

The Significance of Fish and Water to the Blackfoot People

Background

One of the components of the 2020-21 Blackfoot Confederacy (BFC) Native Trout Recovery Project was to interview six elders and traditional knowledge holders from each of the four nations of the BFC, with the objective of acquiring information on the traditional and current significance of fish, water and place names within Blackfoot Territory.

The goal of these outputs is to increase understanding of the history and significance that fish and water have for the Blackfoot people.

The following are shortened versions of interviews with 6 Blackfoot elders:

Elder Mike Bruised Head, Kainai First Nation (Blood Tribe)



I come from the Many Spotted Horse Clan and the Fish Eater Clan.

When we went far in our travels, we had to survive on something and some of the people we met survived on salmon. Eventually the taste was acquired. This is what we ate, and this is the kind of people we met. We were fearless and courageous.

When my great grandfather, Mike Blood got really old he would tell us stories where him and his mother fished. He used to tell different stories of him fishing and hunting. He was born in the 1870's, we're not sure where he fished, but he said they ate the fish they caught. He was

one of the first children taken from his mother against his will and brought to the Dunbow Industrial Catholic Residential School. The school was very close to the Bow River and him and his friends were allowed to go fishing, but they had to share their catch with the clergy and guests.

My great grandmother also talked about living off fish, hunting and there was still no wild game.

When it comes to the water species, my grandfather in Piikani, tells a story of a 'Water Being' that came out of the water in the form of a woman. There's some people still living in Piikani that have this story: there were children swimming, and this lady came out, a Water Being, she actually looked at them and went back into the water. My great grandfather, Mike Blood, too, saw a Water Being, he didn't know what gender but noticed that the hands were different and all together (webbed).

I always look down in the water in case I see it. We respect the Water Beings and the spirit of the water, any water. Water is very sacred.

Elder Shirlee Crowshoe, Piikani Nation



I've heard from my elders like the late John Yellow Horn, who spoke of the "Piskaani" (buffalo jump). He said yes, in the past, we would trap fish by building a little "Pisgaan" or pound of rocks in the river to trap and catch them.

Our neighbors, Kainai, have a clan called the "Mamyooyiiks" (the fish eaters). It's the same here in Piikani, where we get our clan names. There was a clan, the "Oomkookatooyiiks" (the gopher eaters). Our people were often in a state of starvation. It must have been a time of starvation when the "Mamyooyiiks" resorted to catching and eating fish and this became the name of their clan. Therefore, they were called the "fish eaters." Just like the "gopher eaters" in Piikani. They were seen by others to be catching and eating gophers.

In the past when our ancestors were on foot, they were very cautious of the water because that's where "Sooyiitapii" (the underwater people) lived. They were cautioned not to play around or be around water because of "Sooyiitapiiks," that were a powerful source/spirit. All of our sacred items we use were given to us by "Sooyiitapiiks." Our people were afraid and had great respect for "Sooyiitapiiks."

The "Moopistaaniks" (Beaver Bundle) came from a water source and all the "Sooyiitapiiks" or participants that lived in the water. The first one was the "Ksiskstaakiiks" (beaver), who lived in the water. The "Sooyikayiiks" (mink) and "iimhhkayiiks" (swans) were from or near the water and related to the water. It is interesting how we came to be from the "Sooyiitapiiks." The whole universe is connected. The "Spoonitapiiks" (the stars) and the upper beings. "Ksuuhkoomiitapiiks" (the earth people). They are all part of creation.

I was told that water was very sacred and given to us by our Creator. It's how we survived. In traditional times, when our people travelled from one area to another, they always knew where there was a well or water that wasn't far. They must have marked or known where there was water. There's a place north of Piikani called Carmangay ("Nummhhtaii") where there's a well or water source where they would rest or camp. This became the knowledge of the whole community and water was very sacred and powerful. Water has always been part of our life.

Elder John Murray, Amskappi Piikunni

When I was young the river changed and there was a very deep channel through there and was dammed at the east end by the beavers. There was a lot of springs there and when I was young, I used to see a lot of fish there, huge fish, you could see their shadows moving.

One time during the summer, we were having it tough, well we kind of had it tough all of the time, but this guy came and had this big, nice blue and white Oldsmobile and he was talking to my dad, and he told the guy that this guy here (me) can show you where all of the good places to fish are and I would guide and take him fishing on the Beaver, Two Medicine or Little Badger creeks. This guy would throw his fish back after he'd catch them, and he must have seen me looking at him and he asked me what I was thinking. I told him why do you fish if you throw them back? He explained to me it was for sport. I only understood if you fished you were doing it to eat them.

Somewhere embedded in my mind was that we fished to eat them and not throw them back.



