Wasoqopa'q Women Fish Harvesters Gathering

March 18th – 20th, 2025

FINAL REPORT OCTOBER 2026

Contact: https://witlukutimk.ca/ Email: WWspace@dal.ca



Table of Contents

Acknowledgements 3
Introduction 4
Workshop Overview 6
  Workshop Schedule 8
Final Report 11
  Experiences and Insights 11
  Challenges Identified 17
Towards Meaningful Change 21
  Recommendations 21
Moving Forward 25
  Atlantic Policy Congress of Chiefs Fisherwomen Award 25
  Affiliated Project: Upcoming Conference Opportunity 26
Wela'lioq 27

Acknowledgements

Wela'lioq (Thank You) to the Wasoqopa'q Women Fish Harvesters who offered their important insights to the creation of this report. Wela'lioq to the Confederacy of Mi'kmaw Nations,[1] Ocean Nexus Nippon Foundation, Ărramăt: Biodiversity Conservation and the Health and Well-being of Indigenous Peoples (New Frontiers Research Fund [NFRFT-2020-00188]), and Dalhousie University (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council). This project is supported in part by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and by funding from the Government of Canada's New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRF). We would also like to sincerely thank Andrea Bishop (Resolution Health Support Advisor) and Katelynn Luymes (Mental Wellness Case Manager) for offering mental health support, as well as the facilitators who led the rematriation activities during the workshop.



Photos by Alanna Syliboy

Government of Canada / Gouvernement du Canada

New Frontiers in Research Fund / Fonds Nouvelles frontières en recherche

The ᔑᑯᓭᐟ Ărramăt Project draws upon research supported by the Government of Canada's New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRF).

ᔑᑯᓭᐟ Projet Ărramăt repose sur des recherches financées par le fonds Nouvelles frontières en recherche du gouvernement du Canada.

ᔑᑯᓭᐟ
Ărramăt

[1] In July of 2026, the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq (CMM) experienced a name change to the Confederacy of Mi'kmaw Nations (CMN).

Introduction

From March 18th to 20th, 2025, a gathering took place in Wasoqopa'q First Nation that brought together Wasoqopa'q Women Fish Harvesters to discuss their experiences, challenges, and successes within their fishing activities. This report captures and summarizes key points discussed throughout the gathering. Central to these discussions are their experiences, insights, challenges, and recommendations towards meaningful change to support Mi'kmaw Women Fish Harvesters.

Background

For thousands of years, Mi'kmaw women have been engaging in the practice of *Netukulimk* for food and livelihoods, providing for their families and communities. More broadly, Netukulimk encompasses providing (food and livelihood) for your family and community without compromising the integrity of the ecosystems on which we depend. Harvesting fish remains a central food, livelihood, and cultural practice. There has been an increasing number of women participating in a broad range of fisheries from food, commercial to treaty fisheries. This resurgence of women's participation however has not been without challenges. For generations, settler colonial patriarchy or male-dominated systems have been imposed on our communities. Subsequently, Indigenous women are often excluded from participating in natural resource economic sectors or in related decision-making processes. And when they do, they often face discrimination, workplace harassment and violence which has become a frequent occurrence (see MMIWG Final Inquiry Report 2019).

Although there are workplace policies and procedures that enforce respectful workplace behaviours at formal workplaces, fishing vessels and other water-based practices for food and livelihoods are generally outside of this purview resulting in limited redress processes for Mi'kmaw/Indigenous women to pursue when they experience discrimination and/or violence. This project aims to revitalize a matriarchal-focused program that centers the voices and experiences of Mi'kmaw Women Fish Harvesters to foster positive

engagement and learning from each other by enacting Mi'kmaw ancestral and cultural protocols for making respectful relations such as *Ankukamkewe* (making relations) and *Nikmatut* (family and community relationships).

Objectives

1. To provide a safe, inclusive environment in which Mi'kmaw Women Fish harvesters can share their struggles and past experiences, and strategies for prevention as well as redress.
2. To provide traditional support systems to Mi'kmaw Women Fish Harvesters who have experienced violence, abuse, and harassment while on the water and in training.
3. To develop resources to assist Mi'kmaw Women Fish Harvesters in successfully navigating a male-dominated industry.
4. To proactively address the MMIWG Calls to Justice relating to governance and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) also the UN Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Act.

Recommended citation: Pictou, S., Syliboy, A., Murphy, L., and Brimacombe, M. (2026). *Wasoqopa'q Women Fish Harvesters Gathering, March 18–20, 2025. Final Report*.

Report prepared by: Morgan Brimacombe, Research Assistant Coordinator (Dalhousie University).

Prepared for: The Confederacy of Mi'kmaw Nations (CMN) and Dr. Sherry Pictou, Tier 2 Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Governance (Dalhousie University).

Release date: October 2026.

Workshop Overview

On March 18, 19, 20, 2025, the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq hosted a healing retreat for Mi'kmaw Women Fish Harvesters in Wasoqopa'q First Nation.

