

Community Spirit Award Nomination for L'sitkuk (Bear River First Nation)

“It doesn't take a large community to show they have large spirit.”



The over-view:

L'sitkuk (Bear River First Nation) is a small Mi'kmaw community located inland between Annapolis Royal and Digby, in Kespukwitk (southwest Nova Scotia). L'sitkuk, pronounced "ool-set-gook", and conveys the idea of “water cutting through”, because the river (“Bear River” in English) appears to cut through the rock of the surrounding landscape. Like all words in the Mi'kmaw language, the name of our community describes the place.

While this particular spot is Mi'kmaw “reserve” land, it is not a location of a historical encampment, rather, it was established by the colonial government in 1820. Previously, for more than 5,000 years, our ancestors occupied and made their lives throughout the region, living heavily along the coast in the summer and some winters moving inland. An archaeology site sits at the mouth of the L'sitkuk, which is now private land, a testament to this fact. Historically, L'sitkuk was a central meeting place for our people due to its strategic location on old water routes connecting the Atlantic coastline to interior lands.

It was our region's ancestors who first traded with, as well as helped, the first European settlers in Port Royal (Annapolis). Our ancestors were here when Pierre Dugua, Sieur de Mons, Samuel de Champlain and others settled at Port-Royal in 1605. The Saqamaw, or chief, at the time was Henri Membertou who befriended the French. On 24 June 1610 (Saint John the Baptist Day), Membertou became the first Indigenous leader to be baptized by the French, as a sign of alliance and good faith.

Generations later our people were placed on reserves, separated from their areas of harvesting and lifeways to make way for the settlers. Some of our children were taken years ago and sent to the Shubenacadie Residential School, attempting to rid us of our Mi'kmaw culture and language. Our people enlisted in the military and stood for world peace. Then it was our Elders of today who, as children, were sent to our local neighbouring village school, but it still caused harm by continuing the assimilation project to wipe out our culture. We have endured and battled against many forces meant to ruin

us, but the spirit of our people has survived. Further, as a testament to our resiliency, there is a strong ideal of interconnectedness in the community of L'sitkuk and it is thriving. Exuding a warm community spirit, L'sitkuk welcomes visitors and supports the non-Indigenous community that surrounds it. As we work with our neighbours to acknowledge the past, heal, and move forward, together we walk toward a better future. A living tribute to the strength, power, and diversity of our vibrant community we call L'sitkuk.

L'sitkuk covers only 3.34 square kilometres, with a population of 346 band members (180 living in the physical reserve and 233 living in other regions) Reserves are unique types of communities: as the band office is a small government, like municipalities but also works as an individual nation; then also venturing out to create or support businesses; and still often being the very individuals to knock on doors and deliver food when needed. There is no true handbook for how to run a Mi'kmaw community. Even more, what might have been needed a generation ago, can be different now. "Who are we and what do we need?" is constantly in flux.

In L'sitkuk itself there are multiple developments that contribute to the local economy and employment including, Treaty Gas Bar, a daycare and a school (P-12), and a Health Center. Various self-employed community members are visual artists, musicians, and small business owners.

The spirit in our community is evident not only in the broad initiatives coming out of our buildings and leadership, but in the private and personal accounts. We are like an extended family here, when a crisis happens the people are quick to present the skills or medicine they carry to assist. From protecting vulnerable families with a road block security checkpoint to singing in a flash mass of drums in someone's backyard during their illness. The community is small enough that we know everyone here, we know of their struggles, but we also know each other's strength and gifts. There is a memory here of not too long ago when there was very little outside help and we had to rely on each other for survival and support. That spirit is in us now, as it grows with newcomers to our community, and as we reach out to our neighbouring non-Mi'kmaw communities and families, working together.

Let's look at some specific stories..

People share/d their food

The Elders in our community say that growing up here in the 50's and 60's, even if there wasn't a lot of financial wealth around, there was a long-time tradition in this community of ensuring no one went hungry. They talk about how the people shared the food they had. For example, some houses might have barrels of salt herring and dried fish in their basements whereas others might have deer or bear hanging frozen outside their homes over the winter

months, and community members would go to other houses to pick up some food, while in your house you offered what you had. Elders say the spirit of that sharing of food is still here.

Food security is addressed through initiatives at the Health Center, the Band office, and from individual harvesters/gatherers. Households receive boxes of food, fresh vegetables from the community garden, jam from the berries, made during a community event or by a volunteer, maple syrup made by a community member from the local forest, moose from the communal hunt in Unama'ki (Cape Breton), fish and various seafood caught by community members, wild game hunted by community members, gift certificates to grocery stores, and money towards school lunches.

