

“Eels were life to our people”: traditional ecological knowledge of eels as food, medicine, community and life among participants in the Mi’kmaq food and ceremonial fishery in Cape Breton, NS

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30 May 2011

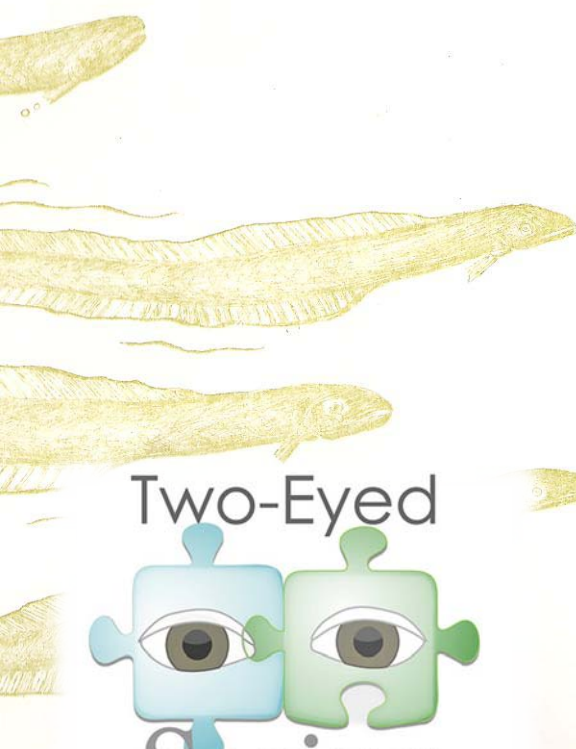
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at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB.

ESAC conference theme:

"People, Places and Sustainability: Exploring Ideas Across Communities"

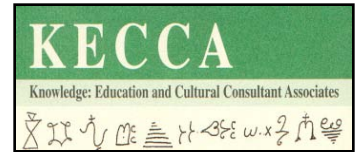
ABSTRACT:

Eels are an important part of the Mi'kmaq traditional food system, known as *netukulimk* or the traditional way of life. In this presentation, I explore a key theme, "eels were life to our people", which emerged through qualitative analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 community-recommended eel fishery participants, from 4 Mi'kmaq communities in Unama'ki (Cape Breton), Nova Scotia. Using quotations and thick description, I try to portray the unique cultural perspective on interdependence and sustainability among these participants and how they link their ecological knowledge, practices, and values. Traditional ecological knowledge of eels encompasses knowledge, practices, and beliefs related to catching, preparing, and eating eels. Eels are consumed as food and medicine, and valued as a survival food, staple food, and special food. Participants also explain that eel food brings the community together when it is shared. Food is central to ecological thought among participants because they depend on eels for food and thus life and so they perceive themselves to be interdependent with the environment. For some participants and elders, the traditional way of life is valuable because it reminds a person of his or her interdependence with the environment through food. Therefore, participants value respectful and reciprocal activities which allow them to show reverence for the eel as a source of life while harvesting, preparing, sharing and consuming eels. Funding for this research was provided by the Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in Integrative Science, Dr. Cheryl Bartlett.



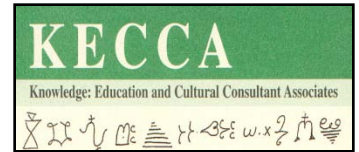
Albert Marshall

Mi'kmaq Elder, Eskasoni FN
Elder Advisor, Integrative Science



Murdena Marshall

Mi'kmaq Elder, Eskasoni FN
Elder Advisor, Integrative Science
Professor of Mi'kmaq Studies
(retired), Cape Breton University



