Relationships to the Land

The history of the First Nations people in British Columbia is as rooted in the land as are the great trees of the forests. Although the First Nations of the province are many and diverse, they have at least one thing in common: they have an enduring relationship with the land, a bond so strong that it defines who they are.

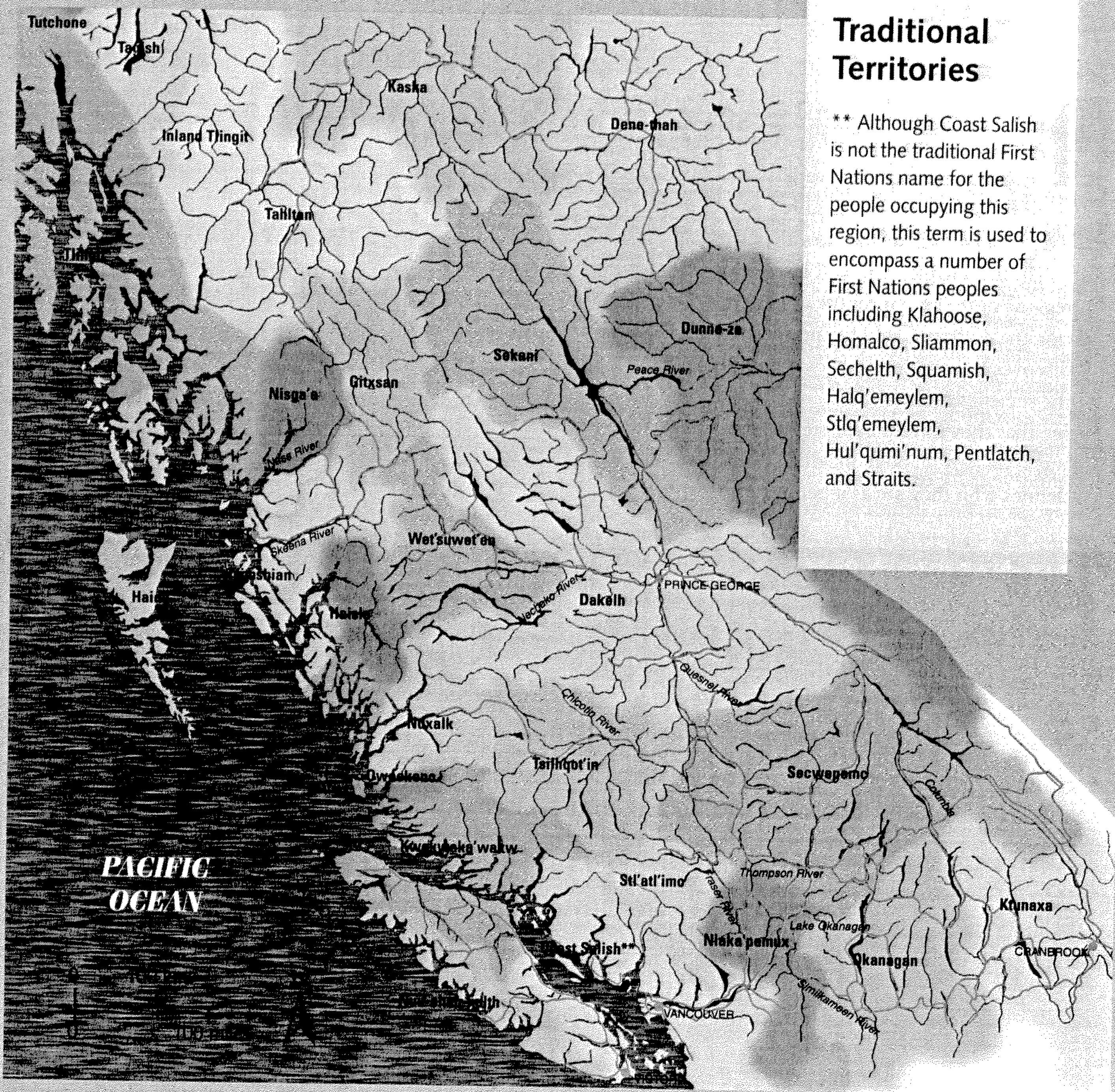
In general, Western society views the ownership of land and resources as an individual right. Property or land ownership is based on the right to purchase land, holding it in what is termed fee simple, that is, owning land that can be sold or passed on to inheritors. In practice, some individuals or corporations own land, while others who are landless pay land owners for the right to live on or use the land. In the traditional First Nations view, ownership of land is interpreted in a very different way. It is the extended family, the group, or the community that holds rights to the land, not individuals. There are no landless people in this system, as every member of the community shares in the rights and responsibilities of using and taking care of the land.

