

# Gigohnke/Fishing

## Sharing eel catch Mi'kmaq tradition

*Kerry Prosper and  
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**PAK'TNKEK** – Court decisions recognizing Mi'kmaq treaty rights to fish for subsistence, ceremonial and “modest livelihood” poses mean much more than assured access to marine resources. For the Mi'kmaq these rights enable and support the preservation of critical practices lying at the heart of the culture. The practice and the place of fishing (utkunajik in Mi'kmaq - pronounced utkunagik) among the Mi'kmaq and within Mi'kmaq communities involves more than material items and considerations. It is a form of communication responsible for the existence and state of our culture. Our whole identity and the knowledge we possess is actually a result of our ancestors sharing stories, legends, and friendship, that is sharing and passing on our way of life.

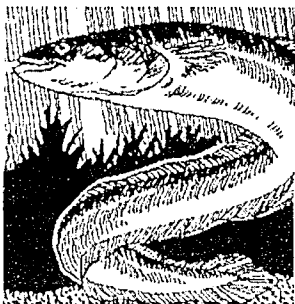
Yet, this practice of passing on knowledge and sharing is inhibited by a number of factors such as declines in natural resources, dropping levels of fluency in the Mi'kmaq language, exposure to non-Mi'kmaq cultural practices and technologies (e.g., T.V.), the decline in consumption of traditional foods. In order to better understand these processes and document experiences, the Anishinabek Fish and Wildlife Society is documenting our community's knowledge regarding the catch, consumption and use of (k'ataq- American Eel).

Throughout our research community members have been asked to share their experiences, knowledge, stories and family histories associated with fishing and using eels. This study has been designed to explore and to document the knowledge of our community's knowledge, including knowledge passed on by our ancestors.

This study has revealed some interesting findings related to eel fishing (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



Spring tide during the first full moon of June brings Mi'kmaq families together to seek lobster and eels from amongst the rocks and seaweed of Bayfield Beach. Events such as this enabled our people to pass down knowledge from generation to another. Pictured above are John R. Prosper and Benjimin'o'q Paul from different generations of the Paq'tnkek Band. Thanks goes out to 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.

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.

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.

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## Fish traps prove aboriginal title

*By Stephen Hume  
Vancouver Sun*

**COURTENAY** – In the fall of 2002, on one of those grey West Coast afternoons with a sullen sky threatening rain, university archeology student Nancy Greene decided to go for a walk with husband David.

Greene remembers that the tide was exceptionally low and had receded more than a kilometre from the shoreline. Before them sprawled the vast mudflat of Comox Bay, stippled with pools of water, patches of weed and clam shells.

What she'd expected to be a gooey expanse proved firm and the two soon found themselves hiking the tidal flats, something they'd never done before.

Greene noticed odd, knob-like bits of driftwood protruding from the mud. The more she looked, the more she saw – dozens, then scores.

She stooped to examine one. The top had rotted but below the surface the wood had been preserved. It looked like it had been driven vertically into the seabed. It looked man-made. She discerned something that nobody else had apparently noticed in a century or more – the knobs of wood were in parallels.

“She saw these stakes

arranged in lines and that great big light bulb went on inside her head,” David said with a grin as his wife reached for a good description of her epiphany.

Greene realized they were looking not at flotsam but at evidence of human engineering. Not only that, the scale appeared enormous. Everywhere she looked, she saw clusters and concentrations.

“I saw stakes everywhere – everywhere – just everywhere. I looked. The more I saw, the more I realized that this was vast. I didn't even know what to call them,” she recalled. “I didn't know they were called alignments. But I realized its potential importance as an archeological site.”

What she was looking at, it turns out, was evidence of what could prove the largest prehistoric architectural feature on the West Coast.

There is also a tantalizing hint in the historic record. John Walbran's landmark study of B.C. place names says the headland enclosing Comox Bay was named Punta de Lazo de la Vega by the Spanish explorer Jose Maria Narvaez in 1791. He translates the term loosely as “the point of the snares on the plain” which might be a reference to extensive fish traps.