

WORK THROUGH TIME

Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea



Eelfishing in Eskasoni, with Barry Bernard

Barry Bernard: The first time I went eel fishing, I went with my grandfather. It was during the summer, I would say July or June. He said to get the boat ready. He knew during that night it was going to be calm weather, no wind.

I had the boat ready, he said pack a little lunch. We waited until it got dark. Well, the water was so calm, it was like clear glass. We used the gas lamp as our light to fish for eels.

We went around the Bras d'Or, the shore side of Whycomagh. It was six, seven feet of water and you would see the eels laying flat. I'd say it took a few minutes for him to catch a couple of eels. He asked me to try it and I think I tried about ten times before I finally caught my first eel!

It takes a method, it takes a trick. The aiming and the timing, it's very important when you're trying to catch an eel. So that was my first time eelfishing.

My second experience was during the summer, that same summer, about six o'clock in the morning. It's a different method of fishing eels, because we'd be floating, the water would be nice and calm. While we were floating, you would see eels, three-quarters of their body standing up, like eelgrass.

I asked my grandfather, "Why are they standing up? How come they're not laying down?" He said, "They're waiting for their prey."

Early morning of the day, you would see eels standing up like eelgrass. You had to be patient. You would sneak behind them, get your spear ready – the spear was made by two pieces of stick, one steel bar in the middle. You'd have an opening about 2.5 inches, with a steel bar that's very sharp. When you hit the eel, you thrust your spear to the ground, let the eel roll around the bar or your stick, then you bring him back to the boat. If you do it too quick he's just going to fall back off, so you let him curl around your stick.

You have to look at Mi'kmaq tradition. For example, eelfishing, or any types of hunting or fishing, comes down from your grandparents or your father. Eelfishing techniques were handed down from my grandfather to my father to me, and now I'm handing them down to my sons. Which I hope my son will keep continuing the

tradition – hand it down to his sons, to his sons. It's a Mi'kmaq tradition of showing you how to survive, using techniques, tools, of catching their fish or your deer or your moose or your rabbit. It all depends on what time of the season it is.

Calum: How have the tools changed as you've grown?

Barry: Today they've got spears that you can buy on E-bay! They do a lot of diving and they use spears to catch salmon. When I was growing up in Whycocomagh, we used to use rabbit snares for salmon season. Put a rabbit snare on the end of your stick, when you see a salmon you just gradually try and put it around his head. Then you pull it up, holding the rabbit snare, and you throw the stick and the snare up on the bank.

Sometimes we would dive – use a sharp stick or a spear, whatever you can make at the time. You can poke your salmon, and once you poke your salmon you let the stick stay on and it will eventually die off. That was one of the ways, either using a worm, or a hook, or making up a jig.

As time has changed I've noticed the different technology that comes out, you get to adapt to that world. It's faster to capture, and there are ways of capture that are faster than before. Better ways. So as times change, you also change with the time.

What I notice now is the depletion of eels. When I was growing up, there were a lot of eels. It was common to see a family having an eel dinner, or eel stew. In today's world, only a few people still keep that tradition where they would go and fish for eels and have a traditional feast. Today it's a delicacy, I guess.

As the times change, we're introducing more pollution to the Bras d'Or lakes. There's a disease now that's infecting the eels in the Bras d'Or lakes – a parasite which goes into their air bladder and prevents them from diving to eat. I've noticed there aren't as many as there used to be. I don't know if its overfishing or if it's pollution – what's causing the depletion – but I've noticed now it's not easy anymore, like it used to be. They're not abundant like they used to be.

We don't harvest eels in Cape Breton. We think they're going to be here forever, but I doubt it. We have to look into ways of growing eels, introducing them back into the market.

To us, the eel was also used as a medicine tool. When I was growing up, if you were sick, my grandma would make eel stew, and the broth from the stew would put you to sleep. God knows what's in the eel, but they would use it as some kind of a medicine.

Calum: Do you eat eel often?

Barry: Last time I ate eel was two weeks ago. I do eat eel often, as much as I can.

I catch my own, I do a lot of fishing. I'm a fly fisherman, a recreational fisherman. I tie my own flies. I take my kids flyfishing, fishing or eel fishing. Whatever fishing we do, we all go as a family, because my boys enjoy fishing, and it's something they don't get in schools.

I took my son fishing and I told him "If we catch something we'll eat it." We got a couple of trout, we cooked them over an open fire, and we had our dinner. To them, it was something they don't get in schools. It's an educational way of teaching a person how to survive outdoors, in the wilderness. Today most people go to Wal-Mart or Sobers or Lo-food or whatever. There are not many people that rely on nature.

I grew up with rabbits. My grandparents were basketweavers and trappers. During my time when I was living with my grandparents we would trap, fish, hunt small game, and that would be our supper or dinner or whatever.

Whatever we made from axe handles, pig axe handles, baskets, we would sell them on the street. We had a basket shop. I remember Americans stopping at the house, they were buying baskets. That was part of our livelihood, being basketweavers.

We had a little chicken farm, I had a chicken farm. We had pigs, we had a garden. There wasn't much money exchanged, it was more like bartering. I remember there was a German family in Whycomagh, I used to trade comic books for eggs.

That was a way for me to learn how to speak English, because I didn't go to school until I was thirteen years old. English wasn't introduced to me until I was thirteen years old. And then I found it was a foreign language. It was the hardest language in the world to learn.

Being Aboriginal, the only language I ever heard was the Mi'kmaq language. The English language was very strange. During my time when I went to school, I had my older brother translate to me. The hardest part of the education system was that they'd try to introduce French, and I already had a hard time trying to learn English. They wanted me to learn French! I had to say "This is not working for me".

