



American Eel

Building cultural bridges on the East Coast

Kouchibouguac encourages Mi'kmaq and Acadian youth to share American Eel traditions



© Denis Doucet

Some of the Sixth Graders nervously giggled when the cafeteria staff at l'École Marée-Montante in St-Louis-de-Kent, N.B., presented boiled and fried eel for anyone who wanted a taste.

Only two of the 19 visiting Mi'kmaq students and 17 Acadian students had previously tasted American Eel, even though nearly all their parents had eaten it.

The Mi'kmaq and Acadians share extensive culture and tradition when it comes to American Eels. Their shared past is what led Marilyn Simon-Ingram and Nicole Daigle, heritage interpreters and education outreach co-ordinators at Kouchibouguac National Park, to

talk to a Grade Six class at Elsipogtog First Nation School and at l'École Marée-Montante about the importance of conserving this species.

Special concern

After dramatic population declines of up to 99 per cent in Lake Ontario and the upper St. Lawrence River in 2006, the American Eel (*Anguilla rostrata*) was assessed as a 'species of special concern' by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).

In Atlantic Canada, the American Eel is found in seven national parks, including Kouchibouguac. Its decline elsewhere, along with its importance to Aboriginal communities, has led Parks Canada to embark on a multi-year project to assess its status in Atlantic Canada and educate Canadians about the species.

Aboriginal perspectives

Scientific data and video footage were collected over a two-year period to present the natural, historic and cultural importance of the American Eel. The information includes Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives on the eel's history and efforts to conserve the species.

Kouchibouguac National Park has collaborated with Aboriginal communities to include their perspectives on the American Eel in an educational program for students.



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Grade 6 student with an eel

understanding and appreciation of the Mi'kmaq culture and its similarities to Acadian traditions.

Shared past and future

The Mi'kmaq and Acadians historically share a harmonious relationship and some traditional ways of life. Acadians learned to live off the land from Mi'kmaq, who taught them how to hunt and fish. The Mi'kmaq benefitted from Acadian trade and still use French words such as 'cave' for basement and "magazin" for store. Acadians have similarly adopted Mi'kmaq words, such as "mashqui" for bark.

All of the students from both schools were eager to share their newly acquired knowledge with each other on a brisk October morning. The students at l'École Marée-Montante prepared a welcome sign and reorganized their desks to make room for the class that arrived by bus from Elsipogtog. At first, though, everyone was shy and quiet.

"Historic day"

Simon-Ingram and Daigle started the conversation by relating some of the culture that the students have in common when it comes to the American Eel. For example, the Mi'kmaq and Acadians both avoided hunger by fishing on the ice for eel during winter and in small boats called scows in the summer – traditions maintained to this day.

Within no time, the students were asking each other all kinds of questions.

"This is an historic day," a teacher from Marée-Montante whispered as the students were ushered out to meet a commercial eel fisherman. "We have never hosted a Mi'kmaq class in our school."

Following their classroom presentations, Simon-Ingram and Daigle encouraged the students to ask their parents, grandparents and other members of their community for personal or historical stories related to American Eels. Simon-Ingram and Daigle later returned to film what the students had to share.

Aware of the project at both schools, the students were eager to find out what their counterparts had discovered. To be good hosts, the Acadian students first visited Kouchibouguac National Park to participate in Simon-Ingram's Wigwam Gathering. Her stories, legends and responses to countless questions gave them a better



Kouchibouguac National Park of Canada

Hands-on experience

Réal Doucet was checking an eel trap in the Kouchibouguac River when the students arrived on a nearby bridge. As he lifted the net, many of them uttered 'wow' and 'cool' at the bundle of wiggling eels.

Doucet beached his boat so the students could see the eels up close. Within minutes, everyone had touched an eel. Some even took one in their hands. The students asked numerous questions, which Doucet had no trouble answering after 43 years as an eel fisherman.

The day ended with new friendships and everyone more knowledgeable about the natural, historical and cultural importance of the American Eel in Atlantic Canada.



Students listening to elder Jo Clair

Wanting to return the day's hospitality, the students from Elsipogtog invited the class from Marée-Montante to go to their school within a few weeks to hear from elder Jo Clair, who is researching eels, and to watch the footage taken by Simon-Ingram and Daigle to prepare a short documentary for both communities.

In the meantime, almost everyone tried the boiled and fried eel at l'École Marée-Montante's cafeteria. Quite a number of students had several pieces. One boy carefully wrapped a slice in a napkin to take home for his father who really likes eel.

Since the Parks Canada visits, several students have gone fishing for American Eel with their father, uncle or grandfather with some learning more about traditional ways during these outings.

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