The goal of the retreat was to encourage the revitalization of matriarchal focussed programs that center on the voices and experiences of Mi'kmaw Women Fish Harvesters by engaging and learning from each other, in a good way, by enacting Mi'kmaw ancestral and cultural protocols (Ankukamkewe and Nikmatut) for making respectful relations.

The gathering was a great success with 26 women in attendance (Fisherwomen, Chiefs, CMM's Resolution Support Team, presenters, and facilitators), participating in a variety of Rematriation activities including drum making, beading, quilling, and a water ceremony. The gathering also provided opportunity for women working in various fishing activities (food, ceremonial, treaty/commercial) to share lived experiences on the water and develop a support network with other women fishers. The event also provided opportunity for CMM, in partnership with Dalhousie, to compile information in hopes of developing an action plan as pertains to creating safer work environments.

The project received support and assistance from Dr./District Chief Sherry Pictou, Tier 2 Canada Research Chair, Indigenous Governance (Social Science Humanities Research Council) and the Ărramăt: Biodiversity Conservation and the Health and Well-being of Indigenous Peoples (New Frontiers Research Fund), and Dr. Pictou's research assistant, Morgan Brimacombe. Dr. Pictou and Ms. Brimacombe are working with CMM (Alanna and Lisa) to facilitate more gatherings.

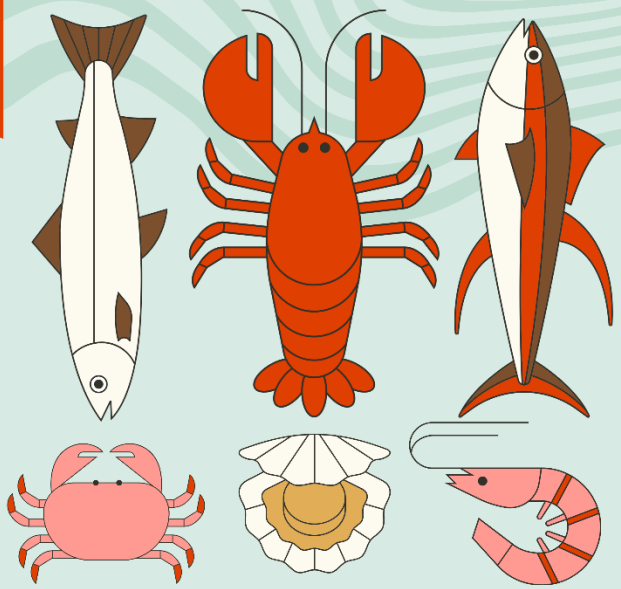
Alanna Syliboy
Culture, Education and Engagement Manager
ASyliboy@mikmawconservation.ca

Dr./District Chief Sherry Pictou
Tier 2 Canada Research Chair, Indigenous Governance, Dalhousie University
Sherry.Pictou@dal.ca

Lisa Murphy
Human Resource Outreach Coordinator
Lisa.Murphy@cmmns.com

Morgan Brimacombe
Research Assistant Coordinator
Morgan.Brimacombe@dal.ca

March
18-20
2025



Wasoqopa'q First Nation Fisherwomen Workshops

DATES:

MARCH 18-20 2025

Accommodation: **Tru by Hilton Yarmouth**
Address: **10588 Starrs Road, Yarmouth, B5A 5J7**

Workshop Location: **Rose Purdy Recreation & Community Centre in Yarmouth**

Catering: **Winners One Stop Restaurant Yarmouth**

Workshop Schedule

Fisher Women's Gathering

To help understand, support, and appreciate our Mi'kmaw Fisher Women.

Day 1 March 18th2025	Agenda
11:00am	**Registration** Rose Purdy Centre 15 Burbine Street, Acadia First Nation.
12:00pm – 12:30	**Opening Ceremonies** - Opening Prayer, Water Ceremony and smudging – Marilyn Franics and Melanie Purdy - Welcoming words – Chief Debbie Robinson - Welcoming with District Chief Sherry Pictou - Explanation of event and outcomes – Alanna Syliboy - Introductions - All
12:30 – 1:00 pm	**Lunch**
1:00 – 5:00 pm	**Crafting and Conversations** *Participants will be split* - Drum Making with Andrea Bishop (Rose Purdy Centre) - Quilling with Crystal Gloade (Rose Purdy Centre) - Fisheries discussion with Alanna Syliboy (Meeting space at Tru by Hilton)
6:00pm	**Supper together.** (time may change not required)

Day 2 March 19th 2025	Agenda
9:00am	**Welcome** – Alanna Syliboy
9:10am – 9:30pm	**Welcome back** - Recap of day one, overview of day two.
10:00am- 12:00pm	**Conversation and crafting.** *Participants are split into groups* - Beading with Jannaya Nickerson (Rose Purdy Centre) - Fisheries Discussion with Alanna Syliboy (Rose Purdy Centre)
12:00 – 1:00	**Lunch**
1:00 – 4:00pm	**Conversation and Crafting** *Participants are split into groups* - Beading with Jannaya Nickerson (Rose Purdy Centre) - Fisheries Discussion with Alanna Syliboy (Rose Purdy Centre)
5:00pm	**Supper together.** (time may change not required)
	End of Day 2 Wela'lioq

