

Treaty Fishing: SO MUCH MORE THAN A GREEN JOB

photos: Robin Tress

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When we think about a green job, we might first imagine a renewable energy tradesperson. And for sure, the work to build more energy-efficiency and clean renewable energy is a crucial piece of the work needed to help us transition to a just, low-carbon society.

But a green economy also needs teachers, farmers, fishers, artists, community builders and caregivers to lead us on the way to building this just future. While some of these green jobs are technological and innovative, other folks are fighting to continue to practice their ancestral green livelihoods.

Marilyn Leigh Francis and her nephews Sekewa't, Oeligisgag, and Gesaltingawei are Mi'kmaq rights holders who fish in Saint Mary's Bay. Their gear has adapted with the times, but their practice of stewarding life in the Bay as they provide for their families and community dates back thousands of years. Marilyn Leigh's hard work is much more than a job. And safeguarding and supporting her right to a livelihood on the water is a vital part of our just future here in unceded Mi'kmaq territory.



What is your name and what do you do?

"I am Marilyn Leigh Francis and I'm an inherent rights fisherwoman."

What's your work like day to day?

"It can be pretty different day to day but for the most part we wake up, we get our bait, we get our fuels, we get everything going on the water, we fish our gear, and we come in. Sometimes we sell lobster to the locals.

"We've been doing it for such a long time, it's a way of life. It's not so much like a job. It just feels good for us to do it and it makes us feel close. My spirit name is Gagamit Kiwnik and that means Standing Otter. I'm a salt water otter, so I really feel drawn to the water. I love being with it, I love being in it, I love being on it, around it, so fishing is like a lifestyle for us and I think it's something we'll do until we can't."

How do you see yourself as part of the green economy here in Nova Scotia?

"We really try to take care of the water. And I think it's important that if you're on the water, if you're fishing in the water, if you're diving in the water, if you're swimming on the water, that you try your best to maintain it. I think it's important that we try to keep our water as clean as possible because it's affecting everybody, not just us. It's affecting our sea life, it's affecting our seaweeds, it's affecting our plants and our microorganisms and all these things. If we don't take care of it now we're not going to have it.

"We can do this as people of this land. And I'm not just talking about Native people. I'm talking people in general. It's our job. I think as humans, it is our duty to ensure that future generations still have this and that they don't have to worry about where they are going to get their resources."

And what are you most excited about in this work?

"Being on the water is the thing that makes me feel really good. I'm providing for my family, and helping provide for more families. We give thanks. We make offerings. We do things the right way. And I genuinely love fishing. I love being with my nephews, my family.

"My nephews, they're amazing. I really try to give them the best of what I know. That way they're prepared to make sound choices when they are old enough. I want them to have a better chance than I did. I want their lives to have meaning, to have purpose, like all L'nus. To take care of people, to take care of everything.

"[And] I think it is important for L'nu to assert our treaties and inherent rights because if we don't, we're not going to be able to

hunt, fish, and take care of our families. It would be like going back to when we had to get the okay to leave the reserve. People forget that even 50 years ago we had to get permission from the Canadian government to leave the reserve and go into a town."

What do you mean by inherent rights and treaty rights?

"My inherent right wasn't given to me by government or by a chief and council. It was given to me by my parents, it was passed on to me through my bloodline. Treaty was put in place to protect the inherent right. The inherent right that we have—the one that I fish by—is protected by the Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1752. That's about being able to fish and live without hindrance.

"It is everything because it gives me the right to protect you. To protect anyone within our territory. It's not just for L'nu people. Without it the L'nu people of L'nuacadie (Turtle Island) won't be allowed to do what we came to this earth to do, which is protect Mother Earth. Which is protect the water, the animals, the birds, protect the people.

"And now they want to give us a hard time because of a 'moderate livelihood.' Our people and our elders sat down and they made these agreements. I don't think they thought that our own people would have to defend the meaning of a moderate livelihood. Because to me a moderate livelihood is somebody's ability to live a good, safe, healthy life. There's no price tag on that."

Any advice for others who might want to do this work?

"As L'nu people we have our right to be our own sovereign individuals. For us to be able to be L'nu. I want to be able to be safe. I want for my family to be safe. I want people to be able to fish so our families can survive. A lot of our L'nu people are on social assistance and struggle with poverty. And it's not a choice they made themselves—it was forced on them. And we have our own resources within our own territory that could stop a lot of these problems.

"We have young people taking their lives because they don't know anything else. We have a lot of young people who are suffering bad addictions. They can come out here and do good hard work and take that work home to their family and feel good about what they've done. They can feel good about putting food on their table and clothes on their backs and letting their children sleep in a safe home.

"When L'nu people swore to protect Turtle Island, and their territory, it includes the people in the territory, native and non-native alike. But we can't do that if we can't first do what we need to do. Like my son says, 'We can travel together if we stay in our lanes. There will be no accidents. But right now, people are trying to push us off of the road, and that's not safe for anybody.'"

Sadie Beaton and **Laura Cutmore** are really grateful for the time they got to spend with Marilyn Leigh, Sekewa't, Oeligisgag, and Gesaltingawei Francis. The interview has been condensed and edited for clarity. Pre-order your 2019 Green Jobs Calendar for more stories of folks in Nova Scotia leading the way for our green economy at ecologyaction.ca/greenjobscalendar