A volunteer caring for the community honeybees posted on social media, calling for sugar needed to feed the bees, and within hours many people in our community went into town to get sugar to offer. We bought so many bags that there was a pile overflowing. There is always sense of taking care and sharing the food when possible, and reciprocating.

Connected to lands/waters: we have always been guides, and we still are

Our little community was one of the first/leaders in creating a medicine trail and cultural centre.

This medicine trail project inspired a university masters student to research the process. Other researchers (academic and non-academic) have come to learn from our small community of land-based experts. Non-fiction books feature the photos and stories of L'sitkuk band members. Film-makers have learned from our community and created documentaries about our community.

People have been coming to learn from our band members about the land for generations, and we still find ways to tell new stories along our trails and waterways. We tell our stories to teach the next generations in our families and community, as well as to outside communities.

While the Cultural Centre building has been used for various community purposes over the years, the trail continues to be used daily by community members and by other projects, getting revitalized every few years.

L'sitkuk-to-Keji canoe trip



<https://bearriverfirstnation.ca>

One of our Elders says that the young people were struggling with cultural identity (eg. what it means to be Mi'kmaw) and we were seeing mental health struggles arise, and the community was asking ourselves 'what was broken/disconnected'. In discussions people decided that the forest around us has been important to our unique identity here as well as our health. One way to re-connect and retrace those steps and strokes was with a canoe journey.

Our local guides and woodspeople spent much time with the BRFN Band Council and partners discussing the old canoe routes and new opportunities, mapping a new version of the route based on tradition, and clearing out the trails. Led by the very guides who planned the trip, along with excited community members to reclaim this part of their identity, and youth, they made their way tracing the routes of the people who came before us. The first group was videotaped as they embarked on this week-long journey to slowly make their way back to our wintering camping place of Merrymakedge, Kejimkujik. They fished, camped, enjoyed their time as the previous generations would have, as well as overcoming newer obstacles of low water and treacherous ground. Community members were moved to tears watching them leave and then land in Merrymakedge.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKaceG_FuM8

And even after one trip the youth came back home with stories that were similar to our older generations, as the land and waters are still caring for us. A youth-focused canoe trip is now an annual event. This is one way to honour the ecosystems (by connecting to them), and ensure that youth are continuously involved, taught the cultural ways through experience, and maintaining the livelihoods of our guides and knowledge-holders. This led to the creation of "Seven Paddles".

Seven Paddles: Culture, Environment and Connecting the Generations

"Seven Paddles" is a project that was started to re-establish traditional Mi'kmaw canoe routes for ecotourism in NS has become a way for people in Bear River First Nation to strengthen their ties with their land and culture. It is also allowing people to learn from their Elders and use that knowledge to create new opportunities. We honour seven directions (the sky, the Earth, the soul/spirit, East, South, West, North) and live by the Seven Teachings of love, respect, humility, honesty truth, wisdom, and courage.

Seven Paddles continues to grow more diverse as we work to uplift or create projects that embody the cultural teachings, especially the activities that bring us back to the land, such

as educational retreats, hunting and fishing, building birch bark canoes, creating art, and much more. Seven Paddles is now undergoing a branding project to ensure that the public is aware of the ways that our community works on the land/water, as well as where, and how to reach us. Under this umbrella concept, we are all paddling together, through different strengths or skills which are different types of paddles. The difficulty describing this initiative comes from the way it overarches many projects and people.

Harvesters Gathering

As other Mi'kmaw communities develop their own gatherings and powwows, our community leaders have also been hosting small community events. In the fall season the community comes together to share their harvests, from meat, to fish, to cranberries and other food. For the past ten years we have held these events, keeping a sacred fire for 4 days and welcoming community to share in song, or dance, and to feast together. Later, the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq (our tribal organization to support initiatives) encouraged communities to create celebrations that are time-specific and community-specific. So L'sitkuk decided to organize a larger public mawio'mi or "powwow" at the time of our harvest gathering. We had over 900 people attend our gathering in 2018. As a community of less than 200 it was a big venture and since then we scaled back to be more management and sustainable.

Today, our Harvesters Gathering has become a signature event that is both intimate and public, keeping our community excited to come together for a feast, games and activities. Some days we see many people coming in to enjoy in our activities with us, and then other moments we are quiet around our sacred fire in the wi'kuom and remember the power of the elements and each other's company. This gathering is a time to bring those stories of the land back together to share and celebrate.

Caring for our Elders

Elders ("seniors") are well respected in our community. At every gathering the Elders are made comfortable, fed first, and special requests are made to honour them, such as asking the Elders to open and close events with their words of prayer or wisdom. The Health Centre began years ago hosting "Elders Night" where community members 60 and over are invited to attend. A meal, gifts, and entertainment, all focused on celebrating and honouring these people are offered. When the space can accommodate it, we will invite the rest of the community to participate in the celebrations.