Day 3 March 20th 2025	Agenda
9:00am	**Welcome back –** Alanna Syliboy
9:00am – 11:00am	**Fisher Women knowledge.** District Chief Sherry Pictou
11:15am – 11:30am	**Break**
11:30am – 12:00pm	**Wrap up** - Questions - All - Recommendations – Group feed back - Door Prizes
12:000pm – 12:30pm	**Closing Remarks -** District Chief Sherry Pictou **Closing prayer** **Bagged lunch to go.**
	End of an event but a beginning of a connection. ***Wela'lioq***

Final Report

Experiences and Insights

1. ***Women Fish Harvesters have a wide range of fishing skills and experiences.***
    - Some participants started fishing long before the Marshall Supreme Court Decision (1999), while others started fishing after.
    - Fishing experiences range from recreational, catch-and-release, food fishing, rights-based (treaty), commercial, and catch-and-sell.
    - Types of species fished include lobsters, scallops, eels, elvers, kiaks, mackerel, smelts, trout, salmon, shad, herring, pickerel, squid, shrimp, striped bass, flounders, herrings, and crabs.
    - Some participants also previously harvested clams, mussels, periwinkles, halibut, and moon snails.

2. ***Women report witnessing and experiencing environmental changes over the years.***
    - These changes include water level changes, river erosion, and a decline in wild species.
    - More specifically: a decline in scallops, a decline in eels, invasive species threatening trout, difficulty harvesting kiaks, a decline in cod, and the closure of clam beds due to pollution.
    - Salmon fishing may also close due to conservation: *"You can still practice your rights, but the numbers are low."*
    - Some shared that they have been protecting eels from an early age: *"It is not something you learn; it is who you are and what you do."*

"Fishing is in who we are.

There is no better place on earth than on the water. It is in you."

3. ***The knowledge of fishing was passed down predominantly through family and friends.***
    - While some women are self-taught, others learned to fish from their mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings, partners, and friends.
    - Teaching children and grandchildren how to fish is very important. Sharing the opportunities and knowledge helps young people be independent and access healthy foods.
    - Many women also knew they wanted to fish after becoming mothers and share a strong interest in teaching their children how to fish.
    - This knowledge is especially important for daughters to be independent and knowledgeable.

"Women taught me how to fish. Watching someone else do it so simply unlocks a new perspective and expands your mind."

4. ***Mi'kmaw Knowledge and tools for harvesting have also been passed down and put into practice. Women Fish Harvesters shared that this includes:***
    - Conducting Ceremony before going out to fish, knowledge on fishing locations, making spears, and using moon phases and seasonal patterns for harvesting practices.
    - Using *Etuaptmumk*, a Two-Eyed Seeing approach, by using modern equipment while integrating Mi'kmaw values and knowledge.
    - However, the concept of Etuaptmumk can also be misused, co-opted, ignored, and inequitably embraced- which oppresses Indigenous Perspectives.

"I would fish Traditionally if I could, but there is no choice. How else do you survive in the Western world? You must adapt."

5. ***Reasons for fishing and the enjoyment of fishing include:***
    - Connecting with family, teaching children, and taking care of family.
    - Self-care, relaxation, and taking a break from daily life.
    - Seeing wildlife, being on the water, and connecting with Mother Earth.
    - Being free, independent, and enjoying the overall thrill of being out on the boat.
    - Being self-sufficient, making money, eating your own catch, and providing for family and community members.
    - Financial reasons.

6. ***Self-sufficiency and access to healthy foods are essential.***
    - Fishing as an act of independence, self-sufficiency, and food security.
    - A participant shared that Traditional Medicine significantly improved her physical health during pregnancy and the health of the baby.

"Independence is when you are in control of your own food security."

"Harvesting as we've always done since time immemorial!"

7. ***Giving back to the community.***
    - Some women consider it important to harvest and give their catch to Elders and others in the community.
    - Others expressed challenges that prevent them from doing so.