Through more than two hundred years of European contact and colonization, the differences in these two views have caused tension and conflict between First Nations people and colonists from other lands. The forces of colonization have threatened the integrated relationship the First Nations have with the land. The First Nations of British Columbia have seen their people marginalized and discriminated against; they have seen oppressive laws attempt to assimilate them; and they have seen their land taken away from them without battle or treaty. Together they have worked to have their title to the land recognized and the loss of the lands compensated for.

Today there are more than two hundred First Nations bands in British Columbia. The continuity of their relationship with their traditional territories has not been broken, despite the pressures put on them. Their oral traditions—the important narratives passed on from generation to generation—reinforce and remind First Nations people of their connection with the land. Today, this connection is still strong, and all across the province, First Nations people return to the land to harvest the same resources as did their ancestors. Of course, some of these resources no longer exist or have been depleted, some of the technologies of production have changed, and now people may travel by speedboat or skidoo to reach their territories. What have not changed are the ties to the land expressed in the oral tradition and verified by modern experiences.

First Nation

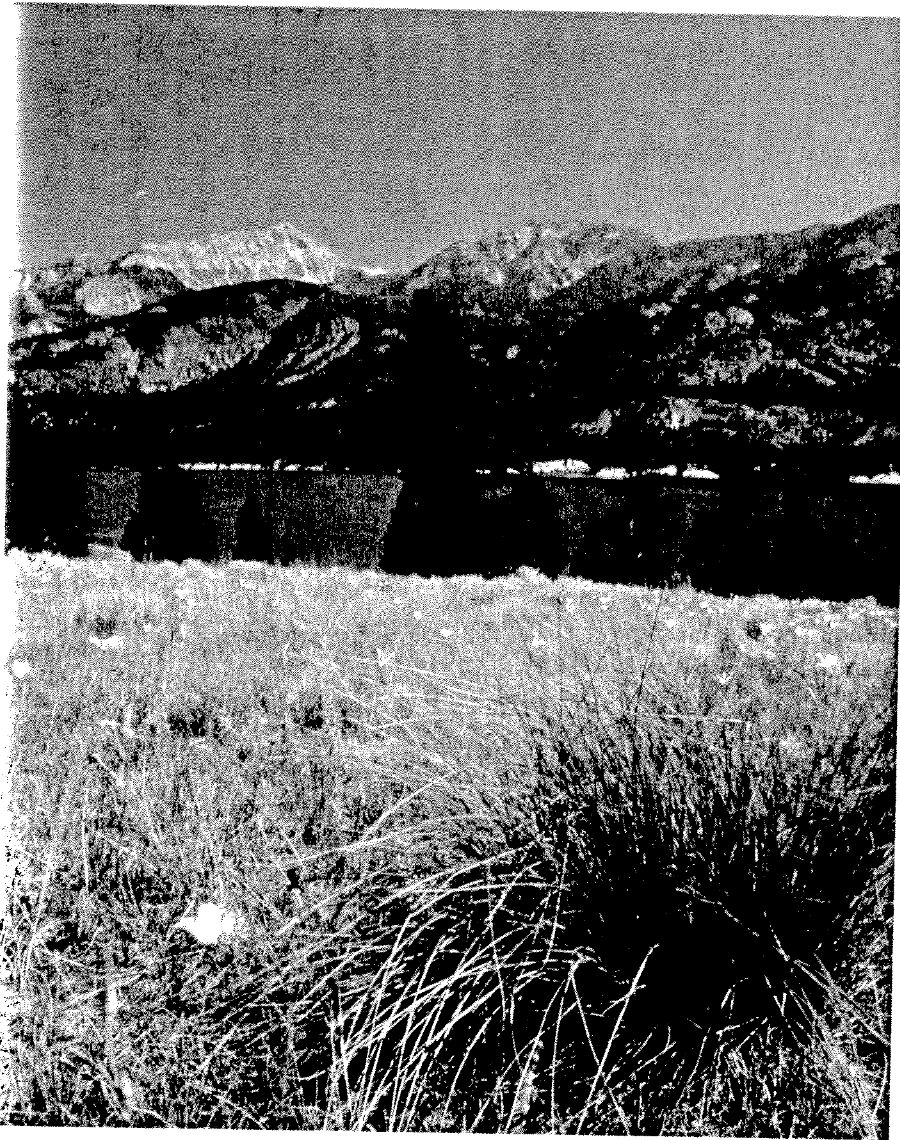
A community of Aboriginal people who identify themselves as a distinct cultural group and who are the descendants of the original inhabitants of the land that is now known as British Columbia. Each First Nation has a name for itself, such as the Stó:lō Nation.



