


## "A Good Feed":

Reverence for eels as a guiding principle for traditional ecological knowledge and management among participants in the Mi'kmaq food and ceremonial fishery in Cape Breton, NS


Sana Kavanagh

School for Resource and Environmental Studies, Dalhousie U.  
Institute for Integrative Science and Health, Cape Breton U.  
June 28, 2011









**Albert Marshall**  
Mi'kmaq Elder, Eskasoni FN  
Elder Advisor, Integrative Science

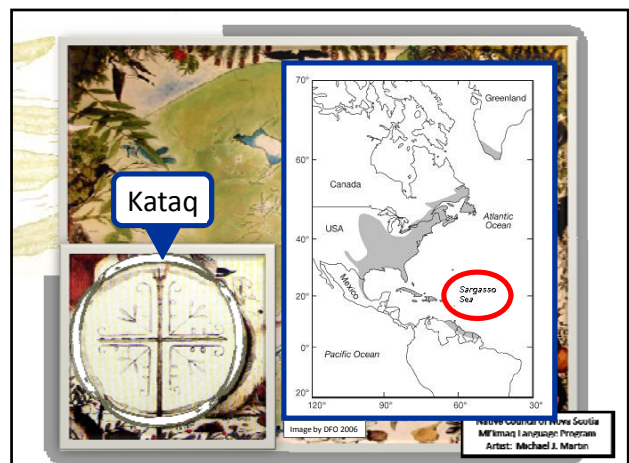
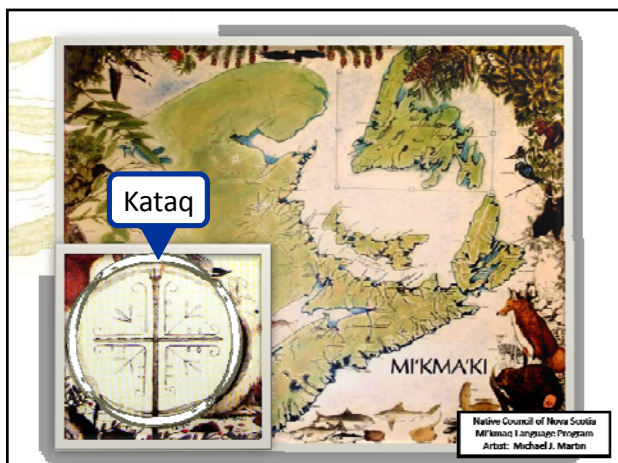
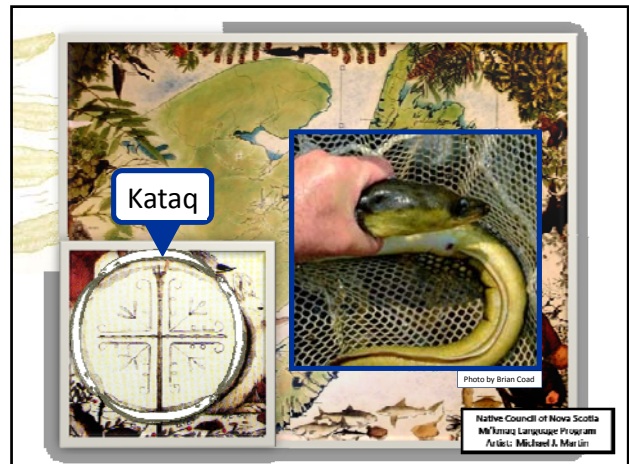


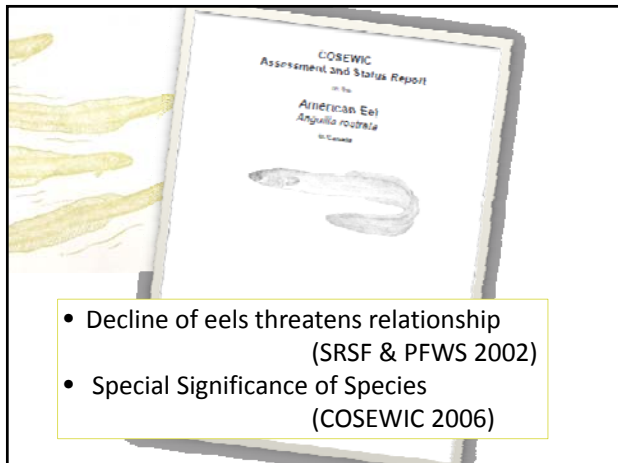
**Murdena Marshall**  
Mi'kmaq Elder, Eskasoni FN  
Elder Advisor, Integrative Science  
Professor of Mi'kmaq Studies (retired), Cape Breton University