Elder David Striped Wolf, Kainai First Nation (Blood Tribe)

I'm from the fish eaters (clan). My neighbors were the Fish Eaters.

My clan is Iskinaak simiiys (the water they drink has a lot of insects in it). My neighbors are also known as lissootapii (live close to the river).

All of the creeks that flow down have fish, insects and ants. The old people taught us not to kill them because they are important to the earth.

I heard the Fish Eater clan got their name because their leaders talked really good. The fish, that's how their mouths move, that's why they talk really good. Buffalo Bull Back Fat, the first leader from Fish Eater clan and Red Crow were real smooth talkers which is why they became leaders.



Elder Clarence Wolf Leg, Siksika Nation



There's so much that can be told about other relationships with this beautiful being called 'maamii,' the fish.

When we look at the fish, the fish is a very important within our waterways because it also tells the Blackfoot people how that river, what kind of life, what kind of ecosystem is going to come back and the type of fish that used to populate the waterways, such as the Bow. The relationship of us, the fish, the land, the environment, the old people say you can't ever separate human beings and the land. The fish is something that indicates how healthy that water is. Our relationship with the fish is also dependent on how that environment is going to be.

Fish play a big part in our traditional ceremonies and help us gauge how the ecosystem is evolving over the years. It's a very powerful indicator, especially in the springtime when runoff happens. All the elders, all the traditional people are saying do not let the fish go away because they are a very important indicator of how that water is going to be for future generations.

Fish also showed us how to administer and how to gather sacred medicines of the water. We've had four floods on the Bow River in recent years and a lot of the sacred medicines that are related to the fish and the beings of the water have been affected.

There are changes that have happened and will continue to happen if we do not tell the story of the importance of the fish and the other water beings in our waterways.

The two things that we need in life are water and fire, because those are the essence of how we survive on Mother Earth.

In the old days, the names they gave to the waterways that flowed through our traditional (Blackfoot) territory and converged down in the south past the medicine line (international boundary), all those rivers were referred to as “Oomksikimmii” (lakes) and “Niithhtaa” (rivers). In a lot of the creation stories, they talk about how those rivers and those people, how this land was created. The Blackfoot people have always travelled close to waterways because that is where all the most powerful medicine plants grow, and the trees they use for the ceremonial lodges, like the sweat lodges and the Sundance lodge. Like the water itself is a very living being that was put on Mother Earth, the rocks, the trees, all the medicines, the animals, the birds. Everything, even the insects that run along the ground.

When you approach the waterways, you always offer the tobacco, and you always honor the beings of the water and the fish that are also part of the water environment.

Our traditions say if you're going to use something from the woods, from Mother Earth, the water, offer something, ask for it and don't take too much, just take what you need and thank those beings for sacrificing their environment, and also their being to let you survive.

Elder Wilfred Yellow Wings, Piikani Nation

My Blackfoot name is "Naamawatsikasii" (meaning "courageous to try something out"). My English name is Wilfred Yellow Wings. I am 83 years old. I was raised by Billy Strikes with a Gun and his Blackfoot name was "Oomahhkookoyi - Big Wolf."

My father was an avid fisherman. My father would ask his relatives where the good fishing places were on the Blackfeet Reservation? He would go fishing and what he caught, he would prepare it for all of us to eat.

There is a story of our ancestors who tell us how they would set up along the water way to dam the fish, they would weave willow sticks together and used them to scoop up the fishes out of these dams. There were no hooks or fish lines at that time.

The Crowsnest River, the Oldman River, the Castle River and Waterton Lakes are four places where our ancestors got their ceremonial paint from.

The creeks that flow out of the hills were very important to our people. They would camp near the river where there was water, trees for shelter and wood for fire.

Where the three rivers meet is a buffalo jump, this place was a winter campground, the people that followed would trap, hunt and fish in this place.

Story of Napi's Playground - this is the time there was a man that came from the west. Napi thought he was leader in his community. He asked the man where he came from, and he said from the big water (ocean). Napi told the man he came from where they had a lot of dry meat and was bragging. Napi was envious of the mountains where the man came from. Napi wanted a challenge for the mountains and rivers. The man thought the man was a sharpshooter. They had a target they shot at with a bow and arrow and a spear. Napi won the game with the bow and arrow and the man won the spear contest. They both won one game and there wasn't a winner. So, they chewed some gum from a pine tree as another game and Napi won that game. Napi chewed the pine gum faster and stuck it back on the tree. Napi won the contest. He told the man they would split the rivers. The man could take all of the plants and animals on the west and Napi would take all of the plants and animals to the east. This is why they call that



place Where Napi Plays (Napi's Playground), where the rivers divide. The man came from the people we call the Kootenai and where there is salmon.