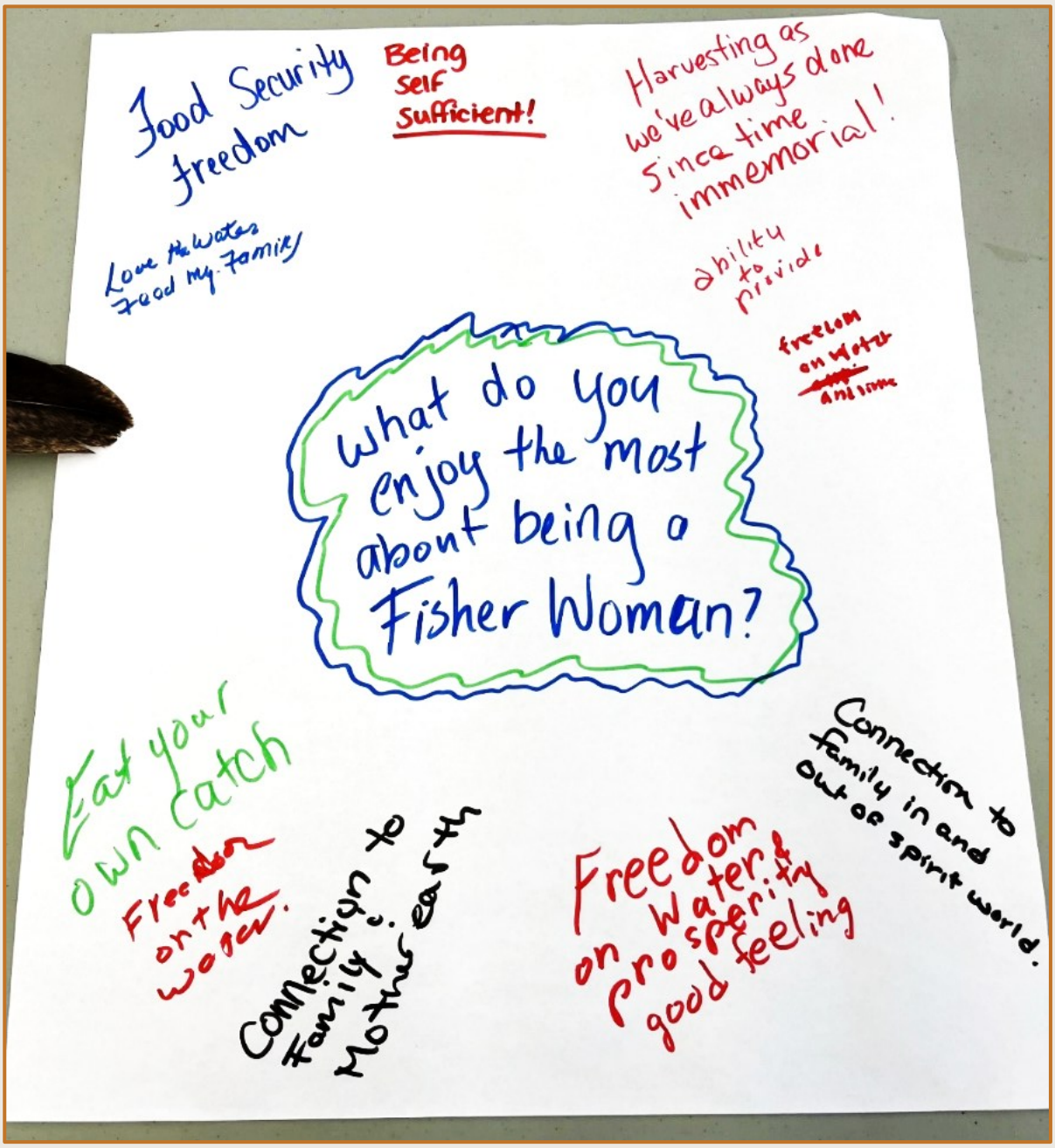
"Giving [your harvest] to those who don't have access. It is rewarding to gift and give back to those who have given to you."

8. ***Access remains a challenge.***
    - While some women own their boat, many shared that still many barriers to access. Financial barriers for owning their own boats include affordability, loaning barriers, and the ongoing additional investments that are required.
    - Safety issues while on the water are widespread.

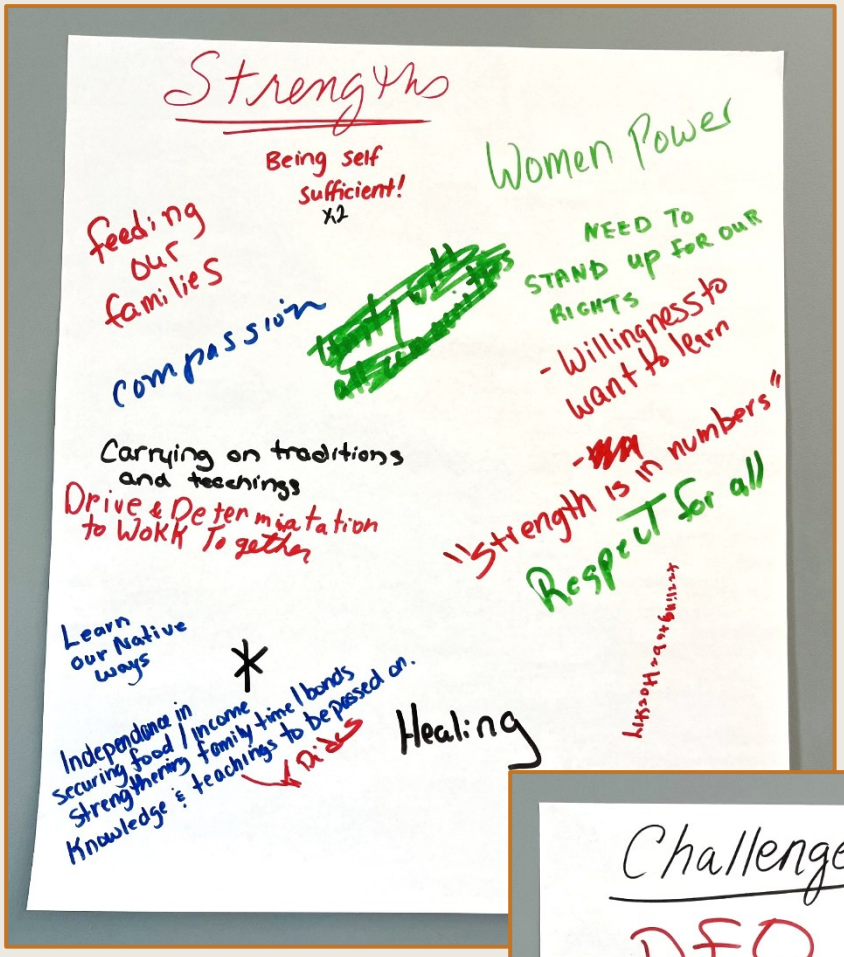
9. ***Opportunities for mentorship and Traditional Knowledge were identified.***
    - There is a need for mentors to teach other women and future generations.
    - Many expressed an interest in mentoring others and using more Traditional practices while fishing, but some barriers prevent them from doing so.
    - Mentorship and increased training will enhance women's safety on the water.
    - *More opportunities and recommendations are continued on Page 21.*

