

Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq and Kat (Eels)

Donald Marshall Jr. was charged by DFO for commercially fishing eels (Kat) without a license. This began another journey by the Mi'kmaq through the legal system for the purpose of affirming treaty rights. In September 1999 the Supreme Court of Canada dismissed the charges against Donald Marshall, in the process affirming the treaty right to fish commercially in support of a 'modest livelihood'. The facts that Donald Marshall was fishing Kat when charged and that the treaty clauses noted in the decision specifically mention Kat seem to have received no consideration in all of the events that have occurred.

Knowing that Kat has been culturally and materially important for the Mi'kmaq, the Paq'tnkek Fish and Wildlife Society (PFWS) in collaboration with Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries (St. Francis Xavier University) has conducted a household survey in the Paq'tnkek community. The survey was designed to explore the relationship between the Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq and Kat or American Eel and marks the completion of the first phase of an on-going research project. The results of the survey have been released as a preliminary report entitled: The Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq and Kat (American Eel - Anquilla rostrata).

The first step in this project was to submit a proposal to the Mi'kmaq Ethics Committee to seek approval and earn the respect of the Mi'kmaq Nation. "The Mi'kmaq Ethics Committee was appointed by the Grand Council in 1999 to establish a set of principles and protocols that will protect the integrity and cultural knowledge of the Mi'kmaq People". This committee's objective is to ensure any research involving the Mi'kmaq would be conducted in a manner respectful to the Mi'kmaq People and their culture. They also recommend any information collected remain in the hands of the various Mi'kmaq communities. Thus ensuring the information would be used in a manner that benefits the Mi'kmaq Nation as a whole. Presently anyone who enters a Mi'kmaq community to study or gather information regarding the Mi'kmaq must first submit a proposal outlining their research plans and their intentions to the Committee prior to implementation. Respecting these principles and protocols, the Paq'tnkek Fish and Wildlife Society submitted a proposal describing

the Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq and Kat research project. Following the committee's review of the proposal, authorization was received in November 2001 to begin the project.

With approval in hand, our next step was to develop a survey aimed at gathering and documenting each Paq'tnkek household's knowledge regarding the past and present fishing practices and use of Kat. In order to accomplish this task in a household setting, it was decided our survey should resemble a census-type questionnaire. Such a questionnaire could be conducted in a respectable and effective manner taking into account each household occupant's knowledge and experiences. A copy of the survey is available at - www.sfx.ca/research/srsf/ResearchResources.

Prior to beginning the survey, our community's requirements needed to be considered. We had to ensure the surveyors would be able to meet the needs of our community's participants. For instance, in order to accommodate our community's Mi'kmaq-speaking people, the surveyors should be bilingual in Mi'kmaq and English. This would provide each participant with the option of communicating in the language of their choice. In turn, the participant would be better able to describe any details concerning their knowledge and experiences. We also felt the interviewers should have prior experience in conducting interviews/surveys. This would ensure a high level of comfort and a sense of open communication between all involved. The surveyors should also express a keen interest in the research, thus encouraging participation. Paq'tnkek band members Mary Catherine Laford and Delores Paul satisfied all of these conditions and were engaged as surveyors. Their efficiency and past experiences definitely contributed to the high 95% participation rate in our study, with 93 of the 98 available households taking part. This is an outstanding level of participation, indicating the interest of the community in the study as well as reflecting the diligence of the interviewers in their pursuit and conduct of the interviews.

Results of our findings revealed some interesting patterns regarding the state of the cultural relationship between the Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq and Kat. First of all, 80 persons, 26.1% of the Paq'tnkek 'on reserve' community reported that they either currently fish or, in the past, have fished for

American Eel. Of these, 53 are men (66.2%) and 27 are women (33.8%). This indicates that although a dominantly male activity, women were quite heavily involved in eel fishery. Further analysis reveals that the women's participation in eel fishing has declined more rapidly than men in past years. When asked if an individual went fishing within the past year, twenty-two percent of the men, but not one woman reported fishing for eel. In addition, women mentioned they primarily fished during the winter as opposed to fishing in both seasons or in the summer.

Another significant finding involved the rate of eel consumption among the Paq'tnkek 'on reserve' population. In general, just over fifty-four percent of all household members surveyed (169 of 312 persons) reported having eaten eel, with men (56.1%) being slightly more likely to eat eel than women (52.2%). Out of these percentages, only 31% of the men and 25% of the women reported eating eel within the last year with a personal preference for winter-caught eels. Also observed within this pattern, females or males over the age of 27 years reported eating eel. For those younger than 27 years of age the rate of consumption declines remarkably. When the rates of consumption and fishing of eel were compared, the numbers of those reporting having eaten eel, contrasted with the much smaller number specified as fishing or having fished eel. This demonstrates that eel has been distributed widely, by those who catch it, within the Paq'tnkek community.

The past and present relationship between the Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq and a resource such as Kat is very dependent upon the availability and access to the resource. There are many influential changes that have impacted the way of life for the Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq. Some of these contributing factors may be changing government policies, court cases, impacts of competing fisheries, environmental changes, global impacts on climate change, etc. Therefore, the Paq'tnkek cultural practices and relationship to Kat would have become susceptible to decline and loss over time.

This is an area of great concern for the Paq'tnkek community. Demographics of the Paq'tnkek community indicate there is a wide gap between the youth and senior population of this community. Such a gap has already inter-

fered with the passing down of knowledge from one generation to the next as evident in our study. The survey results has enabled our community to begin to understand the importance of the cultural relationship between the Mi'kmaq and Kat and the need to preserve it. The community can now begin to understand why there is a cultural decline and take steps to sustain and preserve this rich cultural relationship.

To assist with this process, the Paq'tnkek Fish and Wildlife Society (PFWS) is planning to further investigate this cultural relationship by interviewing in depth the individual(s) who received the most mentions as knowing a lot about fishing and/or cooking Kat in our survey. It is very important for communities to address these types of concerns in order for all of the Mi'kmaq nation to understand for ourselves and to one day become masters of own destiny. The individuals who will be taking the lead role in Phase II of our project will be the major contributors to the preservation of our culture. ☺



Last winter, Kerry Prosper took his daughters, Jaden and Lenora Prosper on a winter eel fishing expedition on Pomquet harbour. Pictured above is one of his daughters Jaden holding an eel he speared that day. This is the creation of his children's first memories of eel fishing. This demonstrates the act of passing down knowledge to the next generation further preserving the cultural relationship of the Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq and Kat. It also emphasises the cultural importance of the past and present traditional use of Pomquet harbour by the Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq.

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