**Cheryl Bartlett**  
CRC, Integrative Science  
Professor of Biology  
Cape Breton University

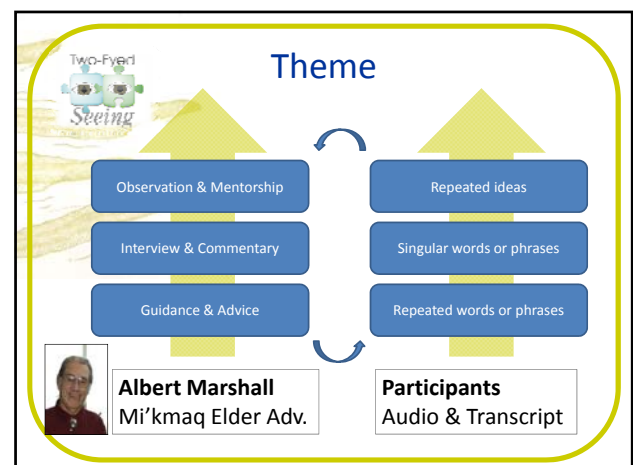
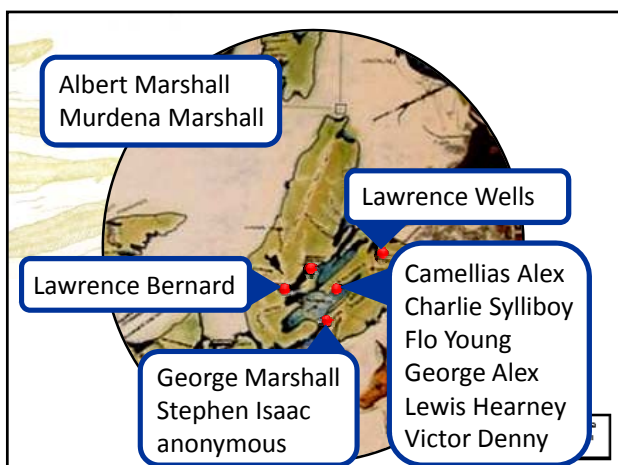
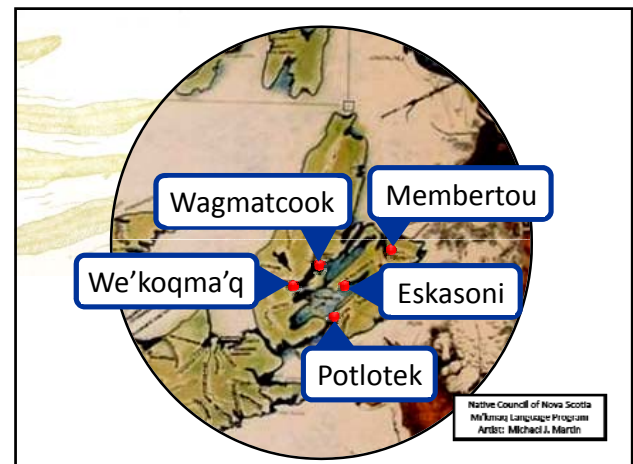
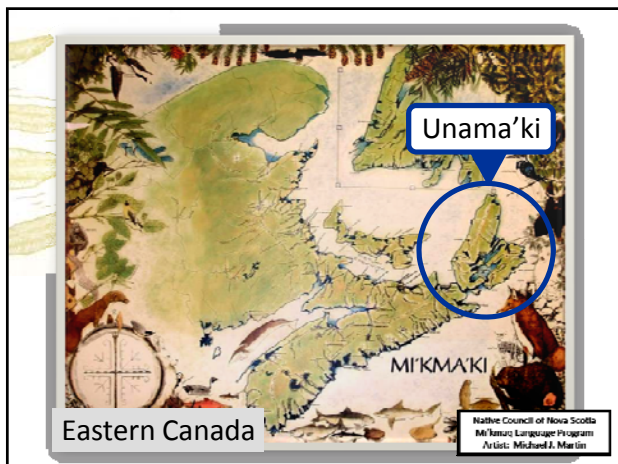