Traditional Territories

** Although Coast Salish is not the traditional First Nations name for the people occupying this region, this term is used to encompass a number of First Nations peoples including Klahoose, Homalco, Sliammon, Sechelth, Squamish, Halq'emeylem, Stlq'emeylem, Hul'qumi'num, Pentlatch, and Straits.

This map shows the traditional territories of the First Nations of British Columbia. The boundaries between the territories are not distinct, indicating that the territories overlap.[1]



Columbia Lake, north of Cranbrook, is in Ktunaxa (Kootenay) territory in southeastern B.C.

also a place of water—of rivers, lakes, channels, and inlets. These waterways, formed by the mountains, define the land and its people. A large part of B.C. is drained by four major river systems: the Fraser, Skeena, Columbia, and Peace. These rivers and their valleys provide living space, transportation routes, and habitat for fish.

Many of the abundant resources found in the province come from the mountains, including forests, food plants, minerals, game, and fur-bearing animals. The waters are equally rich, especially with fish like the Pacific salmon and oolichan. The ocean provides a wide array of food sources, from large sea mammals to small molluscs. Rivers and lakes, too, offer a variety of foods, including fish.

This land and its resources shape the lives of the people who have lived here for thousands of years. The mountains create barriers for people, but they also act as landmarks and natural boundaries. Their peaks and ranges enclose many river systems, both large and small, and these watersheds are a logical way of defining territories. The territories of many First Nations of B.C. are based on the boundaries formed by watersheds.

For thousands of years, First Nations people have inhabited the valleys, plateaus, and coastline of this mountainous land, and they have adapted to the variations in climate, topography, and resources in different ways, resulting in a wide variety of societies. Separate First Nations languages are spoken by distinct groups. Of the sixty First Nations languages in Canada, half are found in British Columbia.

Each First Nation developed a unique relationship with the territory it inhabited. To a large degree, this relationship dictated the social organization and governance system. Generally speaking, interior people

Watershed

All the land drained by a particular river or lake; a drainage basin.

shared many similar features of social organization, as did the people of the coast. Interior societies generally had flexible governing systems, while those on the coast had much more structured governance.

Interior societies were democratic and usually did not have a class system. Family groups associated together to form an identifiable group, sometimes referred to as a band. Their own name for this group usually referred to some feature of their territory. For instance, the Secwepemc people living near Skola'ten (Williams Lake) were the "People of Skola'ten."

Interior groups had a head chief as leader, but usually he acted more as a father or advisor than a powerful ruler. He consulted with the Elders whenever important decisions were made. For some First Nations of the interior, this position was hereditary, usually determined patrilineally; for others, the leader was elected according to his abilities and held a temporary position.

The head chief was not the leader in all activities of the group. The person most qualified, or the one who had been specifically trained, was chosen to direct a particular activity. For instance, the best hunter would lead hunting expeditions; the bravest and most skillful warrior would lead warfare; the greatest orator would deliver speeches.

The people of the coast have many different characteristics, but they share some common features which people who study cultures call the Northwest Coast culture. These societies had strict social codes to follow, with a rigid hierarchy whereby chiefs were ranked in importance, and a class system was made up of chiefs, nobles, commoners, and slaves.

Elder

A person whose wisdom about spirituality, culture, and life is recognized. First Nations people and communities seek the advice and assistance of Elders in various areas of traditional as well as contemporary issues. As a sign of respect for First Nations Elders, the term is often capitalized.

