

ATK Using the Example of the American Eel Workshop
November 18 & 19, 2008
Moncton, New Brunswick

Presentation by Elder Albert Marshall, Eskasoni First Nation

The following is a transcript of the presentation given by Elder Albert Marshall.

“I reside in Unama’ki¹, Eskasoni First Nation and live in Mi’kma’ki². I want to thank the elders for inviting us into their territory.

“Two eyed seeing – this is sort of a guiding principal in our journey here. It reminds us we have to maintain two consciousnesses. Seeing with two eyes – it gives us more clarity. It’s imperative to take the best of whatever tools the White man has brought over – education, their way of life, and what our forefathers left us. With these two sets of tools, we can march forward. This is what traditional knowledge is all about – like a jigsaw puzzle. I have a very small part of it. When all the pieces are together, we have two eyed seeing – that’s traditional knowledge.

“Traditional knowledge – is a way of life for us with recognition that every culture has traditional knowledge. We’re referring to Mi’kmaq traditional knowledge – this is being passed on by the elders. The onus is on us to try to empower the young people. It’s more expedient if you can look at everything from another perspective because no one can look at it just from one perspective and get by with it.

“The last two days have been very challenging for me. When we talk about traditional knowledge, you might come about to think of it as something very philosophical – from a scientific perspective, it has no practical application. But apparently, this is what our forefathers used. Our language was never written. It was always spoken. The tendency is for us to look at it in a circle or a cell. The buzz words – tradition – we don’t have a word for this in my language or traditional ecological knowledge. When we use the word traditional knowledge, we see it from another perspective. We can probably look at it in three perspectives.

“The Outer Layer is general knowledge. The Middle Layer is traditional ecological knowledge or what the world is all about. The Inner Circle embraces the sacredness of this knowledge. It needs special consideration. Not all knowledge can be shared at all times. Once we know how this knowledge can be shared. In my language, we don’t use the word “gift.” Everything that I have has been given to me by the Creator. Rather than talking about gifts, we need to be sharing.

“Knowledges are the gifts left for us by the elders. With those knowledges, we are supposed to help other people that need some encouragement to see themselves in different way. Traditional knowledge is our guiding principle. We are not owners of Mother Earth. We just work here. With this guiding principle, it makes it easier to look at

¹ Unama’ki is one of the seven Mi’kmaq districts and is also known as Cape Breton.

² Mi’kma’ki is the traditional territory of the Mi’kmaq nation, covering Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and parts of Quebec.

netukulimk.³ If we hear and see that word, we recognize that you as a human being have to sustain yourself. But in so doing – there is no danger of exploiting her. As you look at this perspective, in the process of you sustaining yourself – you have a responsibility to ensure that the next seven generations have the same opportunities in sustaining themselves and appreciating Creator's gifts.

“Two eyed seeing is very helpful to us. When we invoke the two eyed perspective, it's not really meant to look at mistakes of the past. We see ourselves as human beings and know from within that no human is ever perfect and every initiative has flaws. The onus on us is to learn. Some of the things we have done in the past – we need to take these lessons and bring them into the present so we're better prepared to go into the future.

“In Unama'ki we have been working diligently to raise consciousness. Our motif might be slightly selfish, because there is a great urgency. When we look in our communities, 80% of the population is under 30years. The younger generations are completely disconnected from who they are as Mi'gmaq people.

“In Eskasoni, we now have 62 people out of 4,000 that are over 65. The Elders have a sense of urgency of ways and opportunities to share stories and validate in the minds of these young people, that it's ok to be a Mi'kmaq person today, as in the future.

“Eel to us, are a very small part and parcel of the whole and of how we provide our substance. In my seventh years, we tend to see there is no one strictly an eel fisherman or woman. Who wants to eat eel 24/7 or 24 hours a day? Providing for family and community – there's other tasks that have to be done. We have to be knowledgeable in how to gather medicines, how to use trees, how to fish and hunt and so on. Very few people have become specialized or are that very passionate about eel.

“Traditional knowledge – from the general knowledge perspective, it is a part and parcel of the whole. Gathering eel, we have different tools by season. In using these tools, we are very mindful of conservation. For example, spearing eel through ice as taught by the elders – the bigger eel are much deeper. We are constantly reminded to leave the brood stock alone – we take the ones closer to the surface and use a spiral motion to maximize the area from that hole. If we take the brood stock, we are compromising the sustainability of the stock.

³ *Netukulimk* is a way of providing for one's life and existence that acknowledges human beings' place in the web of life. *Netukulimk* involves respect for all of Creation, recognizing the interconnection of the web of life, reciprocity, and how humanity's actions impact everything.