



March 2002

## Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries

# The Mi'kmaq Relationship With Kat (American Eel) Scientific Name: *Anguilla rostrata*



Fact sheet 7

### Paqtnekek Fish and Wildlife Commission

Inside this issue:

By: Kerry Prosper, Community Research Coordinator  
and Mary Jane Paulette, Research Assistant

<i>The Mi'kmaq View</i>	1
<i>The Uses of Kat</i>	2-3
<i>Kat and Kejimikujik National Park</i>	4-5
<i>Traditional Methods of Fishing Kat</i>	6
<i>References</i>	7
<i>About Paqtnekek Fish and Wildlife Commission</i>	8
<i>About SRSF</i>	8

The Mi'kmaq people share cultural bonds with many inanimate and animate objects including *Kat* (the American eel). Animate objects were anything classified as living such as animals, plants, trees, and so on. Inanimate objects were classified as non-living such as hunting tools, decorative items, certain places, etc. The Mi'kmaq believe each animate and inanimate object possesses a *manitou* (spirit).

This belief led to the creation of many cultural bonds between the Mi'kmaq and inanimate and animate objects. *Kat* is considered one of these spiritual beings. As with many spiritual beings, *Kat* also served as an important food source, a medicinal ingredient, and a ceremonial object. It is also believed to be the *Jipijka'maq* (the Great Horned Serpent). This spiritual being is referred to in many Mi'kmaq legends. To understand the diversity of the relationship between the Mi'kmaq and *Kat*, one must first consider the Mi'kmaq view and its connection to the environment as a whole.



### *The Mi'kmaq View*

The Mi'kmaq believe *Kji-Niskam* (a Great Spirit) created all things in nature equally therefore all creations should be treated with great respect. To ensure a proper balance with the environment, the Mi'kmaq practiced various traditions and customs. Leslie Upton, a historian (1979, p.11) interpreted this belief based upon archival reporting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

...the Micmacs [sic] accorded animals the same esteem they gave each other. They spoke of them as though the animals lived in the same way, each species a separate tribe living in two villages under its own chiefs...It was all one world indivisible.

The Mi'kmaq believe this equality aspect applied to them as a people "for man was only one part of a totally interdependent system that saw all things, animate and inanimate, in their proper places" (Upton 1979, p.15).

The Mi'kmaq relationship with the environment and all of its components was guided by these beliefs. Various rituals were performed to give thanks to the spirits, the Mi'kmaq believed were responsible for their overall well-being. These rituals were practiced everyday throughout the

## *The Uses of Kat*

*Kat* served as an important food source for the Mi'kmaq but its purposes were not restricted to food. It is also considered a multi-purpose item with its usage ranging from medicinal use to a type of binding material.

As a food source, *Kat* was prepared in many ways. It was sometimes prepared for a stew, baked, smoked and preserved for later use. The Mi'kmaq regarded *Kat* as:

...the favourite catch as it is even today. It mattered not one bit ...whether the meat was cooked or raw, and, if we found we had only tough meat at any time, we would cut and tear it into strips which we would pound on broad flat stones, and thus we were able to chew and swallow it easily

(Holmes-Whitehead 1991, p.10).

In preparation for cooking, *Kat* was usually skinned. The *kadaagel* (eel skin) when dried would tighten. This tightening ability and its durability further enabled the Mi'kmaq to use the skin for an array of purposes. It was used for bindings for sleds, moccasins, clothing, tying spears and harpoons on sticks, and so on.

*Kat* was also used for decorative purposes such as the hair string described in the legend *Sakklo'pi'k* in Ruth Holmes-Whitehead's book *Stories From the Six Worlds Micmac Legends*. The hair string in this legend is made of "...painted eelskin, porcupine quills and sinews [which] are combined...into a new being—the hair ornament" (Holmes-Whitehead 1988, p.11). This story is about two shy women who wish not to marry any man of the People. Yet, a Chief's son attempts to propose to them but is immediately refused. Along comes a lazy and ugly man who jokingly boasts he could marry one of the women. Later, the ugly and lazy man is walking in the woods and meets up with an old woman. This old woman's hair "is fastened up with many beautiful *sakklo'pi'k*, many wonderful ornamented hair-strings which tie up her hair and then trail their ends down over her shoulders, all the way down to her feet" (Holmes-Whitehead 1988, p.84). The old woman informs the lazy and ugly man she is aware of his wish to marry one of the two shy women and offers her assistance to him. He accepts her assistance. The old woman then removes one of the *sakklo'pi'k* from her hair and hands it to him saying:

Take this. Carry it in your pouch, your medicine pouch. Carry it for awhile, then watch out for a time to get close to her, and throw this *sakklo'ipi* upon her back. But do not let her see you do this. Do not let her feel you do this. And do not tell anyone else about this at all

(Holmes-Whitehead 1988, p 86).