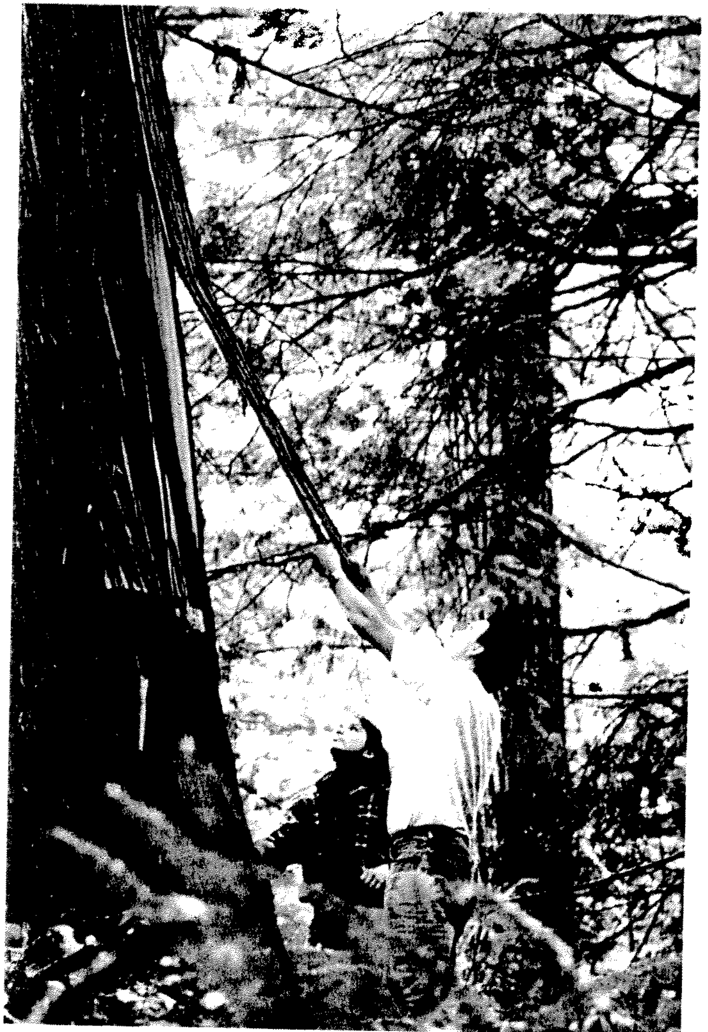
Patrilineally

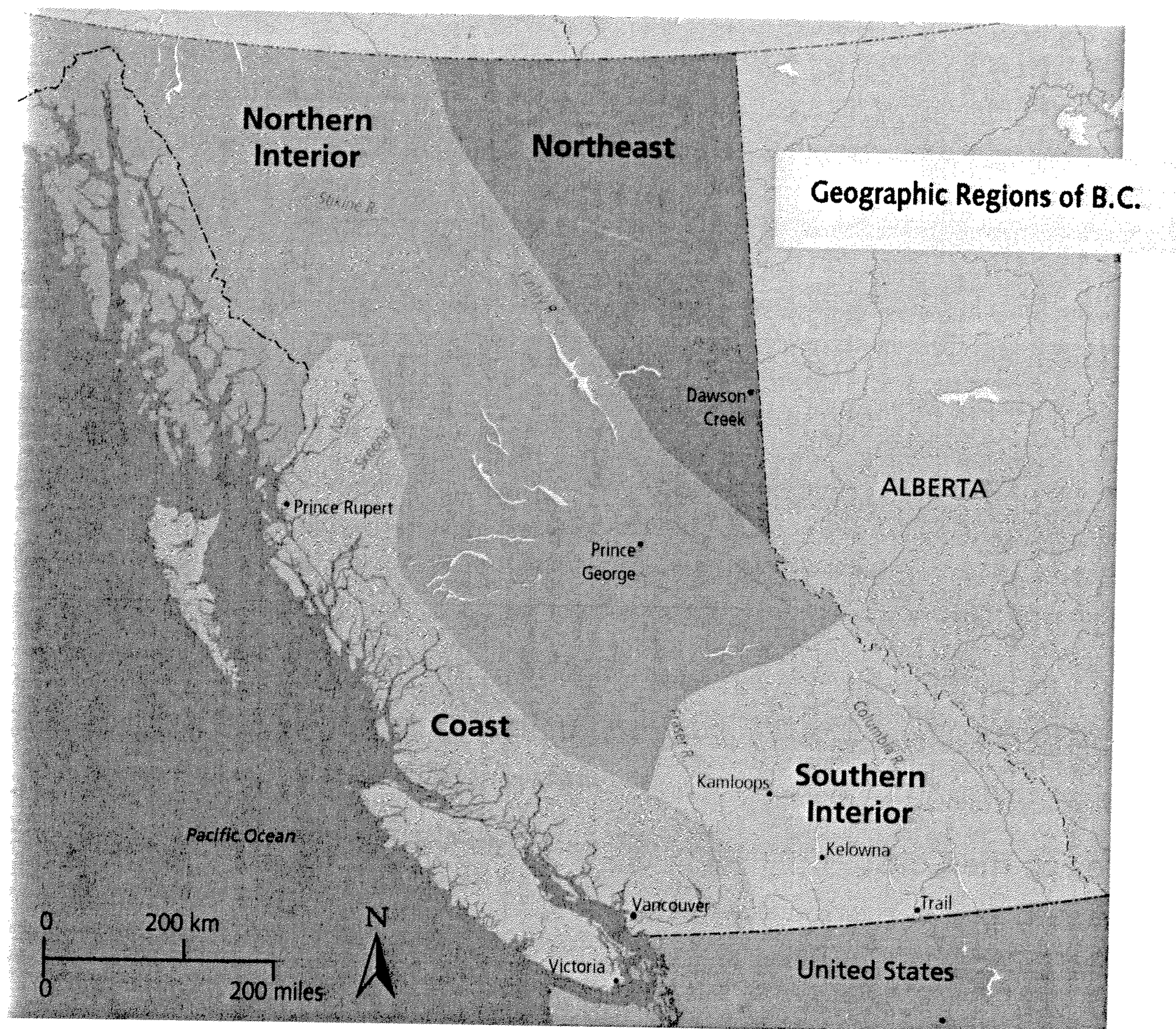
Based on kinship with the father or descent through the male line.

