that express Mi'kmaq sustainable management practices. The institute provides a blueprint for management and self-governance that demonstrate Mi'kmaq focus on sustainable use.

As resource stewards, Mi'kmaq would be empowered to address their health crises. They could improve dietary conditions and health through sustainable 'traditional food' harvests. Additionally, the Mi'kmaq would access the economic benefits of leading sustainable commercial wildlife harvests, particularly species such as geese, hare, and deer.

Abundant wildlife species might also supply free range meat for local non-native consumption, a food commanding premium prices. Even modest-scale commercial harvests would generate additional employment through hunting, meat processing, transport, and sales.

These initiatives offer tremendous potential for Mi'kmaq well-being and health.

Among the impacts are empowerment, sustainable revenue and employment, access to traditional foods, increased participation in education in resource management sciences and related fields, vastly improved health, and decreased rates of substance abuse, suicide, and crime.

Nova Scotia's NDP government has placed such a high priority on doing the right thing that the premier himself has retained responsibility for aboriginal affairs.

The premier should support a Mi'kmaq management authority, a new hunting licence fee structure, and a transfer of DNR revenue to the Mi'kmaq authority.

This will take vision and courage that moves past apologies. Only initiatives that deliver substantial material gains will improve Mi'kmaq well-being.

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