The lazy and ugly man agrees to follow her instructions and the next day comes upon one of the women wandering in the woods. He then takes her back to her family. Upon their return, she becomes his wife.

*Kadaagel* (eel skin) was also used for its medicinal properties. Its tightening ability enabled the Mi'kmaq to use it as a type of brace to relieve sprains. It was also worn next to the skin for relief from cramps, rheumatism, headaches, and lameness (Lacey 1977, p. 40, 56).

In addition to the skin, other parts of *Kat* were also saved and buried until fall. These parts included the heart, liver, heads, and skins. When these parts were recovered in the fall, it

It is believed among the Mi'kmaq people that in order to have a successful hunt or fishing expedition, one must make an offering to the creator. This offering is referred to as *Pagetunowwedomkawa'* (Propser 2001, p.18). A portion of the poem Legend of Glooscap's Door briefly describes eels as *Pagetunowwedomkawa'*:

At Cape Dolphin near Big Brads d'Or  
There is a hole through a cliff  
It is Glooscap's door.  
And on the outside a flat stone  
It is his table.  
The Indians on a hunt leave on table  
Tobacco and eels.  
This brings them luck, so the story goes  
The legend lives on

*Kat* also served as a ceremonial object. It was involved in various Mi'kmaq traditions such as the ritual *Apuknajit* (Feeding of Grandfather). This ritual was performed on January 31st to give thanks to the Spirits for surviving the hardest time of the year:

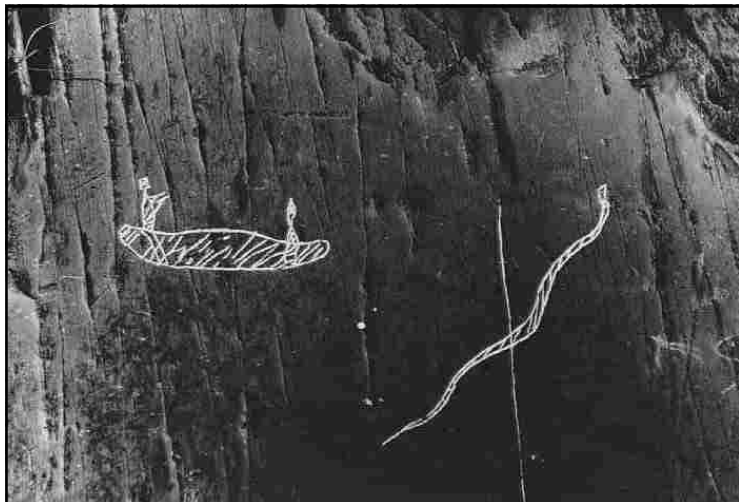
When darkness has settled, food is put out into the night preferably on an old stump or near a tree and offered to the spirits. In days gone by, eel skins and fish heads were offered. An elder would lead the family to a stump, give thanks for surviving thus far and ask for additional assistance until spring  
(Marshall 1997).

Another Mi'kmaq tradition involving eels as a ceremonial offering is also described in *The Legend of Glooscap's Door* by Mi'kmaq author Rita Joe. A portion of this poem is displayed above.

*Kat* and its involvement in various ceremonies as mentioned earlier demonstrates *Kat* was more than a tangible object—it was a sacred being. The Mi'kmaq considered animals as equal in importance to their own existence. Therefore, animals must be treated in a certain manner. For example, a taboo existed on “roasting eels” which was documented by Nicolas Denys in 1672. The fact a taboo exists clearly indicates that *Kat* possesses spiritual qualities and should be treated with great respect.