## Qualitative Research Strategy

- Community and university ethics protocols
- 11 community or elder-referred participants
- Semi-structured in depth interviews
- Open-ended questions
- Community liaison or elder present
- Informed consent
- Visual interview guides
- Audio record and transcription
- thematic analysis - interpretive



## Theme

Respect and reverence for eels as guiding principles in how participants practice eel spearing within traditional way of life

Participants show respect when:

- harvest eel to fulfill their needs, take a “feed” or a “good feed”
- use eel with no waste, little waste or “give something back”

Respect and reverence are based on eels as a source of life.

## 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.*

[Lawrence Bernard 2008]

## Reverence

**SK:** When Albert was explaining what you said earlier, he used the word “reverence”. Do you feel comfortable saying a bit more about reverence for nature and eels?

**Lewis Hearney:** Yeah. It’s the right way to do it, cause if they continue using traps, there will be no eels. For three or four years there, they [the eels] were really scarce. When they stop them, they’re picking up. If they continue to do that, they’ll wipe the eels. It’s better to get some few, not a truckload....Yeah.

**AM:** Do you get the gist of that [Sana]? When you harvest anything in large quantities, there is no reverence....

## A Feed

*Well, we go out there  
till we get enough feeds.*

*Then we get out,  
we go home,  
then we go out again.*

*Life was survival....*

[ Camellias Alex 2008]

## A Feed

*We go out for  
just enough for a feed.  
Two or three dozen [eels].*

[George Alex 2008]

## Need

*Me and my husband  
we never used to go out to get fish  
[eels], more than we need.*

*We get what we need and we go out  
and get some more if we need more  
tomorrow or next week.*

[ Flo Young 2009]



## Need

*This is a big reserve, but years ago the villages weren't big, they were small, and so every man had an opportunity to do something for the community. For instance, in Membertou, there was this fellow [who] was the one who was most likely to get eels. So he'd leave Membertou, and go to Malagawatch, hop on a train, and get off at Orangedale, and then fish all the next day. When he had a bag ready for the whole community that would feed the community (he'd be fishing all day and all night) then he'd hop on the train and go back to Membertou and then distribute the fish to the elders and the families.*

[Murdana Marshall 2009]

## Need

*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]

## A "Feed" & Need

Entire Community

Thousands of Eels

Community

Hundreds of Eels

Family

A Dozen Eels

Self

A Few Eels

## No Waste

*When I was a little kid, we weren't throwing the guts away. We were fighting for the guts... There was nothing foolish about it. These are done right inside the stove.....*

*Take whatever part you want of the gut and put a little part on a stick and put them inside the stove. It was nice.*

[Lawrence Bernard 2008]

## Give Something Back

*And when you take something out of the water you got to give something back....*

*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]

## No Waste/Giving Back

eat or use entire eel

feed to dogs

feed to birds

feed to fish

return to water

eat

### Eel Traps

*When you trapping them [the eels],  
that's what kills us most,  
that's what killed all our eels there.  
About a thousand pounds there.  
Alright when you spear them, that's okay.*  
[Camellias Alex 2009]

### A Feed

*We go out for  
just enough for a feed.  
Two or three dozen [eels],  
instead of hauling  
two or three thousand pounds.*

[George Alex 2008]

### Selective Gear

*When we spear an eel,  
We don't take that much...  
We get just what we want.*  
[Lewis Hearney 2009]

### Size Selection

*FY: But the way we use the eels we never target the  
little ones. We used to try looking for the big ones.  
We let go the little ones. The little ones we don't  
bother them. Just the big ones, the ones we use  
them for meals.*  
*SK: Why do you let the little ones go?*  
*FY: Well, they're too small for cooking and anything.  
It's wasting fish to catch them that small.*  
[Flo Young 2009]