Cheryl Bartlett

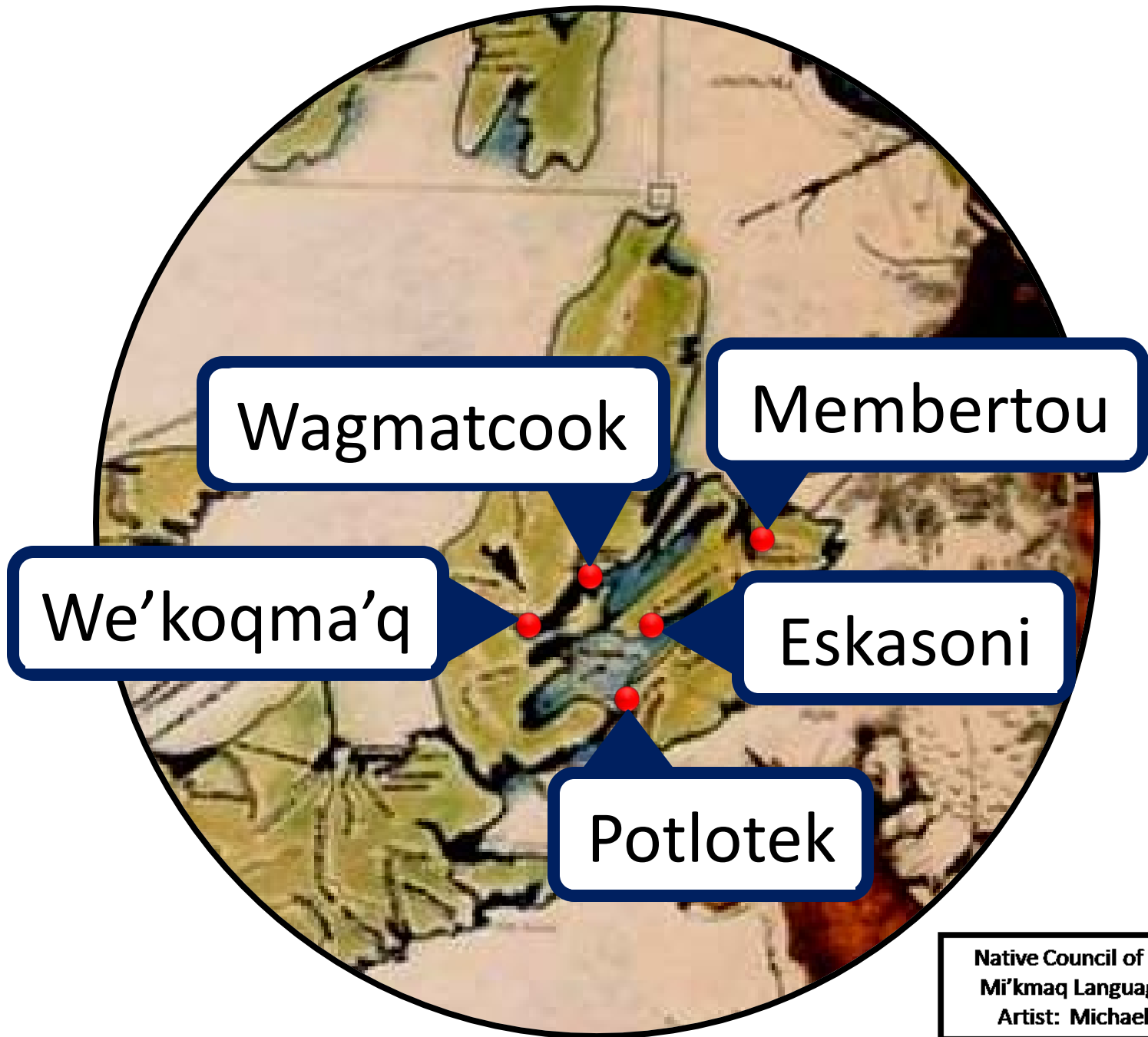
CRC, Integrative Science
Professor of Biology
Cape Breton University





Qualitative Research Strategy

- Semi-structured interviews
- Open-ended questions
- Community liaison or elder present
- Informed consent
- Visual interview guides
- Audio record and transcription
- Qualitative analysis - themes



Wagmatcook

Membertou

We'koqma'q

Eskasoni

Potlotek

Native Council of Nova Scotia
Mi'kmaq Language Program
Artist: Michael J. Martin

A circular map of the Marshall Islands is shown in the background. Five red dots are placed on the map, each with a blue callout box pointing to it. The callout boxes contain the following names:

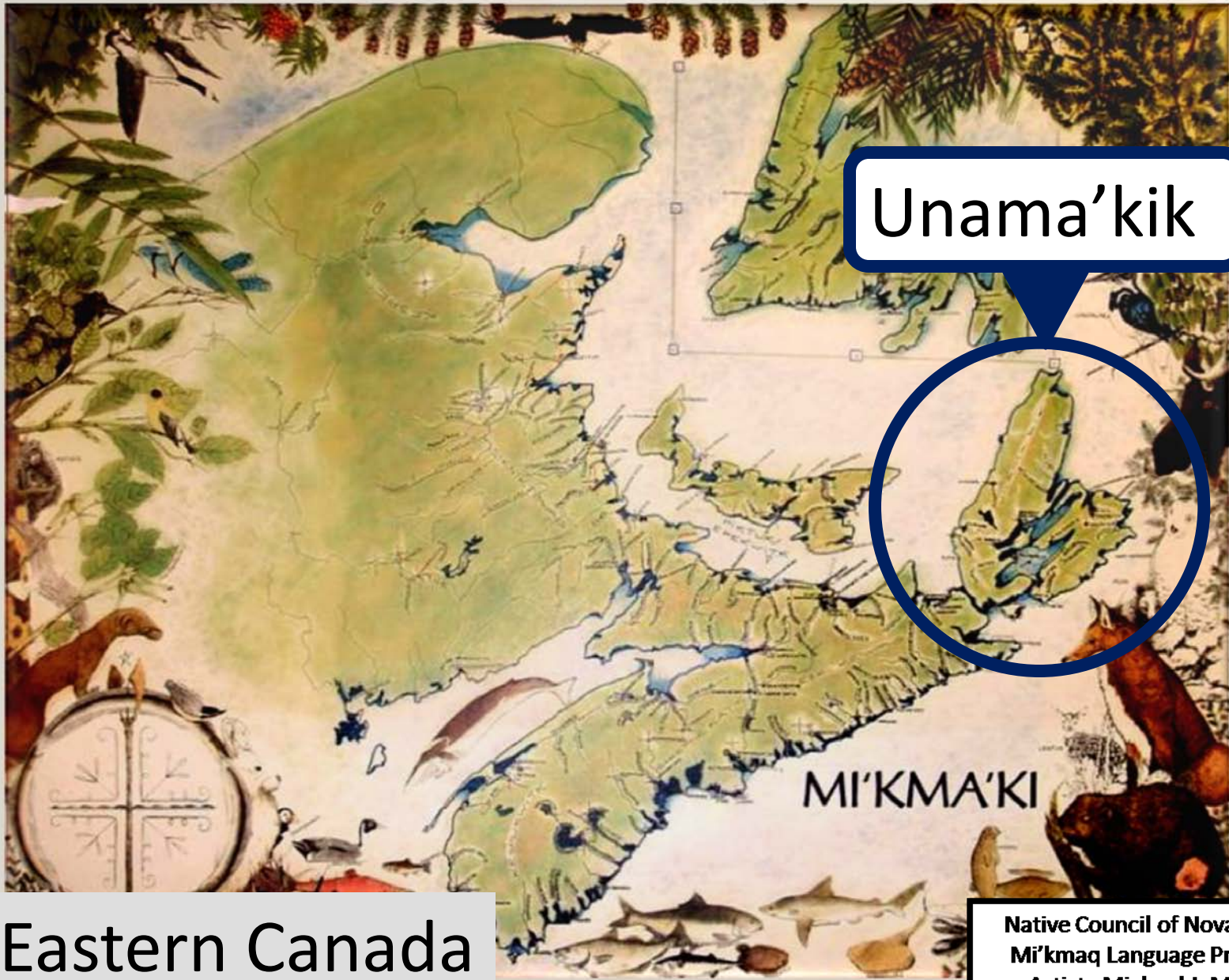
Albert Marshall
Murdena Marshall

Lawrence Wells

Lawrence Bernard

George Marshall
Stephen Isaac
anonymous

Camellias Alex
Charles Sylliboy
Florence Young
George Alex
Lewis Hearney
Victor Denny