The Mi'kmaq believe one should not take more than what is needed. *Kji-Keptin* Alec Denny recalls a memory concerning eels as a young boy. He was out spearing eels one day by himself and was eager to catch as much as he could. He caught so many eels that his boat was filled with them. He then came home to brag about his huge catch to his grandfather. His grandfather seeing how many eels he caught asked him: “What are we going to do with them?” There were obviously more eels than they could use. In order for Alec's grandfather to teach him the importance of only taking what was needed, he put Alec through a vigorous training program. Alec's grandfather told him to salt some of the eels and give it to the people during the mission in Chapel Island. He was then told to carefully clean the rest of the eels and to separate the hearts, livers, skins, guts and eel heads into cans. This was a long process and took two days to complete. Once this was done, he was not yet finished. He was then told to put these items into butter tubs his grandfather made and bury them near the river until fall. At this time these tubs were dug up and put into smaller cans and used as bait for trapping various animals. The Mi'kmaq people were careful not to waste anything and to only take what was needed—not to waste and the next time, Alec would be more

## *Kat and Kejimikujik National Park*



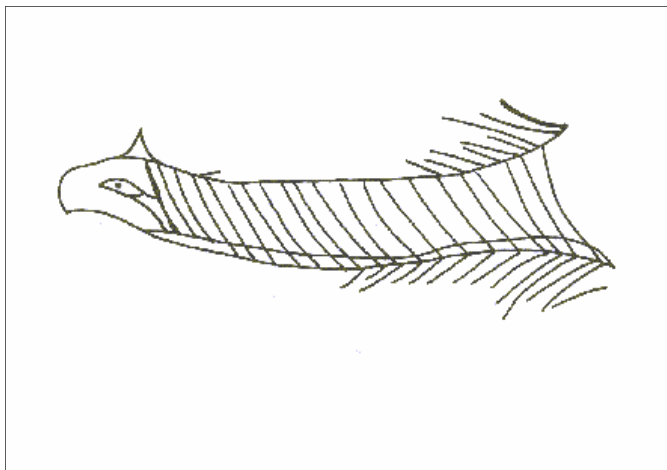
On-line source: <http://museum.gov.ns.ca/mikmaq/p0005htm>

The Mi'kmaq share a long cultural history with *Kat*. Petroglyphs in Nova Scotia's Kejimikujik National Park located in Southwest Nova Scotia suggest the presence of the water creature *Jipijka'maq* - the Great Horned Serpent (Whitehead 1990). Examples of these petroglyphs are shown on this page. The one on the left portrays a Mi'kmaq man and woman in a canoe in the presence of a serpent.

The Mi'kmaq believe *Jipijka'maq* is the eel. There are many similarities between *Jipijka'maq* and *Kat*. For example, it is said *Jipijka'maq* travel "about under the earth in their snake shapes...and sometimes they come up to the Earth World and carve great ruts in

the land as they move across it" (Holmes-Whitehead 1988, p.4). In addition, a special distinction is made between snakes and *Jipijka'maq*. In the legend *Miskwekepu'j* contents of a bag is described as containing both "...snake bones and *jipijka'm* bones..." (Holmes-Whitehead 1988, p.13). Another similarity exists between *Kat* and *Jipijka'maq* behaviour when traveling over land. *Kat* when traveling over land will leave behind it a trail of *skimogan* (slime). This trail of *skimogan* enables *Kat* to reach its destination to the next water source. Each *Kat* would contribute its slime to this trail and go as far as its slime enabled it to. In turn, the next eel would continue the trail by depositing more slime along the trail. The *Jipijka'maq* on the other hand would carve great ruts in the land as it moved across it. These ruts are referred to as the "track of the serpent people" (Holmes-Whitehead 1988, p.44).

Another connection *Kat* has to Kejimikujik National Park are the remains of the stone eel weirs located along the various rivers in the park. Traditionally the Mi'kmaq used these weirs to

