



# Atlantic FISHERMAN

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### 3 Where did all the herring go?

P.E.I. fishermen say they are having record lobster catches, but are concerned about low numbers of herring this season.

### 4 The Gearbox

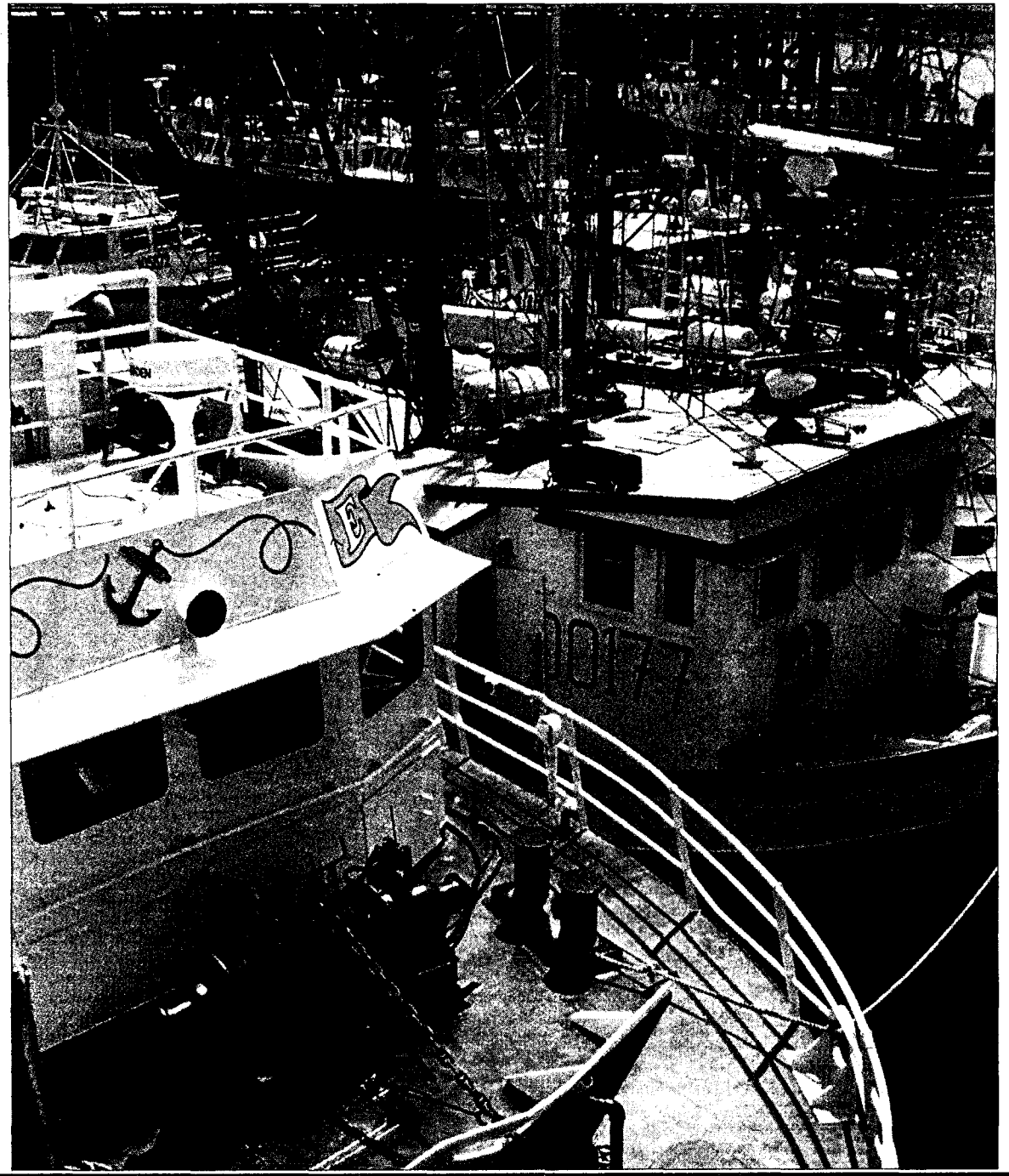
With oil prices at record highs, this is a good time to optimize marine diesel fuel economy.

### 6 P.E.I. in Brief

Souris-Elmira MLA says he is concerned there may be renewed violence later this year in the herring seiner dispute.

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### ON THE COVER

Scallop boats at the Fisherman's Wharf in Digby, N.S.

photo by Heather Killen

# K'at (ka:taq - America Eel): A Mi'kmaq customary food cache

By Mary Jane Paulette, Paq'tnkek Fish and Wildlife Society, Kerry Prosper, Paq'tnkek First Nation, Nova Scotia, and Anthony Davis Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries, St. Francis Xavier University

inflating the market values of licenses and quotas to such an extent that many non-native new entrants must assume even more tremendous debt burdens than was previously the case.

Such a situation pretty well assures that 'fishing for

cerns among non-native fish harvesters about their future in the fisheries. They have also fueled suspicion, resentment, and conflict between the Mi'kmaq and non-natives.

It is time to step back from this set of circumstances, if

largely designed and orchestrated by Fisheries and Oceans. It is a practice that has been most concerned with maintaining the ways and means of its fisheries management regime, a regime that has overseen resource collapses, fisheries moratoria, and tremendous dissatisfaction:

Mi'kmaq have been faced with ultimatums - either exercise your treaty rights within this system as specified in signed fisheries agreements or face arrest, interference, and years of expensive legal fights. With few resources to draw upon, facing high levels on community unemployment, and under threat, it is not at all surprising that most Mi'kmaq leaders felt compelled to sign fisheries agreements.