Our community school invites Elders to come into the building to spend time with the children. Special programming is always available to help our Elders in their homes and lives.

What comes from a Health Centre that runs like a hive

It is extraordinary the amount of programs, initiatives and supports that come out of the L'sitkuk BRFN Health Center. To list a few, some of what they offer or begin are: at least 10 different types of treatment options that span the diversity of needs and preferences of the people here (eg. reflexology, acupuncture, mental wellness, etc); operating the community pool; initiating a community garden/greenhouse; offering food; supplying grocery gift cards; hosting wellness events; organizing Elders' Night; organizing Earth Day clean-ups; offering money to offset youth and Elder recreation costs; purchasing bicycles for all of the youth one summer; offering hygiene packs for school-aged children each September; organizing community camping trips and youth field trips; collaborating on many other initiatives and much more.

Our Health Center isn't like other town's health centres that run primarily medical or physical health program. Ours runs like a hub of whole health, mental and emotional as well, supporting community-building of all kinds, bringing us together or creating initiatives that help us each grow.

The team at the center are incredibly welcoming to all people in our community, making sure the space and access to programming feels equitable, no matter the financial or social relations of the people, from youth to Elders. Regional health groups come to our center to meet, such as the NS Health Authority to discuss connections four times per year. After the health centre in the neighbouring village of Bear River burned down, our health center leadership offered them space to use our facility here and that allowed their medical team to continue their appointments without missing a beat. When our own Band Hall burned down, again our Health Center opened its rooms to make space for Band office staff.

Environmental concern and protection

This little community was a leader in Mi'kmaw ecological projects. In 1988 our community began a forestry management project which decades later turned into a sustainable forestry certificate. Rare black ash trees were planted and other craft-focused trees were identified. Additionally, the community worked over several years to enhance wild Atlantic salmon stocks through a river restoration project. The L'sitkuk Environmental Youth Group was formed to involve and engage youth in environmental and cultural issues. The students study species at risk and are involved in Blanding's Turtle tracking and hatchling emergence and Eastern Ribbonsnake surveys at Kejimkujik. Participants interviewed Elders about the American Eel and built two eel weirs to count the presence of eel during the fall migration. Students also took part in observing population changes and trends as well as counting endangered chimney swifts for a few years while they were roosting in the village of Bear River.

Reclaiming a language

Our last fluent Mi'kmaw speaker passed away over thirty years ago. A band member, a learner herself, stepped up and began teaching beginner language classes in the school, community and continued to host language events. This, along with the knowledge of other learners kept that language ember alive, slowly fanning the flames. The community brought in language teachers from other communities and helped foster that access to language and our growth. In-between funded language programs, volunteers in the community would still meet up once a week to practice and share language together, dubbing it a "language nest". Slowly, we are reclaiming our Mi'kmaw language, through perseverance and commitment to community and the next generations who will need it.

What's in a number?

The community is indeed diverse and not all members enjoy the same kind of events and projects, therefore, engagement and participation numbers and which individuals or families attend depend on what kind of event/project is being offered. As a community we might not have the same opinion on matters, but we still find ways to come together for the benefit of the collective.

On one end of the spectrum participant engagement for the Harvesters Gathering there is just about 73% community participation. Participant engagement for community breakfasts put on by the Health Center is about 30% of the community. On the other end of the spectrum only 1% of the community attend a specific workshop or group activity that is during the day, such as a walking club or language lesson. The important thing is that all community members have something to attend that they are interested in or need. Community surveys are continually going out each year from the Band Hall, Health Center and other organizations or individuals wanting to invite community out. One of the ways that we can spread the word is by weekly community notices that go into every household's mailbox at the end of their driveway. As well as a social media closed group where notices are continuously posted, through the hosting of the Health Center, but anyone is welcome to send their notice, from partner organizations to community members putting on a workshop.

One of the most well-attended community-led events, demonstrating our amazing community spirit, is the community camping trip each summer. This is a most-expenses-paid camping trip somewhere in the Atlantic. Our Health Centre organizes the dates, pays for the camping and invites the many families to join. It is a bonding time for parents and children as well as between families along with time out on the land.

In summary:

The people of L'sitkuk build on individual and communal strengths like relationships with the natural world and artistic skill, we have a high rate of participation to some of our events, we have a wide range of programs that happen here as well as the full range of ages of people participating in community activities, we encourage each other and others outside our community, we have a strong sense of community pride, and we focus on how to ensure that future generations are able to carry on a strong and healthy L'sitkuk.