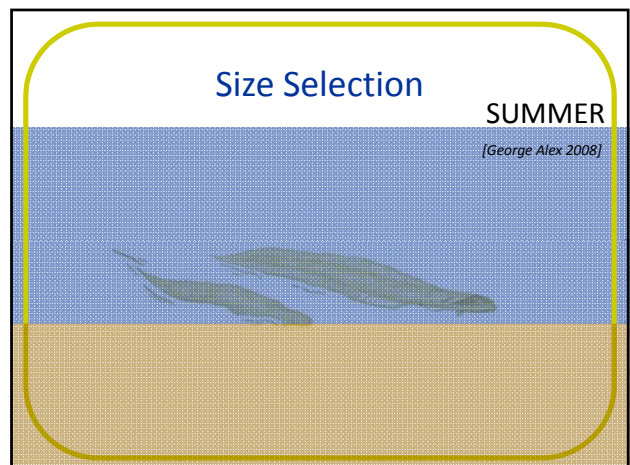
### Size Selection

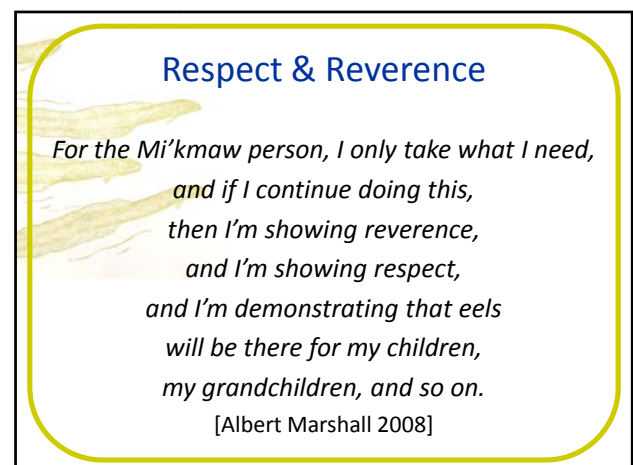
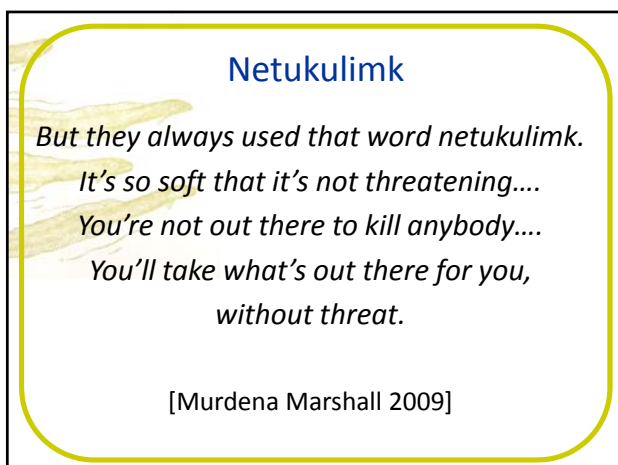
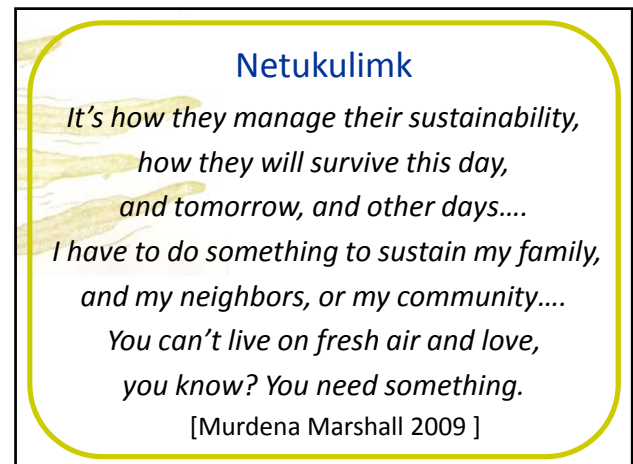
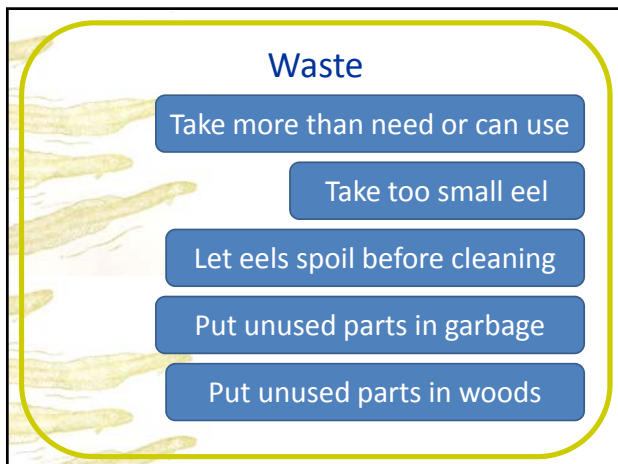
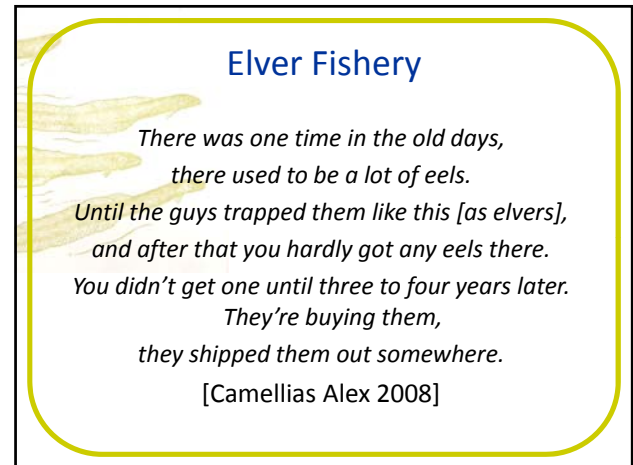
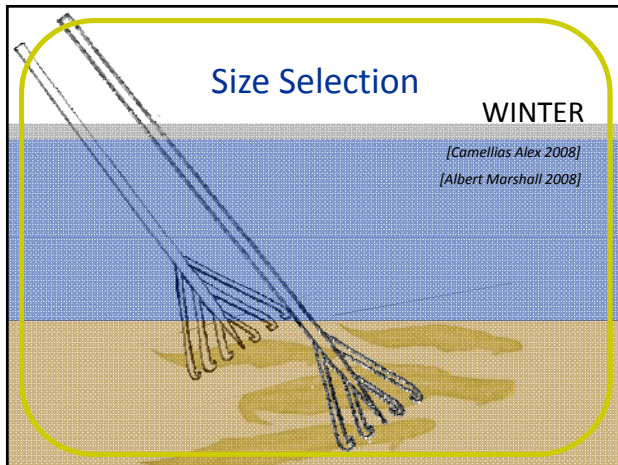
*You don't go for the small ones,  
you let them grow.  
You go after the big ones, the big eels,  
and those ones are good.*  
[George Alex 2008]

