

Mi'kmaq Eel Sustainability Netukulimk

The Mi'kmaq hold a special relationship with kataq, eels.

Eels are a reliable source of food that kept Mi'kmaq alive in harsh times. They were used to sustain a local economy by bartering. Eels convey functional, medicinal and spiritual elements to our people. Ceremonies honouring a young males first harvest were given by the family to celebrate his first game (L'pa'tuj Wi'kapaluet).

Eel skins were used for healing sprains, ties, bindings and moccasin soles. Eel oil provided nourishment and treatment for ear infections. Eels are often requested to calm the sick and comfort the dying as they transition to the spirit world. Eels are also used to treat insomnia. All parts of the eel are used and what is not used is offered back to Mother Earth. Eels are also an important food for other animals.

Bras d'Or Lakes' eels are at least seven years old before they are ready to be taken by spear. They take between 12 and 19 years before they reproduce. Larger eels are closer to reproducing than smaller ones. *To the best of our knowledge, all eels in the Bras d'Or Lakes are female.*

Reproductive cycle

Eels all over Canada come from the same population. They start and end their lives in the Sargasso Sea off the southern United States, reproducing only once before they die. There are many stages in the eel's life cycle. Fertilized eggs hatch as leptocephali in the winter, where they resemble a transparent leaf and travel for about a year on the ocean's currents. Next they change into glass eels looking more like tiny eels, but still transparent.

Once eels begin travelling upriver or to other habitats, they become pigmented, spending much of their time hiding from predators. As they grow, they become yellow eels and actively look for food. This stage can last for many years as they slowly transition into silver eels—their reproductive stage. Silver eels migrate back to the Sargasso Sea in late summer and fall to reproduce and die, completing the life cycle.

There are ways to help.

Netukulimk

Netukulimk describes the Mi'kmaq consciousness of how we guide and sustain ourselves without jeopardizing the future of Mother Earth. Netukulimk recognizes that the sustenance we depend on has a physical and spiritual life to which we are connected. All life is equal. Because of this, all that is harvested is used and treated with respect and gratitude.

Sharing and gratitude

Sharing is an integral part of Mi'kmaq culture. Spear eels when needed. Share your eels with others, especially with those who can't harvest. Use as much of the eel as possible. Give thanks for your eels with an offering of tobacco and return the heads and guts to Mother Earth.

Harvesting method

Rotate eel fishing areas to prevent depletion of eels in one place. Wait a week or so to replenish the area before returning to fish.

Gear and method

The spear is the traditional way to harvest eels. In spring to fall, it lets you select an eel of appropriate size or stage. In winter, eels of all sizes and stages are vulnerable so only take what you need, when you need it. Different types of spears catch different sizes of eels. You can modify winter spears by adjusting the tightness of the wires/strings to capture smaller eels. There are other methods to catch eels such as using eel pots made out of wood or metal.

Respect the silver eel

Traditionally, not harvesting eels during blueberry season was common. This coincides with the season silver eels begin their journey to spawning grounds of the Sargasso Sea.

Habitat

Most of our harvesting takes place in the Bras d'Or Lakes. Rivers and lakes can act as refuge areas where eels are not harvested. Good water quality is necessary for all living things. Our daily practices must reflect the necessity of water to all life. Keep garbage, pollution and silt out of the water to preserve water quality and fish habitat.