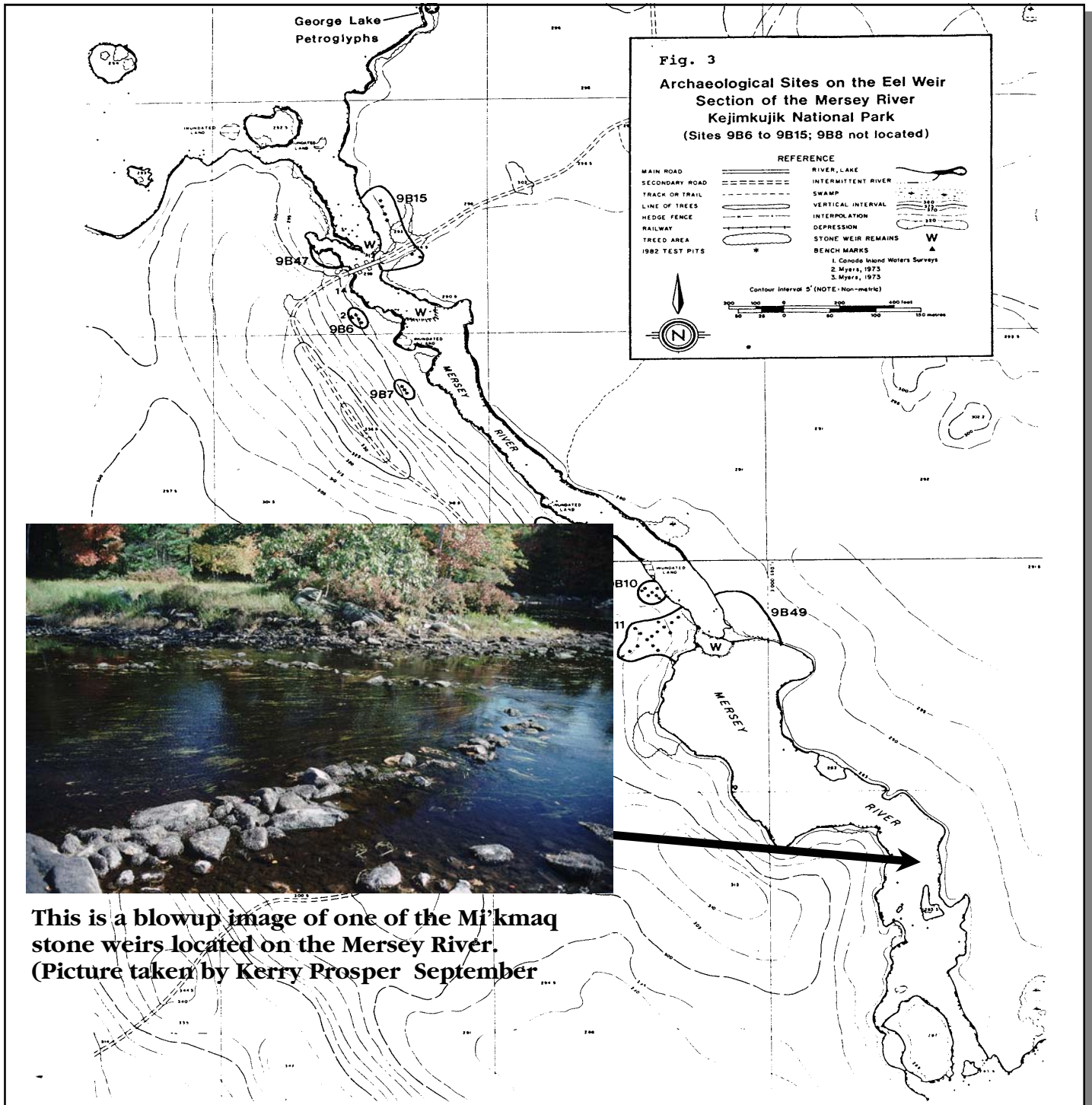


catch eels and other types of fish. The Mi'kmaq had to carefully choose where to construct these weirs due to the great deal of man power and time that was involved in their construction. Where to construct and when to use the weirs required a detailed knowledge of the local area and of various types of fish and their behaviours. Evidence of this type demonstrates the Mi'kmaq relationship to fish and other beings have been in existence for a long time. Located on the next page is a map of Kejimikujik National Park showing a blown up picture of a stone weir located on the Mersey River.

This is a petroglyph of *Jipijka'maq* (Horned Serpent) from Kejimikujik National Park (Robertson 1973).

Additional weirs have also been located throughout northeastern North America: A Sebaskong Lake Fish Weir dated at 5,100 years old in Maine and the Atherley Narrows site on Lake Simcoe in Ontario, dating around 4500 B.P. A third