### Size Selection

SUMMER

[George Alex 2008]





## Respect & Reverence

*When you harvest anything in large quantities,  
there is no reverence,  
because there is no respect for that species,  
and you look upon it as its mine,  
it's an object,  
and I can take as many as I want.*

[Albert Marshall 2008]

## Relationship

*Our relationship is with that one eel that is  
coming up there, that's our relationship.  
It's going to feed somebody, you know?  
And, it's never about catching as many as you  
can, it's never about... You know, we got a  
bucket, we got a good feed, it's never about  
catching as much as you can, I guess.*

[George Marshall 2008]

## Relationship with Eels

*"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]

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

[Lawrence Lunj Bernard 2008]

## Respect & Reverence

*They should use this knowledge that the Elders  
have, and pass it on to the next generation, so  
this knowledge will be going forwards, so that  
every living thing will have this reverence that  
he has, or that his parents have, or that his  
grandparents have. Without that connection,  
people have this tendency to lose, the  
essence, as eels are not a resource, rather a  
source of life for the Mi'kmaq for so long.*

[Lewis Hearney 2008 & Albert Marshall 2008]

**Eels are not a resource,  
rather a source of life  
for the Mi'kmaq for so long.**

[Lewis Hearney 2008 & Albert Marshall 2008]



## Summary

Respect and reverence for eels as guiding principles in how participants practice eel spearing within traditional way of life

Participants show respect when:

- harvest eel to fulfill their needs, take a “feed” or a “good feed”
- use eel with no waste, little waste or “give something back”

Respect and reverence are based on eels as a source of life.

