

Northwest Coast Fishing



Among the Indians in the Pacific Northwest, fishing was a real big deal. They gathered many kinds of fish from high seas, inland salt waters, rivers, and lakes. Through out the year, they fished for salmon, steelhead, halibut, cod, flounder, ling cod, rockfish, herring, smelt, eulachon, dogfish, trout, king, ect. Some tribes, like the Makah even hunted whales from their dugout canoes. The Indians utilized a wide variety of fishing techniques to take fish from nearly every type of whereabouts where fish were present. The **fishing methods** changed according to the locale, but mostly it included trapping, dip-netting, gill-netting, reef-netting, trolling, long-lining, jigging, set-lining, impounding, gaffing, spearing, harpooning, raking, and so many other things.

In a native community, excess food could be converted into wealth; for example they could trade food for canoes, blankets, slaves, and shell ornaments. Smoked or dried salmon was easily stored and transported to other people. Many kinds of salmon were traded in the Puget Sound area and even across the Cascade Mountains. The fish provided lots of protein, fat, vitamins, and minerals in the native diet.

All the Indians in the Pacific Northwest had many rituals and ceremonies dealing with salmon and salmon fishing. One of the ceremonies was called the **First Salmon Ceremony**. In this ceremony the tribes used to cut up the salmon in a special way and then different tribes did different things with it. Another practice was to name the **constellations** and stars in the sky after the fish and fishing gear. Other rituals and ceremonies related directly to fishing equipment and techniques.

Lots of available evidence suggests that Indian fishing increased during the pretreaty decade for three important reasons. The first reason was to serve increased demands for local, non-Indian consumption and exportation. The second reason was to provide money for purchases of introduced merchandise like calico, flour, and molasses. The third reason was to obtain non-Indian goods because the native products were no longer available due to the non-Indian movement into the area.

Salmon was so important to the Indians that they had treaties so that they could keep fishing after they became part of the United States. The **Stevens Treaties** were signed with the Indians in Washington State during the mid-19th century. Part of each treaty dealt with the Indians right to continue fishing.

Article 5. "The right of taking fish at usual and accustomed grounds and stations is further secured to said Indians in common with all citizens of the Territory, and of erecting temporary houses for the purpose of curing, together with the privilege of hunting and gathering roots and berries on open and unclaimed lands. Provided, however That they shall not take shell-fish from any beds staked or cultivated by citizens."

Today these treaties are still observed, but there are many problems. Fishing for salmon today is still important to the Native Americans who live here in the United States. Many Indians now are working in the fishing industry because they love fishing so much. Some Indians still practice the First Salmon Ceremony and other rituals today.