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The Tlingit Way: How to Treat Salmon

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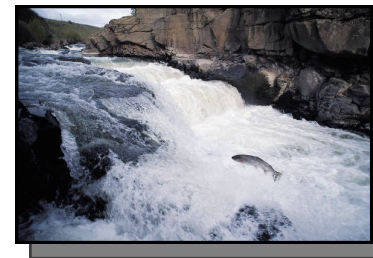
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moved around so they would not spoil, and had to be checked to see if they were drying evenly all the way through.

After about a week the smoking would be finished, and the women would take their fish down from the sticks. They stacked the dried fish together, packed them all between two boards, and put them in a wooden box. The fish were stored in the box until later in the year when the family was ready to eat them.

And that's the way it used to be!



fish for her family. That way, she could tell which fish were hers after they were dried along with everyone else's salmon in the big smokehouse. She saved the fish eggs to dry or smoke.

The women were very careful to take care of the bones, head and guts of the salmon. In some parts of **Lingit Aanee**, the women burned all of the left-over parts of the salmon after they cleaned it. In other areas, they threw them into the stream. This was one of the things which the salmon demanded of human beings. Otherwise, the fish would not be reborn and the people would starve.

There was usually one big smokehouse at summer fish camp. Sometimes people lived in the smokehouse, and other times they lived in tents or small huts and only used the smokehouse for drying fish. The door of the smokehouse faced the river or stream. Sticks to hold the drying salmon hung across the house, in the same direction as the river. When a woman put her salmon on these sticks, she made sure that the front end of the salmon was heading upstream.

The fire for smoking the fish was made of alder wood and cotton wood. It was not allowed to get too hot, because then the fish would cook and the meat would fall off the skins into the fire. Every night the fire was smothered, and every morning it was started again. The women had to pay close attention to the salmon they were smoking. The fish had to be

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Vocabulary

- good will
- weirs
- barricade
- harpoon
- silty
- glacial stream
- gaff hook
- dipnets
- Lingit Aanee

"Why did I kill that fish?

I need it to eat.

My family at home is hungry--

I didn't kill it for nothing.

Forgive me."

Preparing Salmon

The women liked to be together when they were cleaning and smoking salmon. They stayed close to the campsite, and talked and laughed as they worked. They had to work quickly to clean the fish before they spoiled. The children helped them--some helped to clean fish, others helped by babysitting for their younger brothers and sisters.

Each woman had a large cutting board made of cedar or spruce wood for cleaning the fish. She put this on the ground, and put the fish she was going to clean on the board with its head pointed upstream. The fish's head always had to point upstream, for at the head of the stream it would spawn, and its soul would be born again in the body of another fish. The woman herself sat on the ground facing downstream, with her side, not her face, towards the water.

To clean the fish, the woman would cut off its head and make a cut down the fish's belly to clean the guts out. Then she cut the fish almost in two along the backbone and pulled the backbone and ribs out. She cut slits in a special pattern in the meat. Each woman cut her own special design in the

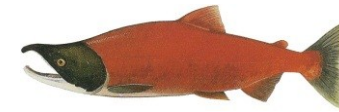
When a salmon was harpooned, the fisherman held on to the rope. The harpoon head came loose from the handle, and stuck in the salmon. The fisherman let the salmon swim around on the end of the rope, and when it became tired, the man pulled the fish to shore.

If the men were fishing in a **silty glacial stream** and couldn't see anything in the water, they used a long **gaff hook** to catch the salmon. The handle of the gaff hook was made of a straight stick, and the hook was made of sharpened bone. Sometimes, the men used large **dip nets** for catching salmon.

In the streams with heavy salmon runs, the fishermen used large fish traps for catching salmon. They would catch more salmon this way than any other. The traps were made of pieces of wood which were lashed together by spruce roots. The men collected the wood, and the women gathered the spruce roots. The men built the trap. Then they placed it across the stream with the opening facing downstream. As the salmon swam upstream to their spawning grounds, they were guided to the opening of the trap. They swam into it, but could not find their way out. When the trap was full, it was hauled out of the water and the salmon were taken to the women to clean.

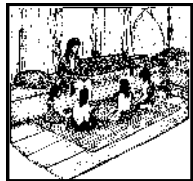
After a man caught a salmon, he sang to it, explaining why he had killed it. The song might say something like this:

Most Alaskans fish for salmon, now and then, and most people like to eat it. But in the old days, the Tlingits used to fish for salmon all summer long and into the fall, and they caught enough to last them through the winter. They ate salmon for almost every meal.



Since salmon were so important to the Tlingits, the people wanted to make sure they would catch enough in the summer and fall to last them through the year. They felt that it was not enough to have good aim with a salmon harpoon, or to be able to build a salmon trap just the right size and strength to hold salmon. They thought those skills were important, but they felt that skills alone would not catch salmon. They believed that salmon allowed themselves to be caught only if they wanted to be caught--so the really good fisherman was the person who knew how to treat fish well and keep **good will** between human beings and salmon. Most important, a good fisherman understood that salmon must not be insulted or angered--for if the salmon were insulted, they would never return to the streams where they were born, and the people would starve.

This story tells some of the special ways the Tlingits treated salmon, and some of the ways they knew to avoid insulting the salmon. These were things that all children had to learn when they were growing up. The children learned by watching and listening to their parents and uncles and aunts and grandparents, and they remembered everything that these relatives told them. They had to--it was a matter of life and death! Then, when the children grew up, they passed on all these rules, and many more, to their own children.



This is the way it used to be:

In the summer, all the clans headed for fish camp, each clan going to the fishing grounds and stream that it owned. A clan often owned more than one good salmon stream, so the members of the clan would split up. Some men took their families to one stream; others took their families to another stream.



Once a group of clansmen and their families arrived at fish camp and had set up tents and arranged their belongings, they helped each other build salmon traps and **weirs** and put up nets across the openings of streams. Then they all fished together, but each man kept the fish he caught for his own family. And each woman cleaned and dried the fish her husband caught for their family.

That is the way it used to be: the family needed the man to catch the fish; and it needed the woman to prepare the fish.

Catching Salmon

In the old days, only the men caught salmon. Women were not allowed to come close to the water when salmon were running. This was one way people showed respect for salmon.

The men knew lots of different ways to catch salmon. Here are some of them: If the men were fishing in a clear stream or river, they might build a **barricade** of sticks (called a weir) across the stream to keep the salmon from swimming upstream. They stood on the banks of the river and threw a long spear called a **harpoon** to catch the salmon.

The harpoon head was made of bone. It rested in a notch at the end of the wooded spear handle. A rope made of spruce roots or kelp was tied to the harpoon head at one end and to the handle at the other.