"Strengthening leadership will strengthen Traditional Knowledge and practices."

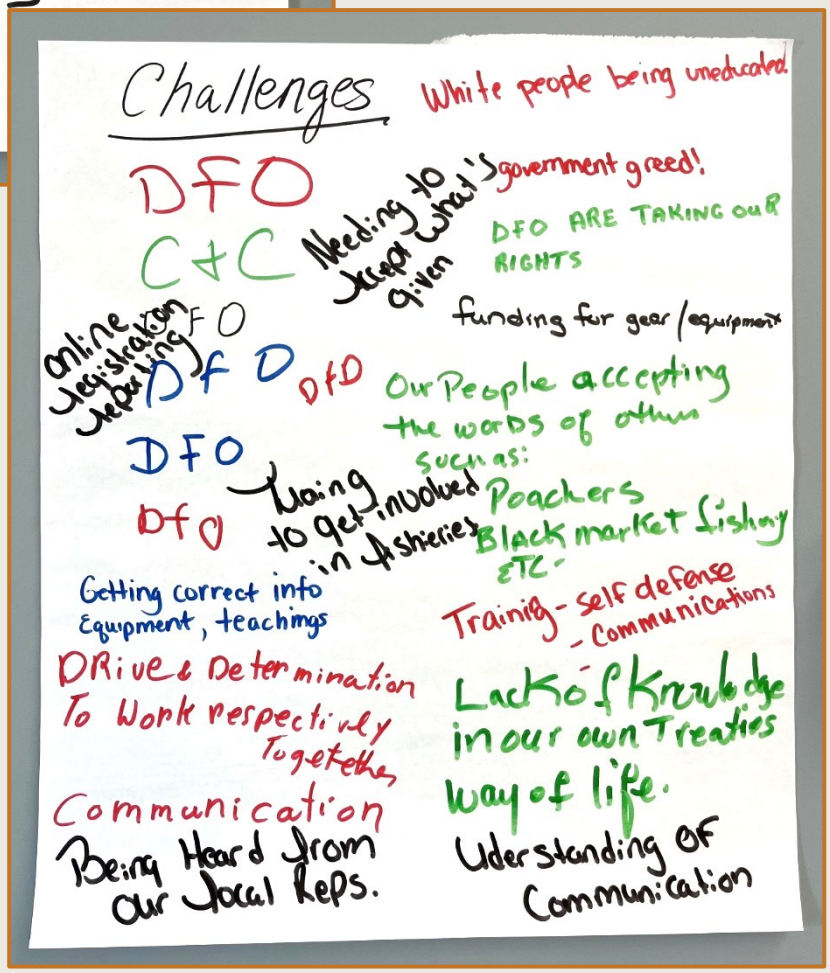
"What do you enjoy the most about being a Fisher Woman?"



Strengths



Challenges



Challenges Identified

1. **Access to Boats and Equipment.**
    - Access to equipment, gear, and bait.
    - Not having a vehicle.
    - Accessibility is an issue for scallop diving.
    - Financial and safety barriers.

2. **Financial Barriers.**
    - Not being paid fairly.
    - Difficult to follow Mi'kmaw Principles when facing financial need.
    - Motivated by financial needs, which removes people's choice.

"Our place in society has put us in a position to do things in order to survive. We never harvested elvers before. But we are in this state due to colonialism and poverty and the system, and we are not given a choice."

3. **Lack of Support.**
    - Guidance to reliable resources is needed.
    - Access to legal aid and lawyers.
    - Heightened risk on the water if there is no support for women.

4. **Childcare and Maternity Leave.**

5. **Maintaining Physical Health.**

6. **Decline in Wild Species and Environmental Changes.**

- Water levels of rivers and lakes have changed, which impacts fishing locations.
- Climate change is impacting Traditional Ways of fishing.