Unama'kik

Eastern Canada

Native Council of Nova Scotia
Mi'kmaq Language Program
Artist: Michael J. Martin

Kataq



Photo by Brian Coad



Native Council of Nova Scotia
Mi'kmaq Language Program
Artist: Michael J. Martin

Kataq

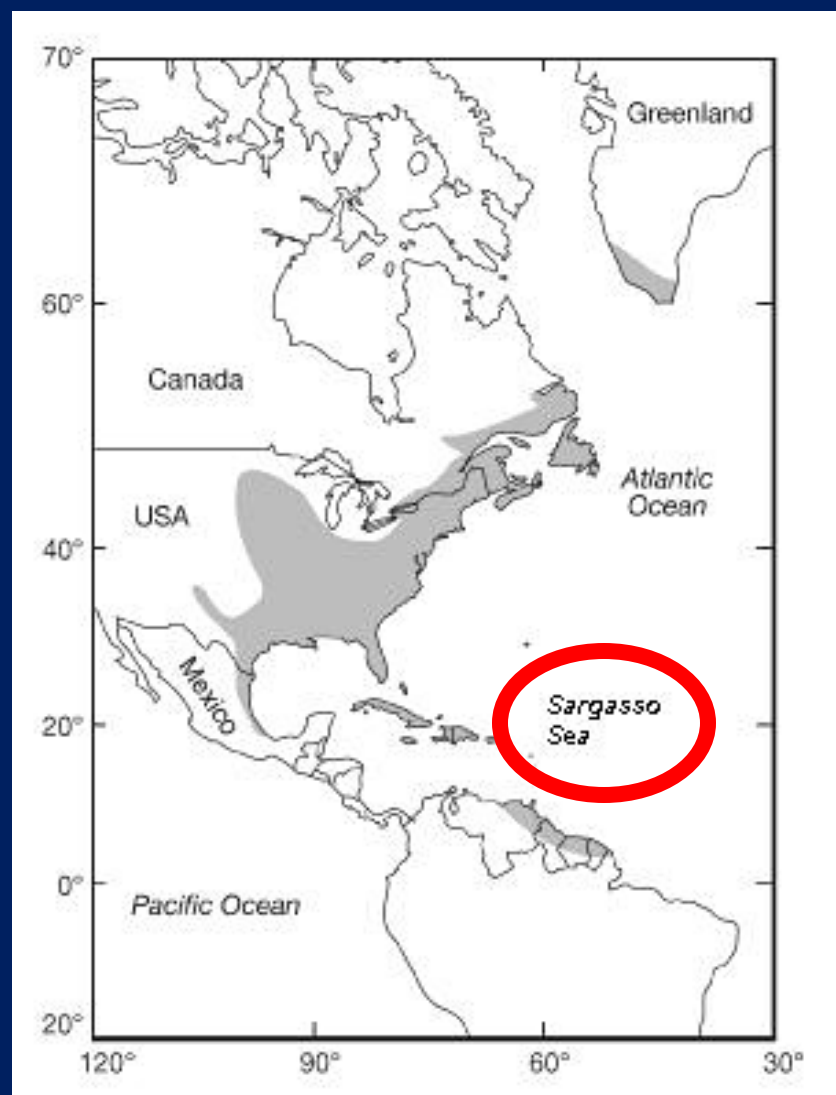


Image by DFO 2006

Native Council of Nova Scotia
Mi'kmaq Language Program
Artist: Michael J. Martin

**COSEWIC
Assessment and Status Report**

on the

**American Eel
*Anguilla rostrata***

in Canada



**SPECIAL CONCERN
2006**

**COSEWIC
COMITÉ SUR LE STATUT DES
ESPÈCES EN DANGER
AU CANADA**



**COMEPAC
COMITÉ SUR LA SITUATION
DES ESPÈCES EN PERIL
AU CANADA**

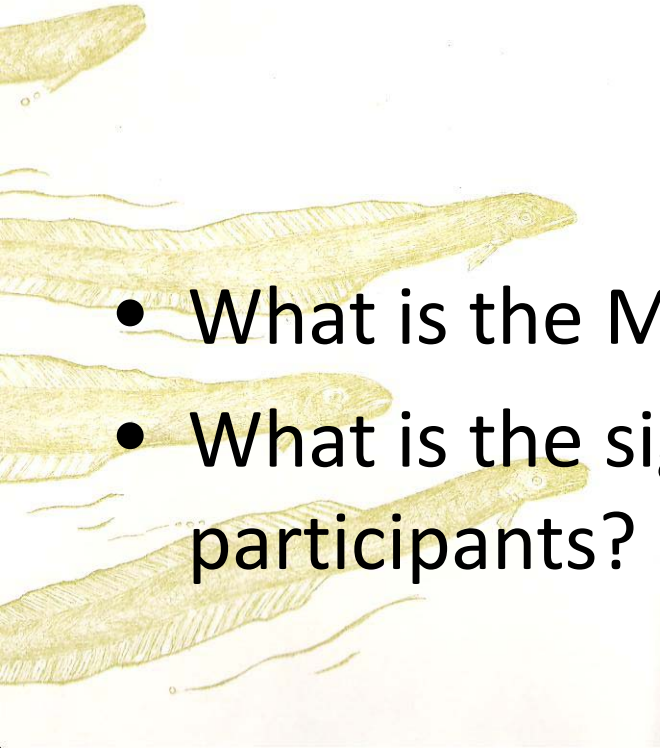


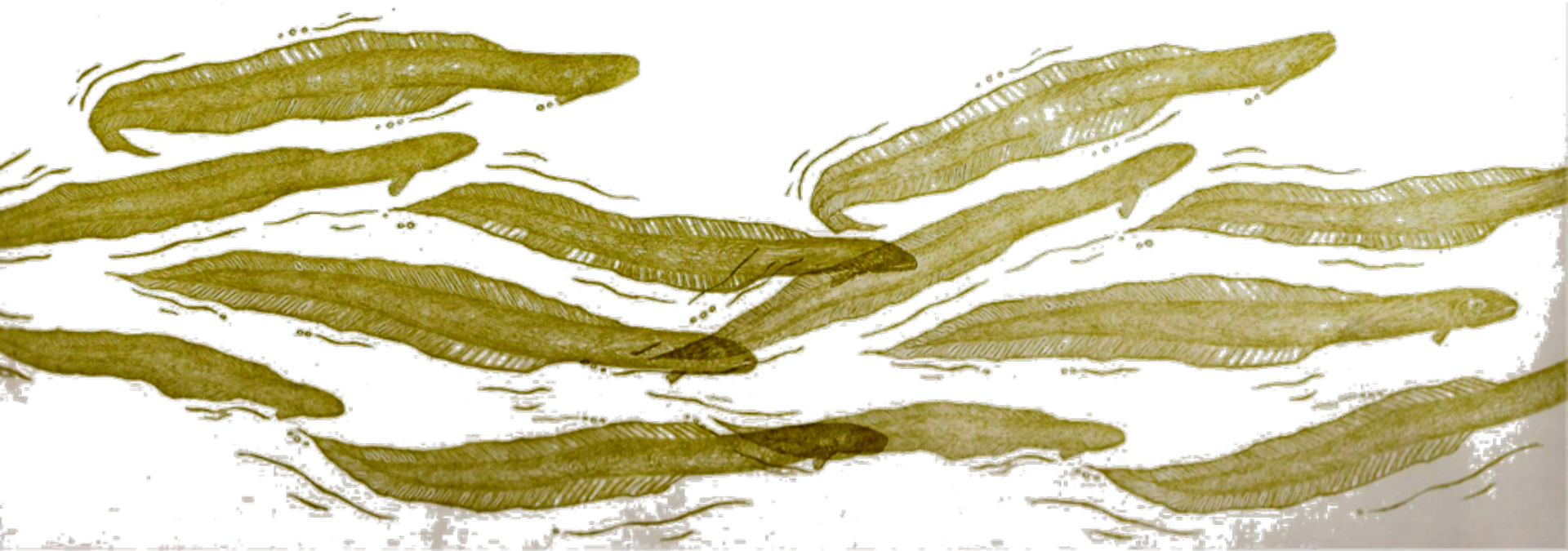
A Special Relationship?

- Culturally significant
