

Eels (Ka't) in Trouble?

Mi'kmaq All Points Services Undertaking Important Research on the American Eel

During the past few years many people, Mi'kmaq and other fishers as well as biologists, have voiced concerns about dwindling numbers of the American eel in Atlantic Canada. Are these concerns justified? And if that is the case, what can we do to help the eel recover? Who will speak for the eel?

Eels are not considered an important resource to the non-native commercial fishery and therefore do not have a strong lobby group in the fishing industry. Unlike in Europe or Japan, eels are not considered a food item by mainstream Canadian consumers and are even despised because of their snake-like appearance. Eels and their wellbeing are therefore not an issue of much public concern.

To the Mi'kmaq, however, eels have always been an important species. For many, they are an important food species. Eels are also culturally important to the Mi'kmaq for their medicinal uses, spiritual practices and oral traditions.

Eels also brought the Mi'kmaq an important treaty rights victory when in 1999 the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the fishing, hunting and gathering rights of the Mi'kmaq in the Marshall case.

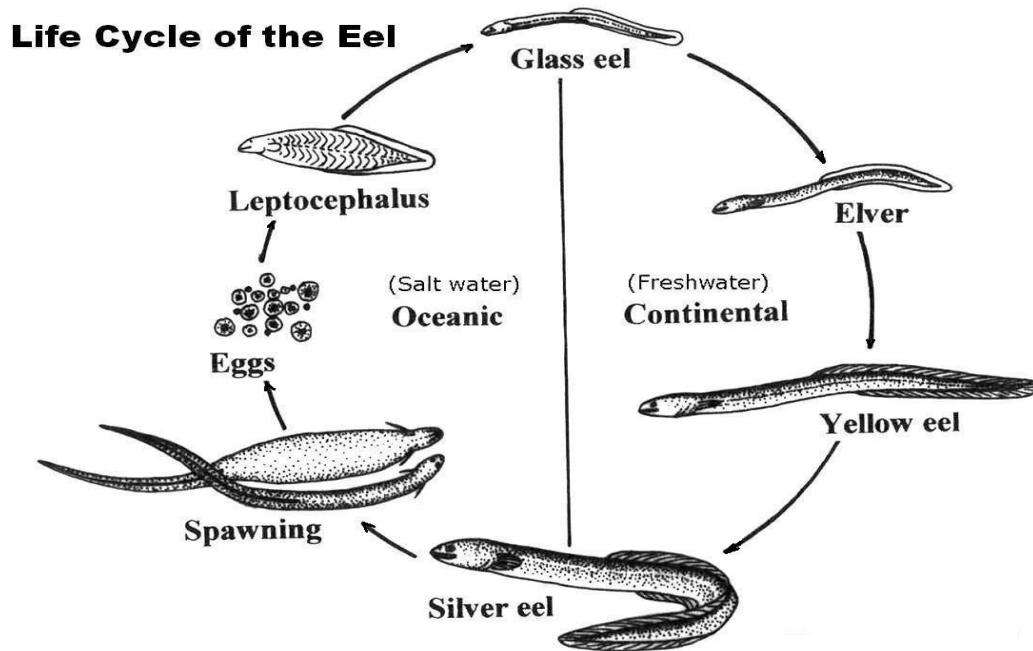
Because of our close relationship with the eel Mi'kmaq have a vast and deep knowledge of this species.



Jaden Prosper with her first eel
(© Kerry Prosper)

But will eels be there for the next seven generations ?

Without solid knowledge about their past and present status, and the threats they face, it is impossible to assess whether eel populations are in danger and if so, what can be done to help them recover.



The Species at Risk Act

The protection of Canada's biological diversity, that is its wildlife and plant species, rests with the Federal Species at Risk Act (SARA). It is designed as a key legal tool for the conservation and rehabilitation of species.

Through this Act, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) has authority for assessing the status of wildlife species that may be at risk. It examines existing information on a given species and on this basis classifies it as either a species of concern, as threatened, endangered, or extirpated/extinct. Once a species is listed as threatened or endangered, certain legislation and procedures fall into place aimed at protecting the species in question and recovery strategies are developed.

The American eel has been listed as a species of concern in 2006.

COSEWIC consists primarily of biologists such as university scientists or professional biologists of the various government departments or museums. As a result, the information on which the committee's decisions were until recently based on was existing scientific or scholarly data. However, as required by the Species at Risk Act, COSEWIC has opened its door to Aboriginal knowledge holders and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge (ATK).