7. **Systemic Barriers.**
    - Challenges related to economic inequality.
    - Lack of overall support for Mi'kmaw Women Fish Harvesters.

"You face so many challenges from the system that does not want you to succeed."

8. **Racism.**
    - Racism in training and classroom settings, as well as on the water.
    - Violence and harassment. This includes gear being tampered with.
    - *Intersectionality* is also important to consider when discussing racism, sexism, ableism, and agism.

9. **Violence and Safety Issues.**
    - Aggression and harassment.
    - Lack of protection and enforcement.
    - Lack of safe spaces for Mi'kmaw Women Fish Harvesters.
    - Risks are higher for women and Two-Spirit People.

"The community is pitted against each other. Instead, we need to protect, support, and care for one another."

10. **Patriarchy.**
    - Brought with colonialism.
    - Women's traps are targeted and tampered with (with the assumption that the women will not defend themselves).

- Being excluded from an early age due to gender and not being taught fishing practices turns into a safety issue while out on the water.
- Lack of respect and appreciation, being held back, being excluded, and working harder to prove oneself to others.

11. Unfair Burden.

- Commercial fisheries are the source of overfishing.
- Others' greed negatively impacts those who did not create the existing systems of exploitation and violence.
- Ignorance and lack of education on the part of non-Indigenous people and mainstream society.

12. Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO).

- Preventing access, restricting, and monitoring.
- Displacement and being dictated where to fish.

13. Leadership.

- Not being heard by local representatives.
- Penalization and poor management planning.
- Strong leadership will help Traditional Knowledge preservation.
- Strong leadership will help in the mentorship of younger generations of fish harvesters.

14. Not Being Heard in Negotiations and Decision-Making.

- Even if sessions are held with community, their ideas may not be applied or listened to.
- People have lingering questions about management plans.
- People with disabilities are also excluded.

- Overall, it is challenging to be repeatedly asked questions, take the time to share perspectives and ideas, and then ultimately not have them reflected in the plans and decisions.

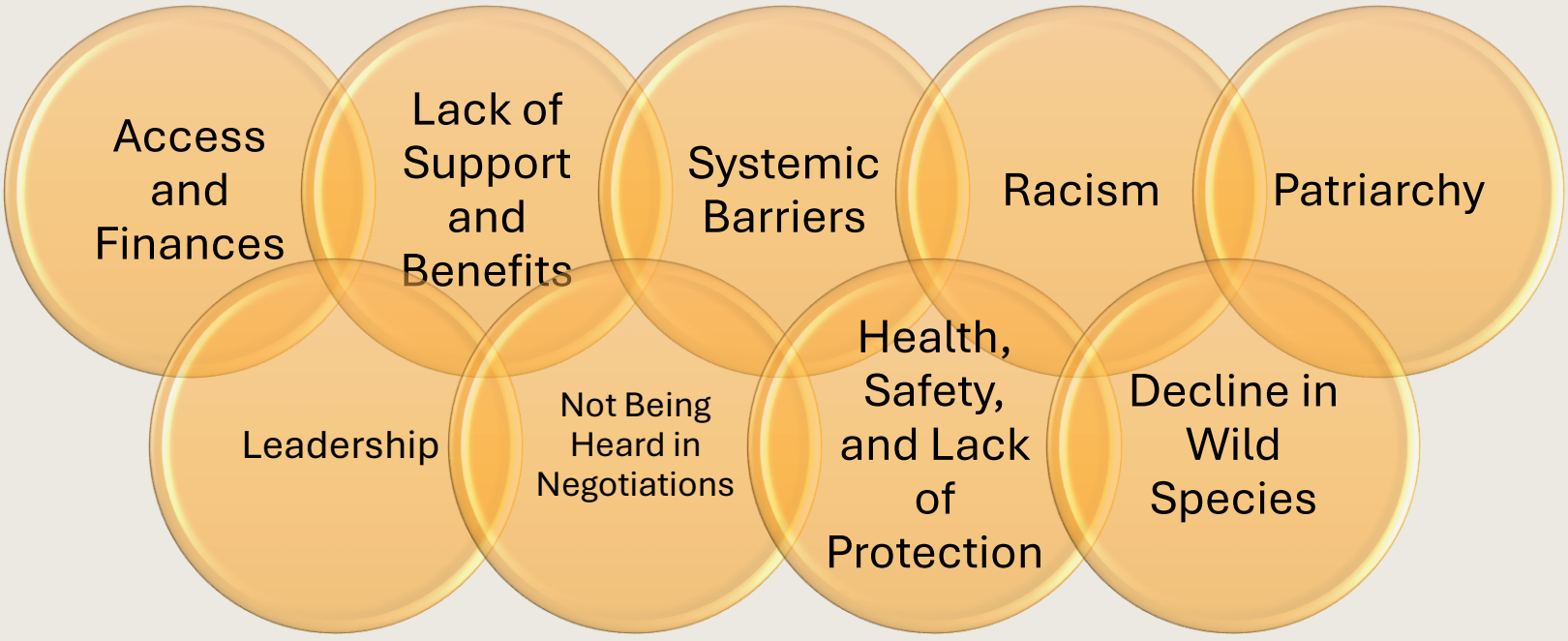
"Do not ask us if you are not actually going to add our opinions."

