

MI'KMA'KI



For thousands of years the Mi'kmaq have maintained deep and sophisticated knowledge about Mi'kma'ki: its animals, plants, habitats, weather, tides, seasons, cycles, landscapes and seascapes. This knowledge about Mi'kma'ki is contained in the language and the stories and has been passed on for many generations. Physical evidence of Mi'kmaw relationships to the land is visible across Mi'kma'ki. This evidence includes ancestral archaeological sites, petroglyphs etched on rocks, tool-stone quarry sites, placenames, altered vegetation, and even fish weirs, which are thousands of years old and still visible today. The earliest known evidence of people in Mi'kma'ki comes from the Debert archaeological sites, which date between 13,300 and 11,100 years ago. There are more than 1000 known ancestral sites (archaeological and oral historical) just from Nova Scotia. Nothing is more important than the land, animals, plants, waterways, and people, out of which Mi'kmaw culture and people have grown and from which the future will come.

People, land, and animals are inseparable in the Mi'kmaw worldview. Unlike in European practice, Mi'kmaq did not own land, but instead governed land use through rights for gathering and hunting. Historically, Mi'kmaq did not set the value of goods based on individual accumulation. Instead, people shared with, and among, families as well as among villages. The Mi'kmaw economy was based on sharing and reciprocity. People did not worry about who owed what because they knew they would get back what they had shared in the future.

Prestige in Mi'kmaw communities came from how much you gave to others and how closely others saw you to be to the natural world (and to animals in particular). These

differences in worldview are part of why British colonialism and other encounters with Europeans created a clash of cultures and practices. It is difficult to understand the history of treaties or treaty rights without understanding these fundamentals of Mi'kmaw culture and practice.

The seven districts of Mi'kma'ki are useful gateways to understanding the nature and diversity of the Mi'kmaw homeland. The districts are traditional governance units, but also reflect geographic areas that are defined by rivers and their watersheds as well as other physiographic characteristics.

The Districts of Mi'kma'ki

Epekwitk aq Piwktuk

Epekwitk aq Piwktuk is a joint district that includes present-day Prince Edward Island and areas of Pictou and Antigonish counties along the Northumberland Strait. Epekwitk translates to “lying in the water place,” describing the island. Piwktuk translates to the “explosive place,” a reference to the presence of ground gasses throughout the area. You might be interested to know that up until about 7000 years ago, Epekwitk was connected to the mainland!

Eskikewa'kik

Eskikewa'kik translates to the “skindresser's territory,” referring to the hunting grounds in eastern Halifax and Guysborough counties along the Atlantic coast. The district also includes the travel routes from the Bay of Fundy and Kjiptuk (Halifax) to Chebucto Bay, as well as routes north into the district of Piwktuk (aq Epekwitk).

Kespe'k

Kespe'k is a very large district that covers much of central and northern New Brunswick as well as the Gaspé Peninsula. The name translates to “last water or land,” noting its northerly position in Mi'kma'ki. Bounded on the west by the mighty Wolastoq (Saint John) River, Kespe'k includes numerous large watersheds and many ancestral places and present-day communities.

Kespukwitk

Kespukwitk translates to the “last flow” area, and includes the most southerly region of Mi'kma'ki. With numerous important watersheds, the district includes a significant number of (known) ancestral sites. The labyrinth of rivers in Kespukwitk is extensive and has

WHAT IS RECIPROCITY?

Reciprocity is the practice of sharing or giving something with the expectation that others will share at a future time. Reciprocity can be a specific agreement or a more general expectation or understanding. Historically, Mi'kmaw reciprocity was general—people acted on good faith, sharing at one time knowing others would share as needed in the future. This was very different than the British and other European economic systems based largely on cash, bartering and early capitalism.

supported Mi'kmaw mobility for generations across this large land area.

Siknikt

Siknikt translates to “a drainage place.” This name refers to the great salt marshes and estuaries of the Chignecto peninsula, includes an area from the Northumberland Strait east to present-day Saint John. Siknikt was an extremely important district during the treaty-making decades.

Sipekne'katik

Sipekne'katik translates to the “wild potato area” a reference to the sipekn plant (*Sagittaria latifolia*), which grows in freshwater aquatic habitats throughout Mi'kma'ki. Sipekne'katik is central to Mi'kma'ki and includes travel routes that connect many of the districts to one another. It was a central meeting place over many generations.

Unama'ki aq Ktaqmkuk

Unama'ki aq Ktaqmkuk are another joint district including Cape Breton Island and Newfoundland. Unama'ki means “foggy lands”—an excellent description of Cape Breton! The Bras d'Or Lakes anchor the communities in Unama'ki, providing resources and a shared cultural landscape. Ktaqmkuk means “lands across the water,” and is related closely to Unama'ki through specific fam-

ilies. Both districts reflect their geographies as islands, each with distinct characteristics.

The learning experiences suggested in this resource use the districts as organizing principles and are referred to in numerous places. More information on the districts can be found at the Mi'kmaw Digital Atlas website, <https://placenames.mapdev.ca/>

