

Kat [ka'taq - American Eel]: A Mi'kmaq Customary Food Cache

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For thousands of years the Mi'kmaq have shared a long spiritual and cultural relationship with Kat. 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'tnkek 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'tnkek First Nation Mi'kmaq. Here we describe and discuss two important findings arising from this study.

Ninety Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq men and women were identified as direct participants in the eel fishing (Table 1). Of those 27 years of age and older, a substantial majority of the men and over 1 in every 3 women reported that they had gone or were currently eel fishing. 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

Table 1: Participation in Eel Fishing by Age and Gender

Age Categories	Gender	
	Male (N=53) %	Female (N=27) %
42 Years to Oldest	80.6	39.3
27 to 41 Years	55.2	32.4
15 to 26 Years	22.6	15.2
8 to 14 Years	9.7	0.0
Youngest to 7 Years	0.0	0.0

that few in the younger generation are learning and experiencing the Mi'kmaq relationship with eel. Cultural knowledge is at risk of being lost.

This possibility is also evident in the simple fact that eel fishery male and female participation rates decline dramatically from the oldest through to the youngest age categories.

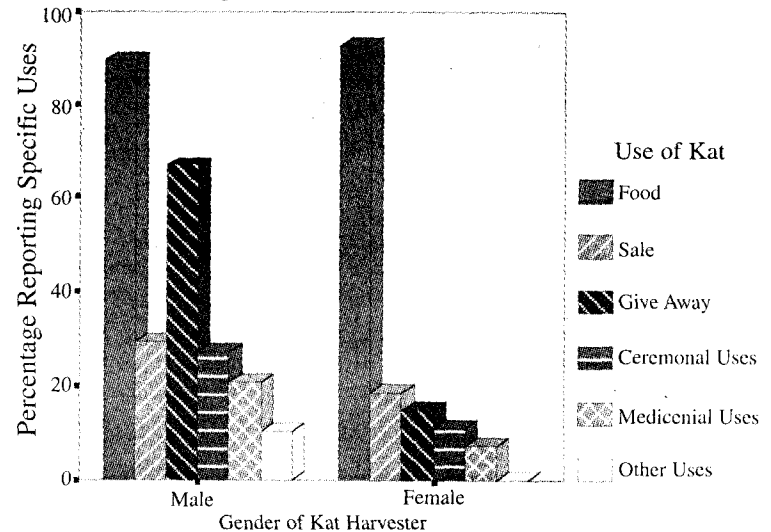
Those reporting that they either currently or in the past fished eel, were asked: "what do/did you do with the eel you've caught?" Responses show that the primary use of Kat for male and female harvesters has been for food (see Figure 1). This is also reflected in the notable percentages of men and women who report giving eel they've caught to others. 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. For instance, a 19th century Indian Agent reported having "...found four orphan children who were unable to rise for the want of food - whole families were subsisting upon wild roots and eels..." Kat is also noted as one of the resources bartered by the Mi'kmaq in the Supreme Court of Canada's affirmation of commercial fishing treaty rights (R v. Marshall, 1999).

Traditionally Kat was used as a major source of food for every stage of life. While just over 1 in 4 Paq'tnkek 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

Figure 1: Uses of Kat



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 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 practices 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's

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 concept of Netukulimk recognizes the interconnection of every animate life form and inanimate object. Starting with the principles embedded in the Netukulimk concept, Mi'kmaq culture offers the opportunity to build resource management from a 'first principle' commitment to ecosystem stewardship. Such an approach would assure resource sustainability, strengthen Mi'kmaq culture, and contribute to achieving satisfying livelihoods.

For more information on the research and research collaboration visit: www.sfx.ca/research/srsf

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