## 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

& Participating Mi'kmaq Communities of Cape Breton:  
Eskasoni, Membertou, Potlotek, & We'koqma'q

## Special Thanks To

### SSHRC



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada



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



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



CAPE BRETON  
UNIVERSITY

## Special Thanks To

Artist Basma Kavanagh

Eel Illustrations

Photo polymer plates

Printed using a Vanderbilt Press

2011

[Used with permission]

## Contact

Sana Kavanagh, graduate student



Institute for Integrative Science and Health,  
Cape Breton University  
School for Resource and Environmental Studies,  
Dalhousie University

Sana\_Kavanagh@cbu.ca

**Welalin**  
**Thank you**  
**Merci**



## Discussion

- Respect & Reverence
- Why
- How
- Sustainability
- Management

## Conclusion

## Netukulimk

*They very seldom used the word  
katemketek,  
which means I'm going to hunt.  
Katemketek is ....  
I'm going to get someone.*

[Murdena Marshall 2009]

## Sustainability

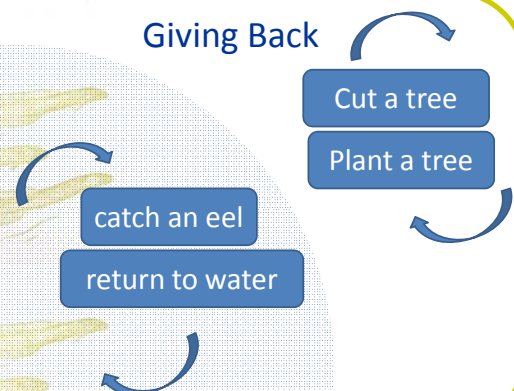
*Because you did it today,  
that doesn't mean  
you don't have to worry about it  
in four weeks time.  
You have to worry about it tomorrow  
because tomorrow you eat again.  
So, it's a continuous mode.  
[Murdena Marshall 2009]*

## Fishing Spots

*You stay in one spot,  
you'll starve.  
Same with a human being;  
you stay in one spot you'll starve.  
Same with eels.*

[George Alex 2008]

## Giving Back



## Sustainability

*It never stops.  
It goes round and round and around.  
Different people doing it different days.  
But it continues.  
The break is never.  
Because it's a continuous process of survival.*

[Murdena Marshall 2009]

## Critique of Fisheries

- Elver fishery
- Commercial eel fishery
- Cod fishery
- Trawling (in general)

## Cod Fishery

*[Comparison]*

## Sustainability

*Reciprocity  
Actions are mutually beneficial*

## Trawling

*[Comparison]*

## Decline

- Declines of eels over lifetime
- "eels are dropping"
- Local declines of eels
- Local recoveries
- "they're coming back"
- Declines of eel fishing, as well

## Emergent Themes

Reverence for eels guides how participants practice eel spearing.

- Participants believe they should:
  - harvest eel to fulfill their needs, by taking only a “good feed”
  - use eel with no waste, or “give something back”

## A Good Feed

[My father in law]  
 He likes eeling,  
 I likes eeling,  
 so I go out with him.  
 Get a feed for the family.  
 [ Camellias Alex 2008]

## Theme

Respect and reverence for eels are guiding principles in how participants practice eel spearing within traditional way of life

- Participants harvest eel to fulfill their needs, take a “feed” or a “good feed”
- Participants use eel with no waste, little waste or “give something back”

## Relationship

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

## Thematic Analysis

Theme

- a summary statement about a major idea (concept or value) as defined and/or qualified by participants during interviews through definition, description, explanation, exposition, instruction, and narration  
 (Rubin & Rubin 2005; Holliday 2007)

## Elver Fishery

*We used to have those [elver] traps.  
 We'd send them halfway around the world.  
 We'd send little babies [elvers].  
 They stopped that.  
 Because when we spear an eel,  
 We don't take that much...  
 We get just what we want.*

[Lewis Hearney 2009]