The Regions of B.C.

Many factors influence how people adapt to living in their chosen territories. The latitude, physical geography, climate, and altitude all affect the types of animal and plant resources found in a specific area. They also determine how people will harvest and use these resources. The relationship of the people with their natural world determines where they choose to live and affects how they organize their societies. B.C. can be divided into four broad geographical regions: the coast, the southern interior, the northeast, and the northern interior.

Skill, knowledge, and respect are required to harvest cedar bark from the coastal rainforests.





The Coast

The First Nations people who live on the coast of British Columbia have adapted to a wet, mild climate influenced by the Pacific Ocean. The temperature usually stays above freezing in the winter and below 20° C in the summer. The annual rainfall in some locations is more than 400 cm a year. This results in many cloudy days, and fog often blankets the mountains.

This climate creates ideal conditions for the temperate rain forests which cover the mountain slopes, providing lush vegetation dominated by coniferous trees. The greatest of these trees, the western red cedar, is considered a special gift from nature by First Nations. Its characteristics make it one of the most useful materials available. Bill Reid, the renowned Haida artist, once wrote about the cedar:

> *If mankind in his infancy had prayed for the perfect substance for all material and aesthetic needs, an indulgent God could have provided nothing better.* [2]

On most of the coast, the mountains rise out of the ocean, creating intricate waterways that form a maze of channels, bays, and inlets. Hundreds of

islands, from tiny rock outcroppings to giant Vancouver Island, provide protection from the ocean winds. As well, thousands of rivers and streams rush down the mountains, flowing into the ocean directly, or combining into major rivers such as the Nass, Skeena, Kitimat, Kitlope, Dean, Bella Coola, Klinaklini, Homathko, and Squamish. These and other rivers empty into the ocean at the heads of long, narrow inlets or fjords. Most of these fjords have steep sides with little shoreline, but the head of the inlet flattens out to a floodplain built up of silt carried by the river. The estuaries formed at the juncture of fjord and river create rich habitats for a great deal of wildlife as well as living space for people.

The southern coast, the region that surrounds Georgia Strait, has a different climate and therefore a unique environment. This area lies in the rain shadow of Vancouver Island, including southeast Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands, and the Fraser Valley. Generally it has flatter land and a drier climate, and, consequently, different vegetation.

In the coastal forests, the plentiful cedar was easily split into timbers and planks for buildings, while the bark could be processed in different ways to make strong baskets or soft clothing.

Resources on the Coast

The principal resources on the coast have already been mentioned: from the forest, the cedar, and from the ocean, the salmon and the oolichan. However, there is a great wealth of other resources available in the coastal environment. In the ocean are deep sea fish such as halibut, sole, cod, and red snapper. Herring spawn near the shore in spring, and their roe is considered a delicacy. Along the intertidal zone are shellfish, cockles, clams, mussels, oysters, and abalone. A dark green seaweed growing on exposed rocky shores, known to scientists as porphyra, is another important resource for harvesting. Crab, octopus, and sea cucumber add to the list of foods from the sea.

The thick bushes and shrubs that grow beneath the giant conifers offer a variety of plants, including berries like huckleberry, salal, and salmonberry. A wide range of medicinal plants come from the rainforest, from the licorice fern whose roots are chewed to soothe coughs to the formidable devil's club, which was used to cleanse and purify the body and soul.

The underbrush of the rain forest is an ideal home for fur-bearing mammals and deer. Their meat is a source of food, while their furs, hides, and bones are useful for clothing and tools. Most common are the black bear and the black-tailed deer. Smaller mammals such as river otter, mink, wolverine, and marten

Oolichan

The oolichan (also spelled eulachon) is a small fish important for its oil. It spends adulthood in the ocean and returns to fresh water to spawn in the early spring. It was the first harvest of the year for the First Nations after the winter supplies had been exhausted.

Intertidal zone

An area which is under water at high tide and exposed at low tide.

The Pacific salmon is a key resource in British Columbia. There are five species: sockeye, coho, spring, chum, and pink. The salmon is hatched in the fresh water rivers and streams of the province, makes its way to the ocean where it spends its adult life, then returns to the fresh water to spawn, and complete the cycle.

also inhabit the forest.