15. "Forced to be Reactionary, But Community Engagement Takes Time."

- More time is needed to understand and meaningfully incorporate community feedback in planning and decision-making.
- More time is needed to meet, discuss, and ask questions over multiple sessions.

"There needs to be more time. Not one month before [the management plan] is due."

Challenges



Towards Meaningful Change

Recommendations

1. **Education.**
    - There is an interest in learning more about harvesting, fishing markets, elvers and eels, and how to process and prepare fish.
    - More opportunities for intergenerational teaching and training would strengthen Traditional Knowledge and Traditional ways of fishing.
    - Treaty Rights education is needed.
    - Additionally, non-Indigenous fishers need to educate themselves.
    - Future efforts and research should be directed towards non-Indigenous people and fishers who are contributing to the challenges.

2. **Reliable Resources.**
    - More direction and support are needed to guide Women Fish Harvesters to reliable resources.
    - More protection from harassment.
    - More support for accessing boats. Beyond that, owning their own fleet and making decisions for themselves.
    - More information on insurance, leaves, employment benefits, and owning your own business.

3. **Support for Mothers.**
    - More support should be in place to accommodate fishers who are also mothers.

"Everything I do is impacted by my children."

4. **Inclusion in Negotiations and Decision-Making.**
    - Value communities' perspectives and input in decision-making processes and planning.
    - Allow for ample time to ask questions about management plans and meaningfully include feedback and recommendations.
    - Increase transparency in planning and decision-making.

5. **Respect Treaty Rights.**

"Standing up for Treaty Rights is key. We want our own people to show up in a good way, support each other, and stand by you when you need them."

6. **Create a DFO Mi'kmaw Women Representative Position.**
    - Reduce the barriers for meaningful representation.

7. **Strengthening Unity and Taking Care of One Another.**
    - Create a Mi'kmaw Women Fish Harvesters' safe space.
    - More protection, enforcement, and safety from aggression on the water.
    - Meaningfully address long-standing challenges of racism, sexism, ableism, and agism.
    - Educate non-Indigenous fishermen.

8. **Mentorship Program.**
    - To encourage intergenerational teaching and learning.
    - There is a strong interest in mentorship, but steps need to be taken to reduce barriers and enhance intergenerational teaching and learning.
    - Some feel they do not have enough experience to be a mentor.
    - Without a boat, they also cannot efficiently be a mentor.

- Interest in learning how to clean and prepare fish. Specifically, how to: *"Pickle, skin, clean, cut, and honour it."*
- Learning and teaching 'by doing' on the land and water.

9. **"Go to the Land and Learn! Don't Just Talk About It."**
    - Meaningful and in-depth training and knowledge-sharing on the land is key, especially with young people: *"Children need to learn it all. You feel better in the bush."*

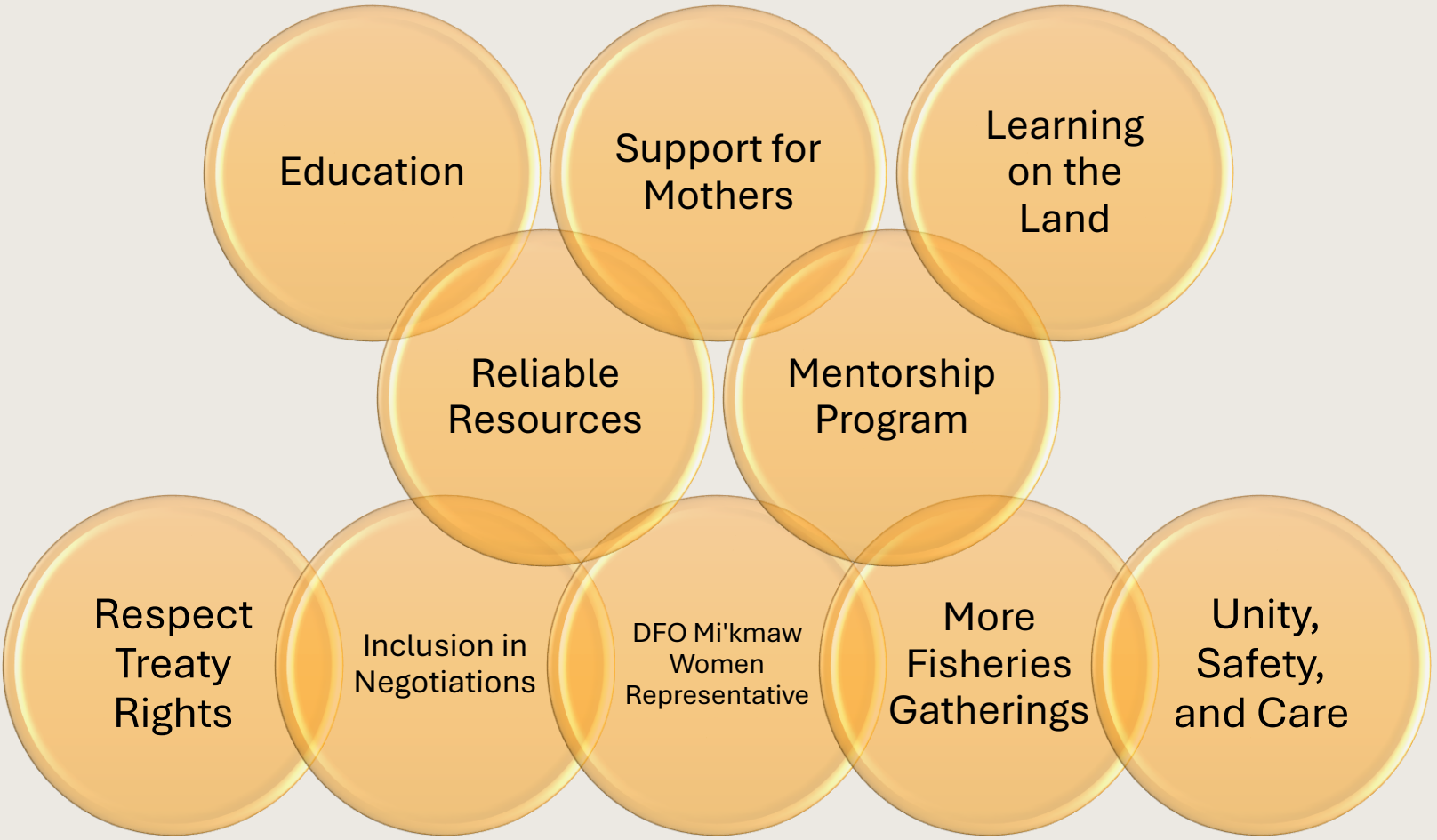
"We actually need to bring the children out [on the land]. You don't realize how strong you are until you connect with your ways."

