

Atlantic Fisherman

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Traditional wisdom can build a sustainable future

It is not coincidental that Donald Marshall Jr. was fishing eel when charged by Fisheries and Oceans with illegal fishing as the Mi'kmaq people have a notable relationship with eel.

American eel, called K'at[pronounced-ka:taq] in Mi'kmaq, are used by the Mi'kmaq in a wide variety of ways. The qualities of the Mi'kmaq use of and relations with K'at demonstrate important features of their culture and spirituality.

It is a common belief among the Mi'kmaq that if nature is treated without respect, then there will be little left for future generations to draw upon. This idea of treating all nature with respect is captured in the Mi'kmaq concept of Netukulimk.

The concept of Netukulimk recognizes that every animate and inanimate object's well being depends on the contribution of all of creation. The respect all beings demonstrate in their contribution to and place in the web of life determines the well being of all life forms.

Customarily, the Mi'kmaq believed that every living and non-living object was created equally, including humans. Everything in life is inter-connected. To sustain life in a respectful manner, lives must be lived responsibly and with con-

sideration, according to the Netukulimk concept.

The central place and importance of Netukulimk within Mi'kmaq culture and relations with 'nature' continues to be expressed to this day and in the many ways the Mi'kmaq use the products of nature.

This is well demonstrated in Mi'kmaq ceremonial and medicinal use of K'at (eel) as described by members of the Paq'tnkek First Nation during some recent research. The Paq'tnkek First Nation, known locally as Afton, is a reserve community located east of Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

Participants describe using eel in many ways. Predominant among these are uses for food, to be given away to other family and community members, and for sale. Notably, many also specified that they used eel for ceremonial and medicinal purposes. Men and women in the oldest age categories were much more likely than younger persons to mention ceremonial and medicinal uses.

Of particular importance here is the place of eel among 'traditional foods' offered during Mi'kmaq and Paq'tnkek feasts as well as during the meals and community gatherings associated with funerals.

Baked eel and eel stews

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are described as common and expected feast foods. Even more notable were those who described eel as an important food offering during funerals.

These testimonials echo the ceremonial importance of eel for the Mi'kmaq, a cultural relationship that has been well documented. For instance, one researcher has noted that eel skins and heads were given as a ceremonial offering for the 'grandfathers' (called feeding of Grandfather - Apuknajit) to give thanks to the spirits for allowing the people to survive through the most difficult time of year.

K'at was also left as a gift for Glooscap, along with tobacco, by hunters. These gifts were offered to bring good fortune during the hunt. The use of K'at is also associated with taboos. The fact that a taboo exists clearly indicates K'at possesses spiritual qualities and must be treated with respect. For instance, it was believed that roasting an eel would be an act of disrespect preventing

the capture of them in the future.

A variety of medicinal usages of eel were also described by Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq, particularly by elders. For example, several noted that eel oil is good for ear infections.

One person specified that: "The eel is hung for three days to drain the oil." Eel oil was also mentioned as effective for chest colds and congestion. The treatment here is to rub the oil directly on to the chest.

Another specified that the broth from eel stew is an effective treatment for the flu. Also, eel broth was used in weaning infants, as well as for sustaining elders when all other foods are being refused. Eel skins are noted as effective as wraps for sprained ankles and wrists, and, when soaked in eel oil, as a treatment for painful legs and arthritis.

Again, these uses echo earlier descriptions of Mi'kmaq practices. For instance, one commentator has noted that eel skins (kadaagel) were used as braces and bandages, with juniper balsam and eel skin making a good poultice for sprains. Another commentator has recorded that in a Mi'kmaq legend, Sakklo'pi'k, the hair strings are described as made of painted eel skin, porcupine quills and sinews.

Various other portions of eel were also used as bait for trapping. Among the Mi'kmaq regard for nature involves using as much of everything as possible, and in ways that show gratitude and respect for being provided for.

The connection of Mi'kmaq culture and spiritualism with K'at demonstrates the continuing importance and meaning, to the Mi'kmaq, of Netukulimk - living in a respectful, responsible, and thankful relation with nature.

This Mi'kmaq principle offers considerable potential as a foundation for developing a new, and more sustainable, approach to the harvesting and use of marine resources. Knowing of the place of Netukulimk within the Mi'kmaq worldview is also critical to developing understandings and alliances between Mi'kmaq and non-native fish harvesters and their communities.

* A complete report of this research may be accessed at: (www.stfx.ca/research/srsf)

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