The region around Georgia Strait offers a drier and warmer climate, so a greater variety of plants and animals live there. One important plant which grows here but not in the rest of the coast region is the camas bulb. This plant is a member of the lily family, and its egg-shaped bulb is an important source of starch.

People of the Coast

The coast has the greatest number of distinct First Nations in Canada. Nine different First Nations live along the north and central coasts and on the west coast of Vancouver Island: Haida, Tsimshian, Nisga'a, Haisla, Xai-Xais (Hai-Hais), Heiltsuk, Kwakwa̱-ka̱'wakw, Nuxalk, and Nuu-chah-nulth. Along Georgia Strait, on Vancouver Island's east coast and the opposite main-

Salal, a member of the heather family, is one of the most common shrubs in B.C.'s coastal forests, in places forming a dense ground cover. It has evergreen leathery leaves and pinkish bell-shaped flowers followed by deep blue berries. First Nations people eat the berries fresh, boil them into a syrup, or dry them into cakes.

Oolichan processing at Fishery Bay, near the mouth of the Nass River. Thousands of people gathered here in February and March to make the valuable oolichan grease. Oolichan was known as the "saviour fish," because it saved people from starvation. Its rich oil or grease is extremely nutritious and valuable; it is eaten as an accompaniment to many foods, and used as a medicine and preservative.

land, including the Fraser Valley, seventeen different First Nations live. All are members of the Coast Salish language group.

The abundant resources available to the First Nations of the coast and the mild coastal climate resulted in the development of highly structured societies. People had time away from resource gathering to develop complex social and artistic customs.

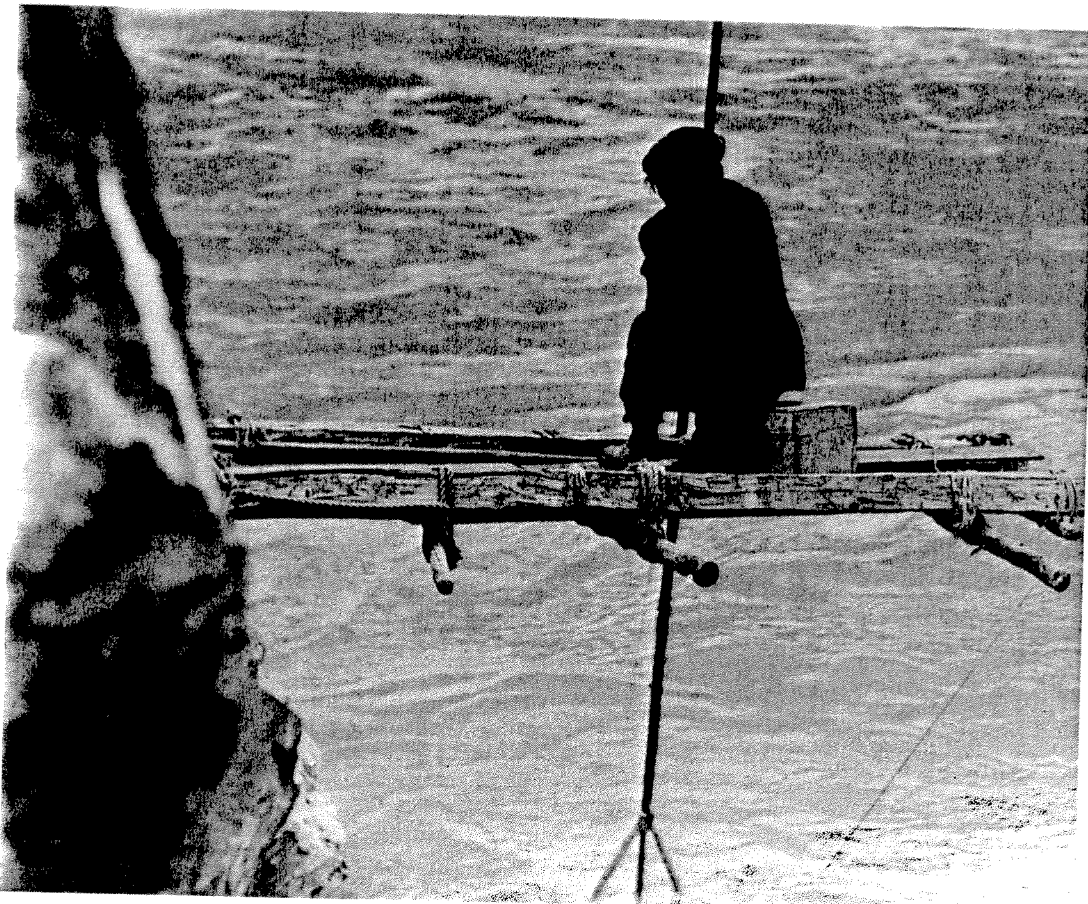
The First Nations of the coast adapted to their ocean-front environment by organizing in resource-use units, generally composed of extended families. Also known as a house group, each resource-use unit had a number of territories that provided resources throughout the year, including salmon fishing grounds, hunting territories, and berry harvesting grounds. Some groups also had oolichan camps, which were usually shared by a number of families. These

Resource-use unit

The resource-use unit is the basic group which has stewardship over the resources in a particular territory. First Nations express this in different ways. For some it may be a family grouping; for others it may be a broader social organization such as a house group.