Through all of this, few seem to have asked the Mi'kmaq people what they would either prefer or propose to do with regard to the exercise of their treaty right for participation in the commercial fisheries. This sort of consultation would have taken time and care. Also, it might have drawn out qualities of Mi'kmaq culture and

perspective that offer tremendous promise for repositioning fisheries management and fishing practices on a more environmentally sustainable basis than is currently the case.

Donald Marshall Jr. was fishing eel commercially when he was charged by DFO officers. This was no coincidence. At that time eel received little regulatory and resource management attention.

At that time of little commercial interest, eel was one fish that had been basically left to the Mi'kmaq and others to harvest where and when they felt inclined. Harvesting eel to barter, among other things, is specifically noted by the Supreme Court as one of the activities embedded in the treaties that establishes the legal basis of the Mi'kmaq right to participate in commercial fisheries for livelihood purposes.

Obviously the Mi'kmaq have a long history of harvesting and using American eel. It is certainly curious that these qualities seem to have been ignored in the debates and discussions of

Mi'kmaq commercial fishing treaty entitlements.

In part to remedy this, over the last few years we have been documenting Mi'kmaq relations with and use of American Eel (K'at [pronounced ka:taq] in the Mi'kmaq language).

Our studies are concerned with understanding ways in which the Mi'kmaq people and their culture view and interact with life forms such as the eel. It is hoped that understandings of the Mi'kmaq and their culture will be improved, and that the potential contributions of the Mi'kmaq to repositioning fisheries management in the interests of all will be made clear.

For thousands of years the Mi'kmaq have shared a long spiritual and cultural relationship with K'at. K'at have provided the Mi'kmaq with a variety of benefits, while in Mi'kmaq culture K'at have become associated with spiritual meanings. For the Mi'kmaq, K'at 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 K'at has been drawn on as a food cache.

In order to explore Mi'kmaq relations with eel, we have documented the past and present usage of K'at among the Paq'tnkek First Nation Mi'kmaq in North-eastern Nova Scotia. Here we describe and discuss two important findings arising from this study.

Ninety Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq men and women were

**Donald Marshall Jr. was fishing eel commercially when he was charged by DFO officers. This was no coincidence. At that time eel received little regulatory and resource management attention.**

debt' becomes a reality for many. In addition, the Court's decision clearly proclaims the fact that all non-natives participate in fishing as a result of a government allocated privilege, while Mi'kmaq participation is based on a legal right.

These attributes and consequences of the Court's decision have deepened con-

just to avoid having the emotional fall-out cloud the potentials for understandings and collaborations that offer some hope for a revitalized commercial fisheries managed with respect for the interests and concerns of both the Mi'kmaq and non-natives.

The current practice for integrating First Nations is

The Supreme Court of Canada's Marshall decision is permanently transforming the commercial fisheries. By establishing that the Mi'kmaq First Nation has treaty-based rights for participation in commercial fisheries the Court's decision has required that room be made for First Nation participation.

This is being accomplished through Fisheries and Oceans buy-outs and redistribution to the various Mi'kmaq communities of available licenses, quotas and capacity.

This policy has had the immediate effect of grossly

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From page 10

identified as direct participants in the eel fishery.

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 K'at 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. 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 K'at 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 K'at, a notably low proportion given the fact that Mi'kmaq have

had access to few economically valuable harvestable resources.

For the Mi'kmaq, K'at 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, K'at has gotten the Mi'kmaq people through the hardest times of the year. Maybe this is why K'at 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.

K'at 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 K'at 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 K'at 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'tnekek 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'tnekek 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 K'at 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 K'at. Now, with the Court's ruling, Mi'kmaq treaty rights have been affirmed. Great responsibilities come with these rights. The Mi'kmaq idea of Netukulimk provides some guidance for a uniquely Mi'kmaq approach, one that has the potential to guide the development of new approaches to fisheries management. The concept of Netukulimk recognizes the

interconnection of every animate life form and inanimate object.

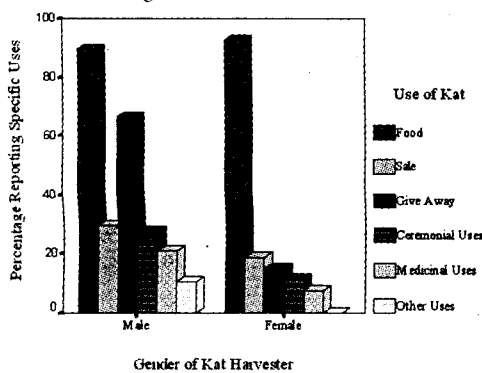
Starting with the principles embedded in the Netukulimk concept, Mi'kmaq culture offers the opportunity to build resource management from a 'first principle' commitment to ecosystem stewardship.

Such an approach would assure resource sustainability, strengthen Mi'kmaq culture, and contribute to achieving satisfying livelihoods.

It also offers a basis on which Mi'kmaq and non-natives can meet and form alliances dedicated to developing an ecosystem stewardship approach as the first principle in fisheries management and livelihood sustainability. This process must begin with building mutually respectful understandings of concerns, preferences, and needs.

For more information on the research and research collaboration visit: [www.stfx.ca/research/srsf](http://www.stfx.ca/research/srsf)

Figure 1: Uses of Kat



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