

Cultural relationship with Kat

For thousands of years the Mi'kmaq have shared a long spiritual and cultural relationship with Kat (eel). Kat have provided the Mi'kmaq with a variety of benefits, while in Mi'kmaq culture Kat have become associated with spiritual meanings. For the Mi'kmaq, Kat as food has been especially important. The importance of eel has rested in the fact that it is a high quality food accessible during times of food shortage, such as the winter. In these sorts of conditions Kat has been drawn on as a food cache.

In order to explore Mi'kmaq relations with eel, the Paq'tnekek Fish and Wildlife Society, in collaboration with Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries at St. Francis Xavier University, has documented the past and present usage of Kat among the Paq'tnekek First Nation Mi'kmaq. Two important findings arising from this study.

Ninety Paq'tnekek Mi'kmaq men and women were identified as direct participants in the eel fishery. But, the numbers of younger persons identified as experienced with fishing Kat shows comparatively low

rates of participation. Notably fewer than one in every ten boys 14 years of age and younger and not one girl in this age range have fished eel. This is worrying in so far as it suggests that few in the younger generation are learning and experiencing the Mi'kmaq relationship with eel. Cultural knowledge is at risk of being lost.

Those reporting that they either currently or in the past fished eel, were asked: "what do/did you do with the eel you've caught?" Responses show that the primary use of Kat has been for food. Substantial numbers of men and women also report using eel for medicinal and ceremonial purposes. Fewer than one in three men and

about one in five women report that at one time or another they have sold Kat, a notably low proportion given the fact that Mi'kmaq have had access to few economically valuable harvestable resources.

For the Mi'kmaq, Kat has always been there during good times and bad and often has been critical during food shortages. Many rivers contain the remnants of stone weirs constructed for the purpose of catching eels and other fish. Eel has been described as one of the "Mi'kmaq's favourite catches and was sometimes eaten raw or hanged to be dried for later use." Frequently, Kat has gotten the Mi'kmaq people through the hardest times of the

year. Maybe this is why Kat plays a ceremonial role in various traditions and is offered as a gift to the Creator. The Mi'kmaq knew eels were likely available when there was nothing else to eat.

Traditionally Kat was used as a major source of food for every stage of life. While just over 1 in 4 Paq'tnekek Mi'kmaq fish eel, over 1 in 2 were reported as having eaten eel. From birth, a mother who was unable to provide breast milk for her child, would often use the broth from eel stew. The broth of eel stew would be cooked until it was mushy then wrapped with oats and bound in a cloth for the infant to suck on. This would provide the child with the solid nutrition until the mother was able to breast feed again.

When people were sick, eel stew was given to help maintain their nutrition and to restore their appetite. It is also for this specific reason that later in life Kat would again be used to restore elders' appetites. For example, on many occasions terminally ill people requested eel and eel broth as

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Obedience

By Chris Quequish

Read: Deuteronomy 6:1-6

Keep these words in your heart that I am telling you today. Do your best to teach them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road and when you lie down and when you get up. Deut. 6:6-7

One spring evening during the ice breakup, we went down to the river to see the ice flowing by. My uncle Robert and several children went down with our pet dog. It was just a puppy but we really loved

him as he was very playful. We were curious about the big chunks of ice and wondered if we could jump on one and jump back before it got carried away. My uncle warned us not to go any closer as one might come right up the bank and hit us.

We were foolish to think we could jump from one block of ice to another because it was so dangerous. I am glad that my uncle was there to watch over us. However, the puppy wasn't so lucky. He jumped onto one ice block and went running across several and when he turned to come back, there

was no ice, only open water between him and the shore. The ice moved so fast it carried our puppy away and we never saw him again. It could have easily happened to us and we could have drowned, but because we listened we were all right. All of us cried, but my uncle said there was nothing we could do. We knew how dangerous it was so we never went down to the river except when we went with someone older.

Life is full of dangerous places into which we could get ourselves. We need to realize where those places are. They may

be places where people are drinking or taking drugs. Just as we learned a lesson from the puppy, we need to learn from others as we see their lives being destroyed through sin. We need Jesus to help us and guide us through His Word so He will be able to show us the safe place to walk in.

Question: Am I letting God lead and guide me?

Prayer: Lord, help me to listen to You today and every day. May I take advice from Your Word and practice it in my life. ▲

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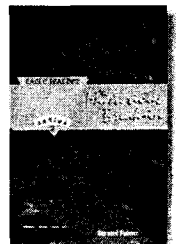
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starting to see it. That's my expertise, my background, bringing people together." Dion promises a strong voice for all westerners, not just Aboriginals, claiming that federal representation needs "fresh blood," and that he is just the person for that. He also praised



Joe Dion



Elijah Harper

CULTURAL RELATIONSHIP WITH KAT

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the one food desired as pleasing and digestible. Eating eel is often followed by a sense of well-being, relaxation, and rest.

Yet, in spite of these qualities, the younger Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq are much more unlikely to eat eel and to experience eating eel than are older community members. For instance, the results from our study show that over 90% of those forty years of age and older reported that they have eaten eel, while fewer than 1 in every 3 of those 25 years old or younger report

having ever eaten eel. There has been a sharp reduction in eel consumption and experiences with eel consumption among the youngest of the Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq.

Many Mi'kmaq struggle to make a decent and satisfying living, while maintaining the way of life, language and culture. The deep and rich relation of the Mi'kmaq with Kat illustrates important qualities of the peoples' connections with nature and the gifts of the Creator. These qualities live in the heart of Mi'kmaq culture. The apparent decline in eel fishing

and consumption among the young is troubling. It foretells of a situation in which important cultural knowledge and practice may no longer be passed from elders to younger community members.

Yet, it is not too late to recognize the important matters shown through Mi'kmaq relations with Kat. Now, with the Court affirmations, Mi'kmaq treaty rights provide the basis for increasing direct management authority over natural resources. Great responsibilities come with these rights. The idea of Netukulimk provides some guidance for a uniquely Mi'kmaq approach. The

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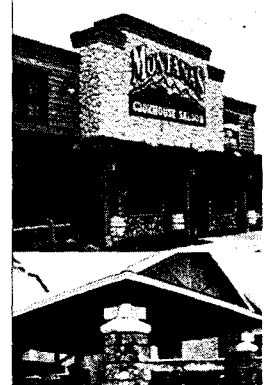
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