

## Bear River (L'sitkuk) First Nation

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Bear River First Nation, in Mi'kmaq is called Muin Sipu. Bear River is often referred to by the Mi'kmaq as L'sitkuk, which is pronounced "elsetkook". Mi'kmaq territory, known to Mi'kmaq as Mi'kma'kik, was split into seven (7) Districts. L'sitkuk lies in the ancient district of Kespukwitk. Kespukwitk which translated into English means "the lands ending or end of territorial".

L'sitkuk is located in the Annapolis Valley between the towns of Annapolis Royal and Digby. L'sitkuk, which translated into English means "flowing along by high rocks" or conveys "water that cuts through", because the river appears to cut through the granite rock of the surrounding landscape.

L'sitkuk has a population of 346 members with 113 living on-reserve and 233 living off-reserve. Historically L'sitkuk has been a central meeting place for the Mi'kmaq due to its strategic location on old water routes connecting the Atlantic coastline to interior lands. It has historically been a meeting place for the Wabanaki Confederacy, a political and cultural alliance among the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet and Mi'kmaq tribes. Archaeological evidence suggests the community has existed in the area for 2,000-4,000 years.

The area around Port-Royal was the traditional summering home of the natives in Bear River. During the summer months, the people of Bear River hunted porpoise in the Bay of Fundy and used the meat for food in the community and used the oil from the porpoise to be sold as machine lubricant. The community members were well known for their craftsmanship in building canoes for fishing and hunting. Their twenty-foot canoes carried whole families and materials to make wigwams for the summer long hunt. Hunters often took 150-200 porpoises a season, sometimes harvesting as many as 13 a day. The famous hunter Malti Pictou reputed to have killed 400 porpoises in a single season along with blackfish, white whales and seals.



The people of Bear River are the Indigenous community whose ancestors welcomed Pierre Dugua, Sieur de Mons, Samuel de Champlain and others who settled at Port-Royal in 1605. The sakmow, 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 native leader to be baptized by the French, as a sign of alliance and good faith. Membertou's baptism was part of the entry by the Mi'kmaq into a relationship with the Catholic Church, known as the Mi'kmaw Concordat.

In 1801 Indian Affairs allotted L'sitkuk 1000 acres, with an additional 600 acres granted in later years. By the 1830s Bear River had become one of the most thriving reserves in the province due to the increasing size of its population. In August of 1831 the community established its own church. Saint Anne's Church was built largely through the efforts of three men; Father Abbe Sigogne, Judge Wiswall of Digby and Chief Andrew Meuse. These men petitioned the government at the time for a parcel of land for the Mi'kmaq to settle on and to have a section of land set aside for a church. On August 19, 1831 Father Sigogne blessed the cornerstone. In its early years the church was also used as a day school. The church still stands today in the community with regular mass being held. The church is beautiful and largely unaltered from its original structure.



Today, the community of L'sitkuk has multiple developments that contribute to the local economy and employment including, Treaty Gas Bar, Muin Sipu Learning Center, Health Center, RCMP Satellite Office, and Fitness Center coming soon. The Heritage and Cultural Center opened in October 2004, and the building resembles a traditional Mi'kmaq wigwam and contains a heritage gallery that displays photos and write ups of Bear River's Elders and past Chiefs as well as a canoe built by using traditional methods.



Tourists and visitors are welcome to walk the Medicine Trail, a 1.5-kilometer medicine trail that shows special plants used in traditional Mi'kmaq medicine. Along the trail are rare black ash, its wood is used to make baskets, Yellow Birch flowers used for tea, Wild Sarsaparilla with the root used to make tea for an all-purpose medicine, and Sweetfern with the leaves and twigs used to make tea and poultices for the treatment of poison ivy rash and other external sores. Traditional economy was based on hunting, fishing, and gathering.



The people of L'sitkuk are well-known for artwork in embroidering porcupine quills on birchbark, leatherwork and basketry, and woodwork as well as hunting and fishing guides for non-natives sports. 7 Paddles is a project that was started to re-establish traditional Mi'kmaq canoe routes for ecotourism in Nova Scotia and 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.

A video is available online of the watershed journey of a group of young paddlers from Bear River First Nation (L'Sit'kuk) to ancestral territory in Kejimikujik National Park. The program has created half a dozen new jobs and created more community gatherings. Part of the project has been building a new wooden cookhouse that stands next to the band's sacred fire pit. Not long ago, a community member died at the same corner in a car crash. The community wanted to create a space for new memories and new stories for the next generation. Young people helped gather bark and dropped by the cookhouse every day to watch or help Mi'kmaq canoe master Todd Labrador craft the 4.9-metre vessel. The cookhouse is now a place to honour the harvesters who often donate the food they hunt and catch.

In 1988 Bear River began a forestry management project. Ash trees have been planted on 445 acres of reserve land. Additionally, the community began efforts to enhance wild Atlantic salmon stocks for a native fishery. A goal of the project is to identify where salmon spawn in the river and build spawning beds at these locations.

