

Mi'kmaw Decision-Making

Smallpox

Scenario

It's the early fall of 1801. You, and all of your sukwiskw (aunties) and klamuksiskw (uncles) and many nikma'j (cousins) are living along the shoreline of Puknipkejik (Pictou Harbour). The place name describes the shape of the "narrow harbour."

Your family have lived along these shorelines for many, many generations. So, they know when and where fish, where to collect medicines and how to provide for each other through tpi'tnewey.

Recently, a group of newcomers have arrived from Scotland. Sadly, they are very sick with measles, whooping cough and smallpox.

Your community knows that Mi'kmaw people are particularly susceptible to these diseases, particularly smallpox. In the last year there have also been smallpox outbreaks in Kjiptuk (Halifax). It is a very serious situation for you and your family.



Artwork: G Glade

Group Resolution

Within your groups, you must decide how you are going to respond to the threat posed by these new illnesses.

Use Mi'kmaw values as you make decisions: work together to reach a decision, honour humility, respect each other and include everyone. Remember that in Mi'kmaw worldview, decisions consider all living beings and the land, not just people.



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Historical Notes

This scenario is built on a real historical record: a letter from 1801. The letter can be found at the Nova Scotia Archives (<https://archives.novascotia.ca/images/mikmaq/201606514.jpg>)

What did the Mi'kmaq decide?

The letter, written by a man named William Nixon reports that “forty or fifty Familys” have fled “Pictou and its Vicinity” for Guysborough due to emigrants arriving from Scotland with smallpox, measles and whooping cough. He notes that the families are living at the head of the “Guysboro River.”

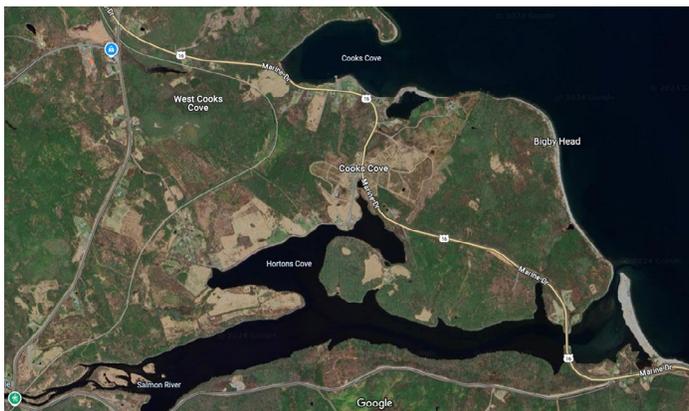
In this situation, communities decided to lean into their expertise and knowledge of living in Mi'kma'ki to protect their families. The relative isolation of Guysborough provided some safety and the Salmon River provided many necessary resources.

Both early historic records and later 19th century federal census records show Mi'kmaw people living at the mouth of the Salmon River in Guysborough. The Salmon River was part of a key travel route between the Sipekneka'tik and Stewiacke rivers and Unama'ki.

In the 20th century, various pressures resulted in people moving away from the Salmon River to other reserve communities—particularly Potlotek and Millbrook.



Artwork: C Gloade



Present day map of the mouth of the Salmon River, just south of the town of Guysborough, Nova Scotia.