- Long history of use
- Economic importance
- Important for year-round food source
- Role in Marshall Decision
- Decline of eel threatens relationship
 - (SRSF & PFWS 2002)
- Special Significance of Species
 - (COSEWIC 2006)

Objectives

- What is the Mi'kmaq relationship with eels?
- What is the significance of this relationship to participants?





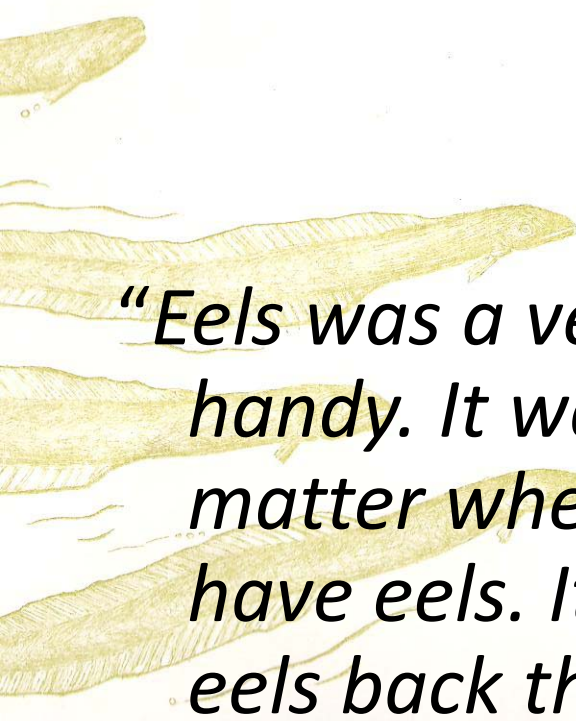
Kataq mimaju'nuksipni'k.
Eels were life to our people.

A series of four yellowish-brown eels are illustrated on the left side of the slide, swimming horizontally. They are drawn with fine lines to show scales and fins. The top eel is partially cut off by the edge of the frame. The second eel is fully visible, followed by the third and fourth eels, each slightly below the previous one.