Extended family

The term extended family usually refers to a large family group of several generations who live and work together. Often it will include several siblings and their families living with parents and perhaps grandparents.



Salmon fishing on the Fraser River. The fisher sits directly above a pool and spears the salmon with the long three-pronged spear. The technology used to build this platform over the river was sophisticated, especially in times before the advent of European materials and tools. Date and location unknown.

seasonal territories were usually close together, depending on local conditions. Each group had a hereditary chief who was responsible for his people and the appropriate use of their territories and resources. A number of these groups were aligned together in collectives often referred to in English as "tribes." They lived together in one large winter village under the leadership of a head or village chief.

Most First Nations on the coast followed similar seasonal patterns, or seasonal rounds, when they moved from location to location as the resources became available. Winters were spent in large villages of as many as thirty cedar longhouses lined up in one or two rows facing the ocean. Feasts, potlatches, and winter ceremonials occupied much of the time spent here.

As spring approached, people moved to various spring resource camps. For many people, this meant congregating in large groups at oolichan processing camps. Many tribes gathered at the mouths of the major oolichan rivers, the Nass, Kemano, Bella Coola, Klinaklini (Knight Inlet), and Fraser. Major trading routes extended from these gathering sites across mountain passes into the interior. As well as oolichan camps, some people went to halibut and seaweed camps or seal camps. By June, the salmon were re-

Seasonal round

Also known as the annual round, this term refers to the pattern of movement from one resource-gathering area to another in a cycle that was followed each year. Spring, summer, and fall saw the people moving to a variety of resource areas while during the harsher winters they gathered in winter villages. The abundance of resources also determined how often people moved. In areas that had a greater abundance and variety, people could stay in one location for longer than in areas where resources were scarcer.

turning, so people spread out to their individual salmon camps. These were at the mouth of a river or sometimes on a lake. People remained at salmon camps until fall. Eventually the cycle was completed as everyone moved back to the winter villages.

This generalized outline of the seasonal rounds varied depending on the resources a group had within its territories. For instance, whale hunting was central to the Nuu-chah-nulth living along the west coast of Vancouver Island. The importance of this resource resulted in cultural patterns, seasonal rounds, and spiritual practices that were different in many ways from other coastal First Nations.

The ownership of each territory was inherited not by individuals but by the extended family group that formed the resource-use unit. Transferring the inherited territorial rights from one generation to the next was the principal purpose of the potlatch. This all-important public ceremony, which combined dances, songs, crest masks, and great quantities of food and many gifts, was the ultimate expression of the coastal people's relationship with the land.

Camas, a member of the lily family, has a blue flower and a sizable bulb that was traditionally a staple food item for First Nations people. Harvested from May to July, the sweet-tasting bulbs were traded as a delicacy.

The Southern Interior

This expansive region covers the southern part of the province, from the eastern slopes of the Coast Mountains to the peaks of the Rocky Mountains. Between these extensive mountain systems is a series of shorter ranges running parallel in a northwest direction, dividing the landscape into a sequence of valleys. Thus are the Okanagan, West Kootenay, and East Kootenay regions formed. A network of rivers and lakes fills the spaces between the mountains. Two great rivers, the Fraser and the Columbia, each have major tributaries such as the Thompson and the Kootenay, which in turn form networks of lakes and tributaries.

The varied landscape creates many different habitats, although most regions have a dry climate with a wide range of seasonal temperatures, making the southern interior the hottest and driest region of B.C. Much of this region is forested, frequently with dry and open forest made up largely of pine, or in wetter areas, with broadleaf deciduous forests. Dry grasslands prevail in the arid lower altitude basins of the Fraser, Thompson, and Okanagan rivers, where it is too dry for trees to grow. In the southern Okanagan Valley the climate is dry enough to be classified as desert. In contrast, the climate and the vegetation on the western mountain slopes in this region are similar to those on the coast. Of course, the winters are much colder so there is more snow than there is on the coast.