### *Kat and Kejimikujik National Park*



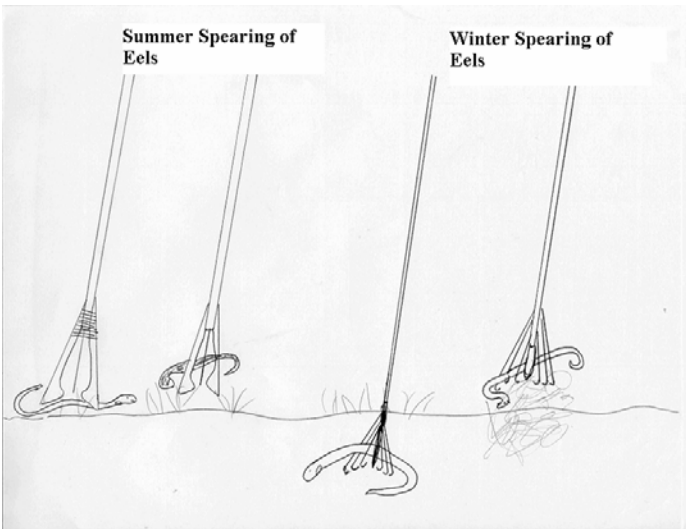
The Mi'kmaq relationship with Kat in Nova Scotia is archeologically documented back as far as 4000 years ago with the presence of stone eel weirs throughout Nova Scotia. The map above shows the location of such weirs on the Mersey River at Kejimikujik National park in South West Nova Scotia

(McNab 1998, p. 98)  
 Map Source: (Environment Canada Parks Canada 1994)

## Traditional Methods of Fishing *Kat*

The Mi'kmaq traditionally employed various types of tools when fishing *Kat*. They used stone eel weirs as mentioned earlier and different types of spears. The stone weir required the most labour and time to construct. A picture of the remains of a stone eel weir is located on the previous page.

“Stone weirs often exhibited a V-shape across the stream, with the point of the V extending either upstream or downstream, depending on the direction of the seasonal migrations. A box-life bark trap or net bag set in a gap in the weir’s fence captured the fish” (Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq and Robert S. Peabody Museum of Archaeology 2001, p.105). The weir sites were



occupied by the Mi'kmaq for an extended part of the year. It was at these sites that the Mi'kmaq would “smoke and dry eels for the winter” (Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq and Robert S. Peabody Museum of Archaeology 2001, p.100).

*Kat* was also fished using spears. There were two different types of spears, a winter and a summer eel spear. Each spear was comprised of bones and wood and was 15-20 feet in length. The winter eel spear had more prongs to it than the summer eel spear. In the summer, visibility in the water ranged from 4-7 feet and the eel could be caught easier than in the winter. In the winter, fishers would go out on the ice, cut holes and spear for eels (Prosper 2001, p.25). At this time, the eels were in the mud. The winter spear therefore had more prongs placed closer together to enable the fisherman to haul the eel out of the mud. On the left are pictures of the summer and winter spears.

Source: Prosper 2001, p.25.



Source: Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq and Robert S. Peabody Museum of Archaeology 2001, p.113.

During the 1930s, anthropologist Frederick Johnson traveled throughout several Mi'kmaq communities in his “search of ethnological information” regarding the Mi'kmaq living in the Maritime provinces (Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq and Robert S. Peabody Museum of Archaeology 2001, p.113). Part of his study also included taking photographs of the Mi'kmaq and their lifestyle. The picture on the left displays Chris Morris with an eel rack he made. This eel rack was used to dry and preserve eels for later use.

Overall, the Mi'kmaq and *Kat* shared a cultural and spiritual relationship within the environment. This relationship provided good health, happiness and long life for all within the

**Note:** This fact sheet contains Mi'kmaq words. These Mi'kmaq words and their English translations used in this fact sheet are used in reference to Rand's Dictionary of the Language of the Micmac Indians.

*Kat* - An eel.

*Kji-Niskam* -Great Spirit

*sakklo'pi'k* -Hair string

*Apuknajit* - Feeding of Grandfather

*Jipijka'maq*- Great Horned Serpent

*Manitou*- Spirit.

*Kadaagel*- eel skin

*Kji-Keptin* -Grand Captain of the Mi'kmaq Grand Council

*Pagetunowewedoomkawa'* - ceremonial offering of fish

*skimogan* - eel slime

If interested in hearing or exploring further some of these words, you can visit the on-line site regarding the Mi'kmaq language at: [www.mikmaq.com/new/language/index.html](http://www.mikmaq.com/new/language/index.html) or the Mi'kmaq Online—Mi'gmaq

## References

Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq and the Robert S. Peabody Museum of Archaeology. 2001.

*Mikwite'lmanej Mikmaqi'k Let Us Remember The Old Mi'kmaq*. Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Limited.

Deny, Nicolas. 1908. *The Description and Natural History of the Coasts of North America (Acadia)(1672)*. New York: Greenwood Press.

Denny, Alec *Kji-Keptin*. March 4, 2002. Personal communication to Mary Jane Paulette.

Environment Canada. Parks Canada. 1994. *Archaeological Sites on the Eel Weir Section of the Mersey River Kejimikujik National Park*.