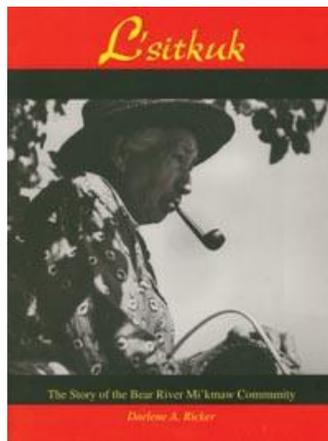
The Bear River L'sitkuk Environmental Youth Group was formed to involve and engage youth in environmental and cultural issues. The students study species at risk and are involved in Blanding's Turtle tracking and hatchling emergence and Eastern Ribbonsnake surveys at Kejimikujik and McGowan Lake. Participants have interviewed elders about the American Eel and built two eel weirs to catch and release eel during the fall migration. Students also take part in observing population changes and trends.

The community of L'sitkuk and the town of Annapolis Royal have joined together on a project to build a new waterfront amphitheater. The Oqwa'titek Amphitheatre was finished in the summer of 2017 and is located at 275 St. George Street in Annapolis Royal. At the site there is a plaque and granite monument with the inscription 'Oqwa'titek'. The word Oqwa'titek means "When They Arrived", in reference to the arrival of French colonist Pierre Dugua and Samuel de Champlain at Port-Royal. The amphitheater is envisioned as a physical symbol of the friendship forged between the Town of Annapolis Royal and Bear River First Nation since 1605 – and a commitment to work



together for the mutual benefit of their communities. The amphitheater is situated at the waterfront with a picturesque surrounding that is beautiful for hosting events such as music performances, weddings, Tai Chi, and more. The amphitheater is free to rent and available to the public for a variety of events. The amphitheater shows the waterfront of Annapolis Royal as a place of first contact, with design elements and enhancements that highlight Mi'kmaq culture that include Elder benches, symbols and carvings, monuments and interpretive panels. There is seating for approximately 140 people.

Some very notable people have come from Bear River First Nation such as Darlene A. Ricker who is a freelance writer who contributes to the Micmac and Maliseet Nations News and edits The Bear River Beat, the L'sitkuk community newsletter. She received an Atlantic Writing Competition award for the book *L'sitkuk*, from the Writer's Federation of Nova Scotia. The book she wrote, *L'sitkuk, The Story of the Bear River Mi'kmaw Community*, is available online. The book preserves the memory of the elders through oral histories and old photographs and tells who these people are and how they survived, prospered and sustained one another. The stories of everyday life reflect native values and the strong ideal of interconnectedness in the community. From the book comes a quote, "*We have endured slavery, starvation, genocide and wards, but the spirit of our people has survived. We have one battle left to fight – ourselves.*" - by L'sitkuk Chief, Frank Meuse Jr.



Another community member is making big moves in the world of theater. Shalan Joudry from L'sitkuk has created the wonderful play '*Elapultiek by Fire*' that is about reconciliation and two sides getting to understand one another better. The word '*Elapultiek*' means '*We are looking towards*'. The play is a must-see. *Elapultiek*, which is staged at dusk with the audience sitting around a campfire, the emphasis is much more on this being a listening place, or "a place to be heard." This could not be more apt, given that much of Mi'kmaw storyteller Shalan Joudry's beautiful play is about the barriers between one character who needs to be heard and another who resists listening. Nat is interrupted by Bill (Matthew Lumley), a white biologist, who is counting the depleting populations of the chimney swift, medium-sized birds that typically nest in chimneys, hoping to create a conservation area for them on the land. For Bill biology, the study of nature, is a chosen profession, it's about science and education and objective observation. For Nat, biology is intuitive, it is part of her tradition, it's inherent in the teachings of her grandparents, it is immersive. The more she speaks about her experience, her culture, and her understanding of the land and the world, the more he grows defensive, dismissive, and the less he wants to hear. The genius in Joudry's writing is



the way she is able to show Bill's lack of intentional malice, and capture how so much of his racist conditioning is subliminal, and how much of it seems rooted in unacknowledged feelings



of guilt that make Bill, a white male Canadian Baby Boomer (all the privilege one could ask for) extremely uncomfortable. In this play the thing we are looking towards seems to be true reconciliation, finding ways to be heard and finding ways to listen. *Elapultiék by Fire* is the first script by a Mi'kmaq playwright to be staged at the Ross Creek Center for the Arts. Joudry also published her first book, *Generations Re-merging*, by Gaspereau Press in 2014.

Each year L'sitkuk holds their Harvester's Gathering in October. The event is usually held at the end of the month, over a four-day span within the community. The Harvester's Gathering is a special event that brings community members together to celebrate, honour and give thanks to the land and those that hunt, fish, and gather throughout the year. There is a community feast including many traditional foods such as moose, deer, salmon and lobster. This event not only gives the community the opportunity to participate in cultural activities but also acknowledges the preservation of Mi'kmaw traditions. Beginning with the lighting of the sacred fire, community members can learn and teach traditions such as prayer, singing, dancing, and sharing stories.