Interdependent Relationship

- Participants rely on eels for food, medicine, community, life
- Eels rely on people to practice respectful fishing to sustain them
- Interdependence reflects social and ecological context
- Interdependence reflects way of thinking

Food

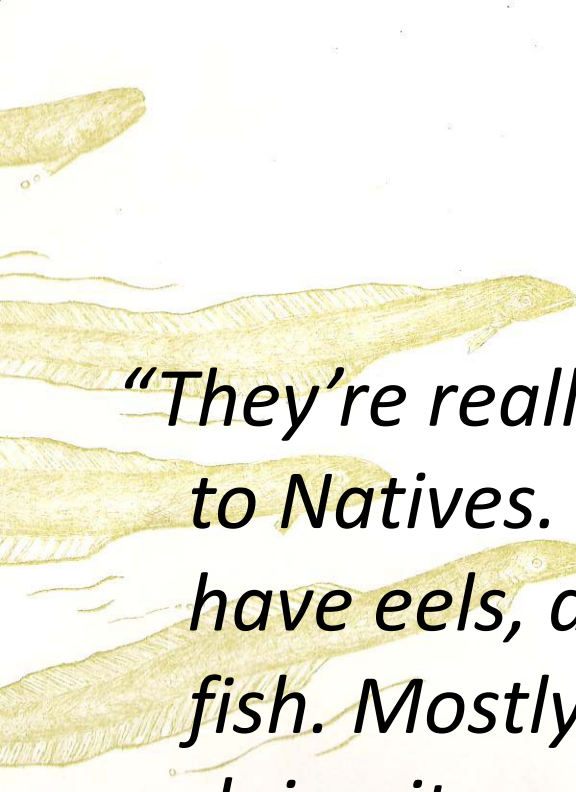


“Eels was a very staple food for us. It was always handy. It was always everywhere. Eels. No matter where we went, you know, we would have eels. It was never no problem getting eels back then or even today.”

“Eels were always around when you need them, because you couldn’t go without a day, I guess, back then, without eels.”

[Lawrence Bernard 2008]

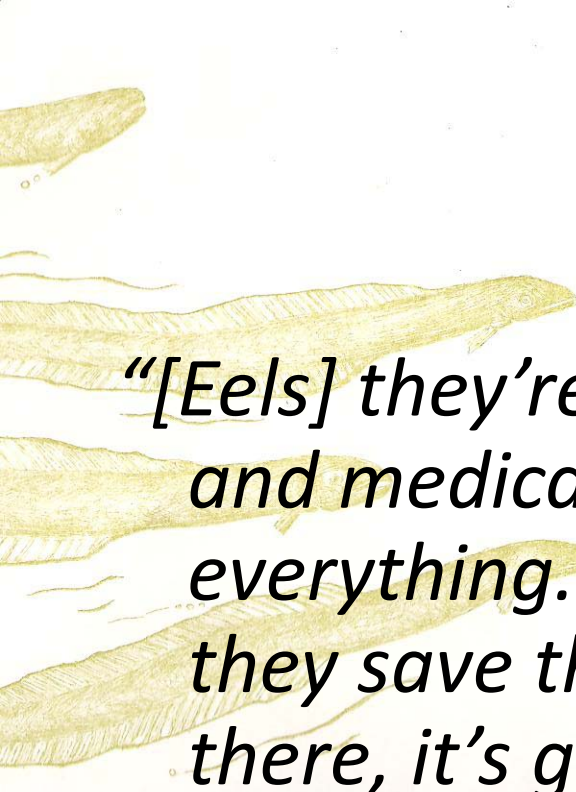
Food



“They’re really important, yeah. To our culture, to Natives. Mostly in the old days, we’d just have eels, and salt pork, one time, and cod fish. Mostly, in the winter time, a lot of people doing it, eeling. Cause at that time we didn’t have freezers. But we fished fresh food.

[Lewis Hearney 2008]

Medicine

A series of yellowish, hand-drawn eels swimming horizontally across the left side of the page. The eels are simple in style, with visible fins and tails.

“[Eels] they’re the best. Good eating, anyway, and medication. You take the skin, out, and everything. Some people, they have arthritis, they save that oil. You rub it around the chest there, it’s good for bronchitis. You can make medication with that too, that’s what I heard. Pain, or something like that, you rub it with that oil from that eel. And then you feed and all that.”

[Camellias Alex 2008]

Community

“[Sharing] that’s the biggest part of the culture. Everybody was. You never had no worries as long as there were people around. Nobody ever went without food. I can never understand why there were days people said ‘lean days’.