Today when you look at education, in the Aboriginal community, at least they have schools in their own communities, they have immersion programs. They can speak their own language in their own environment. It's friendlier, there's not as much prejudice or racism, which I've seen in Whycomagh growing up as a kid in that village school. There was so much racism, hatred, towards Aboriginal people. It was a harsh environment to get an education.

During winter months, eels would be hibernating in about four to six inches of soft mud. They'd be laying in there until the alder trees start budding. That's what my grandfather would say, "you wait until you see the alder trees, once they start budding. That's when the eels are coming out of their hibernation".

For an experienced eel fisherman, an Aboriginal eel fisherman, these areas that we fish have been shown to me by generations, and generations, and generations. They've been handed down from one generation to another. It's a place where my father, and his father, and his father fished that area. A lot of these places that we do fish have been harvested over hundreds and hundreds of years.

The main concern we have is conservation. Conservation was always in the back of your head. Your parents or your grandparents tell you not to overfish, "Try to leave some for the others." So you would never overfish in a certain area. If you had four or five sites, you would know where to go, which place you should not overfish. You would try to balance nature, help to balance nature.

During the spring when the snow is thawing out, the ice is melting, once you see the alder trees start to bud, that's when the eels are coming out of their hibernation.

They usually wait a month, two months, until they start fishing for eels. That will be early June. They would fish eels during the night using – well, today it would be propane lantern. They would just float on the top of the water, make sure there's no wind and the water's very calm, and that's how they fish them in the summertime. Or they would use eel traps.

Calum: In the winter, how do you get them if they're in the mud?

Barry: In wintertime, we have to cut a hole through the ice. We have a 12 to 16 foot pole. At the end of the pole is a fork, and on each side of the fork are three [sharpened] prongs. There's one long prong that's in the middle.

Usually you throw that in the mud, about three or four inches in the mud, and try to feel – you have to have a method, you have to have a skill. It doesn't take overnight to learn how to fish eels.

Once you have that feeling at the end of your pole, you know if it's a stick, you know if it's an eel. Once you throw it in the mud, you have to walk counter-clockwise around your hole with your spear. Sometimes you have to do that three or four times. Finally, you know, it takes practise. It doesn't just come overnight.

Eels act strangely before thunder and when it's lightning. They'll be faster, they'll be hard to sneak towards, and they'll be so quick! So you know something's going to happen – either its going to thunder, rain, or windstorm.

Calum: When you're fishing in the summer, is it harder to spot mature eels from the younger eels?

Barry: If you're fishing during the night in the summertime, you have a selection. You really don't want to catch small ones, because they're too much work. It takes

seven years for an eel to grow twenty-two inches long. So you can imagine if you're catching a big one! It takes ten to twelve years to catch that one; it's twelve years old. So you're very selective of what size you want to catch but in wintertime, you really don't have a choice. You don't know what's underneath the hole.

Calum: After you catch the eel, do you want to walk us through the process of cleaning it? What are the steps involved in getting it ready to eat?

Barry: Before technology advanced to newspaper, people would use sand. They would look for a sandy area, because the eel is so slimy that you have to look for sand to grab a hold of it.

You start cutting from the belly all the way up to the gills. Once you take the guts out, you flip the neck over your index finger and you cut the bone and the meat, without cutting the outside skin. Once you cut that portion, you put your thumb outside the back of the neck of the eel, then you use your hand to pull the meat and the skin apart.

With today's technology you use newspaper, for a better grip. You pull it apart, throw the skin away and the meat you keep, but when you're cleaning it, make sure the blood vessel is cut. Then you cut it into chunks, put it in the oven at 400°F and you have a good supper. Either you make a stew or you bake it. I prefer having it baked.

Calum: What do you eat it with, what's your side dishes?

Barry: Onions and potatoes, that simple. And homemade bannock, you know. That's my favorite meal.

My upbringing with my grandparents and parents, we would never sell our catch. It was always shared with community members. Teaching my boys how to eelfish, what we catch we would give out to the communities, to the elders. We would never sell our catch. Our method was sharing with each other.

In the wintertime, we always invite anyone who wants to eelfish. Try it out. We'll teach you how to eelfish.

Just having fun outside, enjoying the winter weather. Although it's cold, and there's a lot of work to it, it's enjoyable at the end.

I always share my knowledge to my sons and their friends, and I hope that the tradition keeps going on.

I find the eelfishing method is disappearing. Not many people are relying on the eels anymore. I don't know if it's the people losing the taste or losing the tradition, or it's too much work. Especially here in Eskasoni, I find that only the older generation is looking for eels. But there are a few young people that still enjoy it, the taste of eel.

I have four sons and I hope they keep on the tradition, like I was taught by my grandparents, by my father. I hope they continue on, keeping the tradition to their kids and their kids.

Calum: Is it more fun to go out in the summer or the winter?

Barry: Summer. I enjoy it, and although there are a lot of mosquitoes, the summer months are nice.

Winter months are cold, and there's a lot of work to it. Cutting the hole—sometimes you have a foot thick ice, you have to use an axe.

In every Aboriginal community, you would have people doing different jobs, or positions, or duties. You would have hunters, you would have fishermen, and you would have gatherers.

The people who specialized in hunting, or salmon or eel, they would know certain areas where there was an abundance of fish. Hunters would have small game and big game. In an Aboriginal community, each gatherer, or hunter would be specialized in a certain area, and their techniques would be handed down by their family members, from one generation to another.

This piece was edited from an interview with Barry Bernard, conducted at his home in March of 2009 by the *Work Through Time* project team.

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