"The teachers who taught our Elders are still there for us."

"The Traditional Ways will allow folks to fish after climate change."

10. **Offer More Mi'kmaw Women Fishers Gatherings.**
    - Such as Mi'kmaw Women Fish Harvesters workshops, conferences, award ceremonies, and trade shows.
    - Offer workshops on Traditional Knowledge and fishing.

Recommendations



Moving Forward

This report will be shared with the Executive Director of Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn (KMKNO).

Atlantic Policy Congress of Chiefs Fisherwomen Award

The Atlantic Policy Congress of Chiefs (APC) have been hosting an annual APC Fisheries Conference & Awards for several years. One of the issues raised during the *2024 Mi'kmaw Women Fish Harvesters Gathering* (see affiliated report) was how women were not acknowledged at the previous conferences. This information was passed on to the APC, and we were honoured that APC offered its first *Indigenous Women Fish Harvesters Award* in January 2025. This award was offered again in January 2026. In addition to the award recognition, a *Fisherwomen's Panel* took place in 2025 and 2026 featuring Mi'kmaw Women Fish Harvesters who spoke about their experiences.



Affiliated Project: Upcoming Conference Opportunity

On the Land and Water

INDIGENOUS STEWARDSHIP, LIVELIHOODS, AND WELLBEING



June 1 – 4, 2027

Kjipuktuk, Mi'kma'ki / Halifax, Canada

Join us for a four-day international, in-person gathering / conference to share knowledge, research, and experiences — honouring the relationships between the lands, waters, peoples, and communities that sustain one another.

CONFERENCE THEMES

- Relationships with Land, Water, and All Our Relations
- Rights, Access, and Indigenous Governance
- Stewardship, Harvesting and Food Sovereignty
- Healing Relations with Mother Earth
- Sustainable Indigenous Livelihoods
- Indigenous Medicine, Health and Community Wellbeing
- Knowledge, Language, Culture, Intergenerational Learning
- Equity, Justice, and Collective Futures

For more information
Scan the QR code or visit
on-the-land-and-water-2027.org

SPECIAL FEATURES

- Spend a day on the land in Mi'kma'ki
- Cultivate relationships worldwide
- Share experiences of stewardship
- Take part in cultural and land-based activities
- Engage with storytelling and shared learning
- Learn from Indigenous-led initiatives and experience

Call for Contributions — coming soon

Government of Canada / Gouvernement du Canada

The ᐊᕐᓂᒪᑦ Ärramät Project draws upon research supported by the Government of Canada's New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRF).

Le projet ᐊᕐᓂᒪᑦ Projet Ärramät repose sur des recherches financées par le fonds Nouvelles frontières en recherche du gouvernement du Canada.

ᐊᕐᓂᒪᑦ Ärramät

Wela'lioq

We would like to thank everyone who helped make this gathering possible. We are grateful for this partnership and for the opportunity to host a second workshop. We are especially grateful to the Wasoqopa'q Women Fish Harvesters and Knowledge Holders who took the time to attend and share their important insights, strengths, frustrations, and recommendations for meaningful change. Wela'lioq.



