

# Mi'kma'kik



## Introduction

For thousands of years, the Mi'kmaq have grown and sustained deep and sophisticated knowledge about Mi'kma'kik: its animals, plants, habitats, weather, tides, seasons, cycles, landscapes and seascapes. This knowledge about Mi'kma'kik is contained in the Mi'kmaw language and stories, and has been passed on for many generations. Physical evidence of Mi'kmaw relationships to the land is visible across Mi'kma'kik. This evidence includes ancestral archaeological sites, petroglyphs etched on rocks, toolstone quarry sites, placenames, altered vegetation, and even fish weirs, which are thousands of years old and still visible today. The overwhelming evidence from Debert and other sites dates between 13,300 and 11,100 years ago. There is no question that people are living across Mi'kma'kik during this time. There are thousands of 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 Mi'kmaw worldviews. Unlike in most European practices, 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 freely and reciprocating without assessing value. 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 British and other European economic systems. 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'kik 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.

## *Reciprocity in a Mi'kmaw Worldview*

In English, **reciprocity** does not fully capture what Mi'kmaq are thinking when this word is used. One way of thinking about reciprocity is through the expectation within the practice of **tpi'tnewey**. In its literal meaning, tpi'tnewey is the practice of enthusiastically sharing meat

or other resources without any expectation of immediate return. In Mi'kmaw worldview, sharing freely is such a normal occurrence that people really only notice when someone is not sharing.

# The Districts of Mi'kma'kik

## Epekwitk aq Piktuk

Epekwitk aq Piktuk 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. Piktuk translates to “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 “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 Piktuk (aq Epekwitk).

## Kespe'k/Kespe'kewa'kik

Kespe'k/Kespe'kewa'kik 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'kik. Bounded on the west by the mighty Wolastoq (Saint John) River, Kespe'k/Kespe'kewa'kik includes numerous large watersheds and many ancestral places and present-day communities.

## Kespuwitk

Kespuwitk translates to the “last flow” area, and includes the most southerly region of Mi'kma'kik. With numerous important watersheds, the district includes a significant number of (known) ancestral sites. The labyrinth of rivers in Kespuwitk is extensive and has supported Mi'kmaw mobility for generations across this large land area.

## Sikniqt/Sikniqtuk

Sikniqt/Sikniqtuk translates to “a drainage place.” This name refers to the great salt marshes and estuaries of the Chignecto peninsula, including the area from the Northumberland Strait, east to present-day Saint John. Sikniqt/Sikniqtuk 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, which grows in freshwater aquatic habitats throughout Mi'kma'kik. Sipekne'katik is central to Mi'kma'kik and includes travel routes that connect many of the districts to one another. It was a central meeting place over many generations.

## Unama'kik aq Ktaqmkuk

Unama'kik aq Ktaqmkuk are another joint district including Cape Breton Island and Newfoundland. Unama'kik means “foggy lands”—an excellent description of Cape Breton! The Bras d'Or Lakes anchor the communities in Unama'kik, providing resources and a shared cultural landscape. Ktaqmkuk means “lands across the water,” and is related closely to Unama'kik through specific families. Both districts reflect their geographies as islands, each with distinct characteristics.

The Learning Experiences (LEs) 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://mikmawplacenames.ca>

## A Note on Maps

Readers may notice that the districts of Mi'kma'kik have been described in this introduction, but are not represented using a map. This has been done deliberately.

Educators are encouraged to remember that Mi'kma'kik cannot be divided into pieces the way land is often marked in older European-style maps, and even in most contemporary mapping. Boundaries in the Mi'kmaw worldview are always relational, and are intimately intertwined with the ecologies of Mi'kma'kik. District boundaries and other areas were negotiated through

(cont'd)

extended kin relationships and through Mi'kmaw leadership. They changed through time! Along with understanding the relationships, intimate knowledge of *msit no'kmaq* and of *netukulimk* is required to follow Mi'kmaw wayfinding.

In some of the Learning Experiences in this section, maps will be used as a visual cue for the districts. The maps are there to allow for more detailed focus on smaller areas of Mi'kma'kik as learners explore Mi'kma'kik *as* Mi'kma'kik, possibly for the first time. The map lines are there for this purpose alone and should not be taken as literal static representations of district boundaries, or Mi'kmaw territory on the whole.

Mi'kmaw sense of place and belonging is not reducible to lines on a map, as they come from a deeply rooted, loving relationship with all beings in Mi'kma'kik, one that is passed through the generations. This relationship brings Mi'kmaq—

not to mention all humans living in Mi'kma'kik—into an interconnected system that transcends many of the categorizations and divisions that most contemporary mapping imposes. It is this relationship that the earliest treaties Mi'kmaq made—with the land, the water, the plants and the animals, long before Europeans arrived—are based upon. The legal order that these relationships formed over time is what shaped the Peace and Friendship Treaties readers will learn about in the Treaties level.