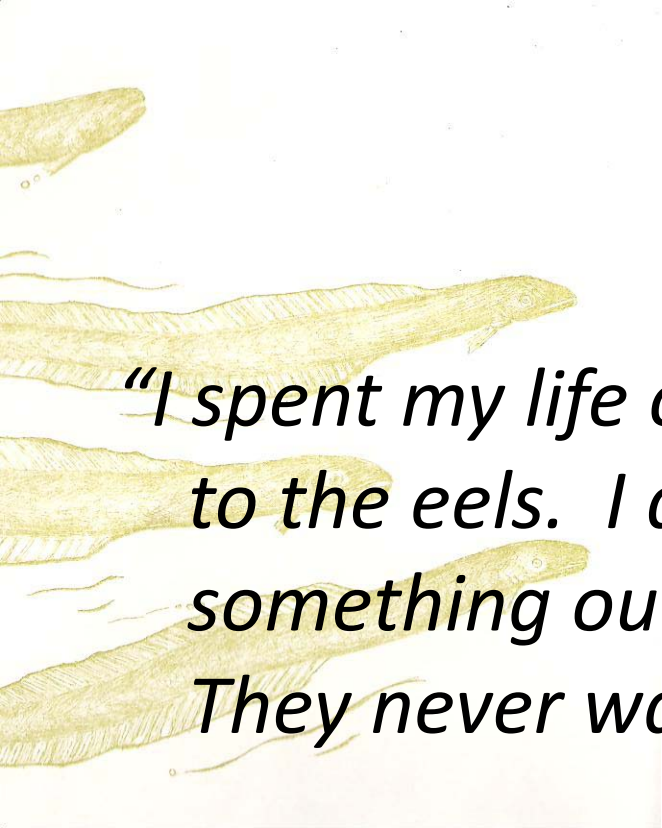
[Lawrence Bernard 2008]

Life

“Eels were life to our people. When everybody was sick and they were down and all that. Medicine. Medicinal purposes with the eels. People would feel a lot better and be able to eat. In the cold, hard winters. I never seen suffering in my life, really. When I grew up in Eskasoni, there was no suffering anywhere. People didn’t have no hard times. We were looking after each other. Nobody minded sharing food because there was all kinds of it around. They, somebody, may come back from eel fishing and they had all kinds of eels, they’d have thousands of eels.”

[Lawrence Bernard 2008]

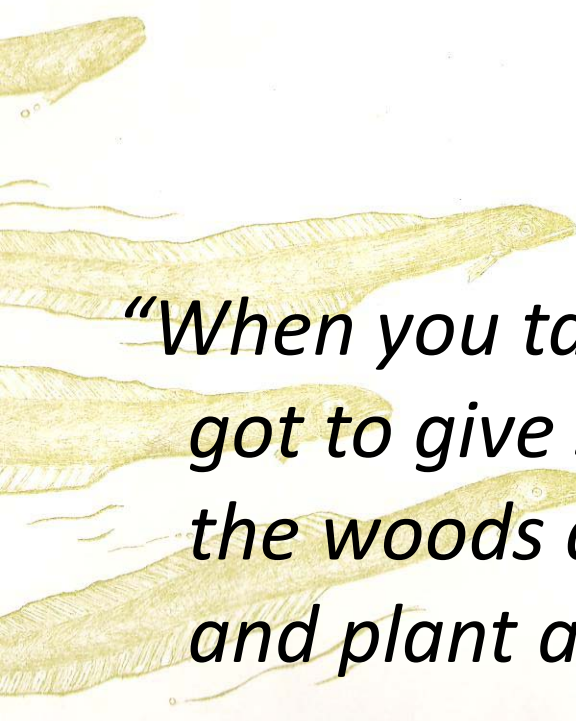
Respect



“I spent my life on eels. I was always respectful to the eels. I always took them home, made something out of them, never wasted them. They never wasted anything back then.”

[Lawrence Bernard 2008]

Reciprocity

The background features several stylized, yellow fish-like shapes. One is at the top left, another is a long horizontal shape in the middle left, and a third is below it, also horizontal. They have a textured, brush-stroke appearance.