The use of ATK in this assessment process will benefit both the eel and the Mi'kmaq community. For one, decisions on the status assessment of the eel and possible recovery strategies will be based on the best and most complete information available, including both western science data and ATK, often described as 'two-eyed seeing'. As well, ATK is becoming recognized as an indispensable component of future species status assessments and will hopefully gain recognition as a valid and valuable category of information about our natural world, on par with scientific data.

We will speak out for the Eel

Mi'kmaq and other Atlantic First Nations need to make their voices heard when it comes to protecting our wildlife and plant communities. We must ensure that our traditional knowledge is part of COSEWIC's decision-making, and of any recovery strategies that may need to be developed to help the eel and other species at risk recover and flourish.

2010-11 Eel ATK Project by MAPS

Across mainland Nova Scotia, MAPS (Mi'kma'ki All Points Services in Indian Brook) is carrying out research on the American eel. MAPS will be working with mainland First Nation communities over the winter, documenting relevant ATK through interviews with individuals knowledgeable about eel, eel fishing and the various uses of eel.

Legends Relating to Eel

The Legend of the Tidal Bore

In the days of Glooscap the river water was clear and fresh. Until a monster Eel swam down the river and pushed all of the fishes and all the fresh water into the salty bay. Turtle told Glooscap of the cruel hardships that resulted. Glooscap gave great powers to Lobster, who grew much in size and strength and fought the Eel. The long battle stirred up much mud and many waves far up the river until the Eel was killed. And even today in Glooscap's bay and on the muddy river, with an elbow bend, the battle scene takes place twice a day.

(as told by Michael Francis)

The Storm Maker

One legend concerning 'the Storm Maker' (a mighty bird), tells of the plentiful supply of eels and other fish in the sea which were the main source of food for the Mi'kmaq people during the "hungry moons of winter." This was the case until the arrival of the Storm Maker. The Storm Maker caused all the fish and eels to be swept out to sea by the wind created by the flapping of its wings. A Mi'kmaq tricked the Storm Maker and bound up its wings to prevent it from driving the fish and eels out to sea. But, a scum covered the water so that the people were unable to see the eels and fish. At this point, the Storm Maker's wings were unbound by the Mi'kmaq after giving the promise not to cause such strong winds. The Storm Maker did create enough wind, though, to blow away the scum and allow the people to once again see the eels and fish. Here the importance of eel to the Mi'kmaq is emphasised, particularly as a critical food during the winter.

(from K. Prosper & al: The Paq'nkek Mi'kmaq and Ka't (American Eel), 2004)

What is ATK?

ATK is an Aboriginal way of observing and explaining the natural world. It is a world view. It is both a science and a philosophy.

It is a knowledge system based on long-term observation and hands-on experience, and is transmitted through oral tradition and example.

ATK is holistic in that it recognizes the interconnectedness of all elements of nature, humans included. It is spiritual, acknowledging that all parts of the natural world are infused with spirit, and has a moral component. It promotes Netukulimk, respect for all living things and sustainable living.

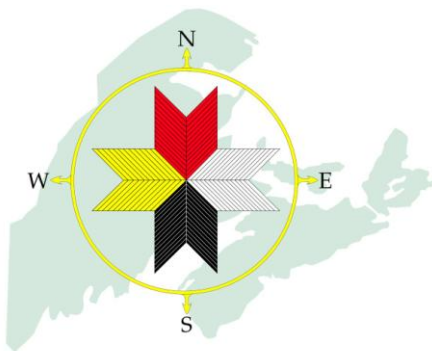
Over the next few months MAPS intends to interview Mi'kmaq who have knowledge of, or experience with the eel across mainland Nova Scotia.

Important for an understanding of their current status is first of all general information on eels such as their life stages, preferred seasonal habitats, their migrations, their food, their natural enemies, etc. Secondly, information about changes that were observed over the past decades with respect to eel numbers, behaviour, their health, as well as changes in eel habitat. Equally important are your opinions about possible threats to eels, to their habitat, their migration or reproduction, or any other observations or concerns relating to eels.

Mi'kma'ki All Points Services, Inc. (MAPS)

MAPS incorporated in June of 2009 as a not-for-profit research institution.

The objects of MAPS are to provide assistance and support to Mi'kmaq Bands, First Nations groups and organizations on the documentation, preservation and promotion of Mi'kmaq history, traditions and culture in a manner that fosters First Nation capacity and resources in areas of education, research, environment, resource management, community land use and development.



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