Mapping, and the understanding of place that informs mapping, comes from individual and shared cultural experiences. Educators are encouraged to keep this in mind whenever maps are used in the classroom. Some important questions to ask are: What is the map for? Who created it? What is the purpose of this map? How do my lived experiences shape how I interpret it? What is missing from this map?

## Three Key Concepts

The following three concepts will assist both learners and educators to anchor their understanding of Mi'kmaw experience and worldview. They are used frequently in this resource and are foundational to many of the included Learning Experiences. These concepts grew out of and simultaneously shaped (and continuously shape), the relationships Mi'kmaq have with Mi'kma'kik. It is important to understand that these are not simply ideas, but ways of living life. Think of these as guidelines for living well in Mi'kma'kik, and understanding the world in a way that prioritizes balance and good relationships.

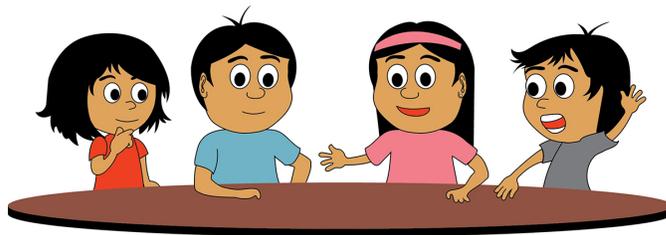
### Netukulimk

Netukulimk is the Mi'kmaw concept that integrates how one makes a living with the responsibilities of making that living. It is the term used for hunting and gathering, but in the present-day it also extends to mean any kind of economic activity. However, the concept includes not only the *what* (economic activity) but the *how* (ensuring economic activity is performed in a sustainable way through traditional governance practices). People are responsible to the environment while undertaking that economic activity—the modern concept of sustainability is inherent to netukulimk. The definition of netukulimk provided by the Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources explains it best:

“Netukulimk is the use of the natural bounty provided by the Creator for the self-support and well-being of the individual and the community. Netukulimk is achieving adequate standards of community nutrition and economic well-being without jeopardizing the integrity, diversity, or productivity of our environment.

As Mi'kmaq, we have an inherent right to access and use our resources and we have a responsibility to use those resources in a sustainable way. The Mi'kmaq way of resource management includes a spiritual element that ties together people, plants, animals, and the environment. UINR's strength is in our ability to integrate scientific research with Mi'kmaq knowledge acquisition, utilization, and storage.”

As you can see, the three concepts of netukulimk, msit no'kmaq and weji-sqalia'tiek all relate to one other!



In one upcoming LE, learners will work with age appropriate definitions of netukulimk and of msit no'kmaq. The concepts show up in other LEs as well. They are essential for understanding treaty education.

### Msit No'kmaq

Msit no'kmaq is a Mi'kmaw concept that refers to all living things being related. At its core, it is an acknowledgement of the relatedness of creation, animals, plants, water and earth. It is also a phrase used for honouring and thanking the Creator during ceremonies and other occasions. When Mi'kmaw people say msit no'kmaq, it is a way of saying “I understand that we are all related and I am grateful to be tied together in spirit with animals, plants, and all living beings.” Msit no'kmaq helps us remember that we as humans are part of the natural world as opposed to being outside of it. It is also a foundational pillar of the concept of netukulimk.

### Weji sqalia'tiek

The term weji-sqalia'tiek comes from a letter Mi'kmaw saqmaq (chiefs) sent to Governor Edward Cornwallis in the fall of 1749. The letter stated their position regarding land and expressed concerns about how the British were living in Mi'kma'kik. The term weji-sqalia'tiek has been translated by Mi'kmaw linguist, Dr. Bernard Francis, to mean “we sprouted from” Mi'kma'kik. It is an important and powerful idea: the language, culture and people emerged from the landscapes and seascapes of the region—its plants, animals, seasons, and cycles. It is what defines being Mi'kmaq: being indigenous to Mi'kma'kik.

Think for a minute what it means for generations and generations and generations of people to live in a place—to grow up from a place. One Elder explains this idea as an exchange of elements. Ancestors go back to the land and the waterways, feed the plants and animals, and then become the nutrients of the soil, slowly moving through the ecosystem generation after generation. We not only sprout from here, but we give back to others so that they can sprout, too.



Courtesy of Dr. Gerald R. Gloade