“When you take something out of the water you got to give something back. You go out into the woods and cut a tree, you got to go back and plant another tree.” [George Alex 2008]

“I take the guts and throw them back out and let the other fish eat them. Fish eat other fish to stay alive.” [George Alex 2008]

Conclusion

- A relationship with special significance
- Multifaceted
- Reflects social and ecological realities
- Reflects Mi'kmaq worldview and values

Discussion

- Rationale to value and protect eel
- Responsible (accountable) to the eel because the eel is their source of life
- Relationship between Mi'kmaq and Kataq
- Is there a place for this rationale in protection or management of eel?

COSEWIC
COMITÉ DES ÉTATS DE
L'ENDANGÈREMENT DE LA VIE
FAUNE EN CANADA



COSEWIC
COMITÉ SUR LA SITUATION
DES ESPÈCES EN PÉRIL
AU CANADA



Special Thanks To Mi'kmaq Providers

- Albert Marshall
- Camellias Alex
- Charles Sylliboy
- Florence Young
- George Alex
- George Marshall
- Lawrence Bernard
- Lawrence Wells
- Lewis Hearney
- Murdena Marshall
- Stephen Isaac
- Anonymous

and participating Mi'kmaq communities of Cape Breton:
Eskasoni, Membertou, Potlotek, We'koqma'q

Special Thanks To

SSHRC



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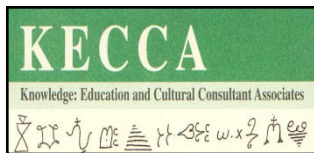
Canada



**Albert
Marshall**
Mi'kmaq Elder,
Eskasoni FN



**Cheryl
Bartlett**
CRC in Integrative Science
Professor of Biology



CAPE BRETON
UNIVERSITY

Eel art by Basma Kavanagh

Contact

Sana Kavanagh, graduate student



Institute for Integrative Science and Health,

Cape Breton University

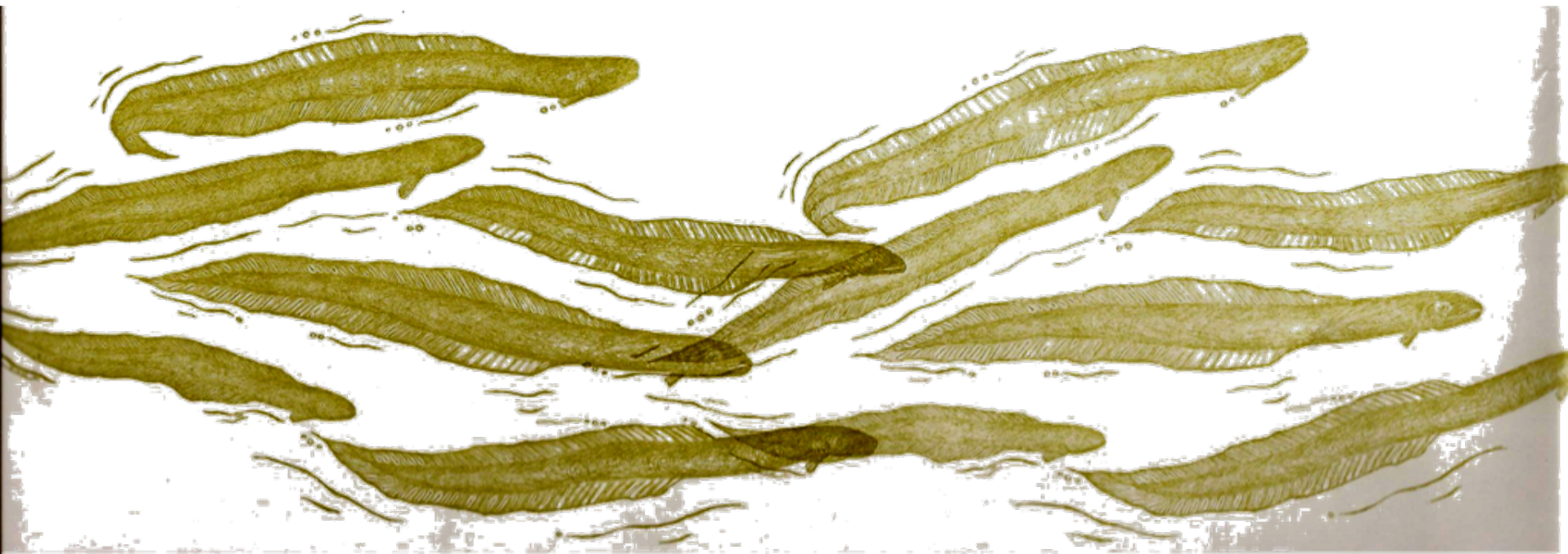
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Welalin
Thank you
Merci



Kataq mimaju'nuksipni'k.
Eels were life to our people.