

## SPECIES AT RISK MANAGEMENT:

# WISQOQ

### WISQOQ: A TREE AT THE ROOT OF MI'KMAQ FAMILY LIFE

At the heart of the Mi'kmaq First Nation people, the black ash tree, or wisqoq, has been carefully harvested for generations and is a cultural cornerstone species. The Mi'kmaq use the trees in traditional basket making and also use the supple rings of this hardwood tree for making canoes, tools, a percussion instrument (ji'kmaqnn), snowshoes, a variety of medicinal uses and to trade for currency. Most importantly, it has cultural significance through the passing of knowledge and stories from one generation to the next.

### LOSS OF TREES SHAKES THE ROOTS OF A CULTURE

A convergence of different factors has dangerously dwindled the wisqoq population in Canada: loss of habitat and alteration of crucial wetlands and riverbanks, historical and current harvesting for crafts and cooperage, and the non-competitive nature of the tree itself. The Emerald Ash Borer, discovered in Bedford, NS in 2019, is quickly decimating ash trees in Quebec and Ontario, and now poses a threat to Nova Scotia wisqoq. New ways to identify, grow and protect the trees are needed.



Black Ash or wisqoq bark



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### PLANTING A SEED FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Annual seed collection is a key to conservation and future planting efforts. Locating and identifying seed bearing trees will help create a path for Mi'kmaq community members to become stewards of their cultural livelihood. Positive outcomes for all Mi'kmaq communities include:

- Learning about the ecological and cultural significance of the wisqoq.
- Receiving trees and becoming new stewards for the continuation of these trees.
- Learning to grow trees in a way that they can be monitored and protected from threats.
- Strengthening the community's relationship to the wisqoq.



A new wisqoq stand is recently visited by Mi'kmaq Elders and representatives, government, and Port Hawkesbury Paper





## 20 YEARS OF RECOVERY AND ACTION

In the early 2000s, forestry staff from the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq (CMM) and the Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources (UINR) created a comprehensive plan to collect and grow wisqoq (black ash) from seed. CMM and UINR partnered with Scott and Stewart Forestry Consultants to germinate and grow the wisqoq seeds collected for distribution to Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq communities. *As a result of this early work, UINR distributed a limited amount of wisqoq to the five Unama'ki Mi'kmaw communities for their use in 2006.*

Wisqoq was listed as a Species-at-Risk in 2013, and by 2015 a Recovery Team was formed. A Recovery and Action Plan was developed through collaboration among many rightsholders, organizations, communities, and government.



## A NEW STAND OF WISQOQ IS FOUND

This spring, a stand of wisqoq was discovered by a Port Hawkesbury Paper mill employee during a routine survey of a 19.8-hectare area of forest. This newly uncovered stand is significant because it is a cluster of trees, and there is evidence of seed-bearing trees, which indicates male and female trees in the area. Most known wisqoq populations in Cape Breton are reproducing by stump sprouts, not seed. Other trees easily out-compete wisqoq trees, but the large diameters of some trees indicate that they are mature and not suppressed. Next, a formal survey of the property will be completed to determine if more trees are present and create a plan to protect the current stand.

## CONSERVING WISQOQ AS A CULTURAL CORNERSTONE SPECIES

Currently, there are a number of wisqoq seedlings growing and being stewarded in the Millbrook Greenhouse, under the care of CMM staff. These seedlings have been growing for close to a decade and are outgrowing their current location in the greenhouse.

The adopt-a-wisqoq initiative will see these seedlings distributed between all eight mainland Mi'kmaq communities. CMM staff will provide any requested education and information to communities about proper care and protection, threats and ecological and cultural significance of the trees. CMM staff will also support the planting process and work with each community to plan for their needs.

Due to a history of deer browse on seedlings, CMM partnered with the NS Provincial Forest Nursery in Strathlorne to protect and grow 100 of the seedlings to a 5 ft height to reduce mortality risk. The plan is to relocate them to a permanent location in the Annapolis Valley to establish a seed tree orchard to protect the trees and have an easily accessible seed source for future recovery efforts.

## THE NATURE OF PARTNERSHIP

The key to preserving the species is through partnerships like the one between Port Hawkesbury Paper, Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq, Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources and the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables. The employment of skilled forestry workers and contractors who can identify culturally significant trees and initiate the conservation process is crucial, along with educating the public and others who work and spend time in the forests.

To learn more about the wisqoq tree or how to identify it, please visit <http://wisqoq.ca/>