Holmes-Whitehead, Ruth 1988. *Stories From The Six Worlds Micmac Legends*. Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Limited.

Holmes-Whitehead, Ruth 1991. *The Old Man Told Us*. Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Limited.

Joe, Rita. 1988. *Song of Eskasoni—More Poems of Rita Joe*. Charlottetown: Ragweed Press.

Lacey, Laurie. 1977. *Micmac Indian Medicine—Traditional Way of Health*. Antigonish: Formac Limited.

Marshall, Murenda. 1997. Values, Customs and Traditions of the Mi'kmaq Nation. *The Mi'kmaq Anthology*. Lawrencetown Beach: Pottersfield Press. 51-63.

McNab, D.T. 1998. *Earth, Water, Air and Fire Studies in Canadian Ethnohistory*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Nova Scotia Museum. 2002. *The Mi'kmaq Portraits Collection*. Available on-line: <http://museum.gov.ns.ca/mikmaq/mp0005htm>

Prosper, Kerry. 2001. *The Mi'kmaq and Kat (American Eel)*. Antigonish: Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries, St. Francis Xavier University. Available on-line: <http://www.stfx.ca/research/srsf/2005b1.htm>.

Rand, Silas T. 1888. *Dictionary of the Language of the Micmac Indians who reside in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Cape Breton and Newfoundland..* Halifax: Nova Scotia Printing Company.

Robertson, Marion. 1973. *Rock Drawings Of The Micmac Indians*. Halifax: Nova Scotia Museum.

We are continuing our research regarding *Kat* (American Eel). If you require or have any further information regarding the American Eel or this fact sheet, please feel free to contact us. Our contact information is located on the next page. If you wish to learn more about *The Mi'kmaq and Kat (American Eel)*, the working document can be viewed on-line at: [www.stfx.ca/research/](http://www.stfx.ca/research/)

### The Paqtnkek Fish and Wildlife Commission

The Paqtnkek Fish and Wildlife Commission logo contains the four traditional colours—red, black, yellow, and white - each representing the four directions. It's circular shape demonstrates the holistic and collective qualities of the Mi'kmaq nation. Everything and every being within the circle is considered equal. The Great Horned Serpent petroglyph is used as a motif for *Kat* (the American Eel). According to various Mi'kmaq legends, the Great Horned Serpent's behaviour is similar to that of *Kat* (American Eel). "*Paqtnkek*" also holds a distinctive definition— "by the bay."

#### The Paqtnkek Fish and Wildlife Commission Goals

- To promote capacity building within the community in the fields of research and information gathering regarding fish and wildlife.
- To provide information regarding fish and wildlife important to the Mi'kmaq people.
- Develop capacity to co-manage resources important to the Mi'kmaq people. Ex. *Kat* (American Eel).

#### HOW TO CONTACT US:

Kerry Prosper, Community Research Coordinator  
Mary Jane Paulette, Research Assistant  
Phone: (902) 386-2955 or (902) 386-2781  
Email: [kerry@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:kerry@ns.sympatico.ca)

or

[mj.paulette@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:mj.paulette@ns.sympatico.ca)

#### Paqtnkek Fish and Wildlife Commission

Afton First Nation  
R.R. #1 Afton  
Antigonish Co., Nova Scotia  
B0H 1A0



### Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries (SRSF)

SRSF is a partnership linking university researchers and capacity with Mi'kmaq and commercial small boat fisheries community organizations. Although administered at St. Francis Xavier University, SRSF engages and represents a working collaboration between Guysborough county Inshore Fishermen's Association, the Gulf Nova Scotia Bonafide fishermen's Association, the Mi'kmaq Fish and Wildlife Commission—Afton Band, and St.F.X. as well as other university-based social researchers. Additional fisheries and community organizations are linked with SRSF through relations with these core partners.

SRSF is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) through its Community-University Research Alliance (CURA). The basic purposes of SRSF are: to develop fisheries-focused social research linkages between university researchers and community organizations, to build social research capacity, and to facilitate specific fisheries social research activities that will examine the concerns of the partnered community organizations. Social research capacity, experience and linkages are developed through research-focused workshops and specific research projects.

#### HOW TO CONTACT US:

**Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries**  
St. Francis Xavier University  
PO Box 5000, CURA Box 21  
Antigonish, Nova Scotia  
B2G 2W5



Phone: (902) 867-2292  
Fax: (902) 867-5395  
[www.stfx.ca/research/srsf](http://www.stfx.ca/research/srsf)