Resources in the Southern Interior

There is a great diversity in plant and animal life throughout the southern interior due to the variability of the topography and climate of particular valleys or highlands. Plants were probably used more for food by the First Nations people of this region than in other regions of the province. Some groups are believed to

have had up to half of their diets provided by vegetable foods. Important plants, in addition to berries, were camas bulbs, "wild potatoes" ("Indian" potatoes, *Claytonia lenceolata* or Western Spring Beauty), and in the southern Okanagan, bitter-root (*Lewisia rediviva*). A variety of other plants were also used, such as tree lichen, which was cooked in pits; mushrooms; the inner bark of trees; and nuts like hazelnuts. Some plant products were important trade items, including bitter-root, camas bulbs, Indian hemp fibre, dried berries, and a local form of tobacco.

Salmon and deer were the major animal resources used by the people of the Southern Interior. All the rivers—even though they are hundreds of kilometres from the Pacific Ocean—have runs of salmon that make their way up the Fraser or Columbia River systems. Deer, elk, and moose supplemented the diet, and also provided materials for clothing.

People of the Southern Interior

Most of the First Nations people who live in the southern interior are speakers of Interior Salish languages. There are four such nations. Two, the Nlaka'pamux (previously known as the Thompson) and the St'at'imc (Lillooet) live in the transitional zone between the coastal region and the interior plateau. This mountainous area, in the rain shadow of the Coast Mountains, surrounds the Fraser Canyon and nearby tributaries. The Secwepemc (Shuswap) territory covers a large district from the Fraser River to the Rocky Mountains. The traditional territory of the fourth group, the Okanagan, occupies the Okanagan valley and extends south into what is now the United States. Previously an Athapaskan-speaking people, the Stuwix, lived in the Nicola Valley. Apparently they moved into the area generations ago, perhaps from the Tsilhqot'in. Today they do not exist as a distinct group, having been absorbed by their neighbours, the Nlaka'pamux and the Okanagan.

The Ktunaxa (Kootenay), who live in the south-east corner of the province, speak a language unrelated to any other language in the world. The traditional territories of the Ktunaxa Nation, like those of the Okanagan, existed long before the border was created between Canada and the United States, and extend into what are now the states of Montana and Idaho. Their territories also extended across the Rocky Mountains, and three or four times a year they travelled to the eastern slopes of the Rockies to hunt buffalo.

Because most plants were only ready to harvest at certain predictable times of the year, and salmon returned at about the same time each year, the First Nations of the southern interior had a well-defined seasonal round for resource gathering.

Spring was the time for gathering the green shoots of plants like balsamroot, fireweed, cow parsnip, and "Indian celery." By June, Saskatoon berries are ready for picking, and the wild potato can be dug. In the past, this plant was one of the most important sources of carbohydrates. The round fleshy tubers, dug from shallow soil with a digging stick, grow at higher elevations in grassy slopes, but only in moist areas. People would gather in large numbers where the plant was abundant, such as the Potato Mountains near Lytton. Some First Nations people replanted their wild potato meadows to ensure a crop the following year.

By August, the salmon began to appear in the rivers, and families gathered at their various salmon camps to harvest and dry the fish for their winter supplies. Summer lodges were built of a framework of poles covered with tule mats. In the fall, hunting for deer, elk, caribou, bear, mountain goat, and beaver became the main activity.

Most winter villages were built in the lowlands beside major rivers or lakes, where it was somewhat warmer than in the highlands. The people built unique pit houses, highly adapted to the land and climate.

The Northeast Region

Elk meat is one of many animal resources that First Nations people rely on the land to provide.

The northeast region of British Columbia, which stretches along the Peace River, is separated from the rest of the province by the Rocky Mountains. Indeed, this area has more in common with Alberta to the east or the Northwest Territories to the north than with the rest of B.C. However, defined as it is today by the natural boundary of the mountains and the human boundaries of provincial borders, it is a unique region composed of three different, overlapping landscapes: the foothills of the Rockies, the muskeg of the north, and the prairies of the east. This region is a rich hunting ground for large mammals such as moose, elk, caribou, and deer.

The northeast region of British Columbia covers two different ecosystems, the Boreal Plains and the Boreal Taiga. The Boreal Plains district is the western tip of a large area of plateaus, plains, and lowlands that extends eastward across northern Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, and the southern Northwest Territories. It is generally flat, except where large rivers have cut into the earth, forming steep-sided banks. The continental climate creates a wide seasonal temperature range, with summer highs rising to about 20°C and winter lows averaging around –20°C, although record colds have dipped to nearly –50°C. The Peace River lowlands region which takes in the Peace River watershed has a milder climate than the rest of the region, with less snowfall.

The Boreal Taiga lies north of the Boreal Plains. It is made up of expansive muskeg lowlands drained by the Liard River watershed, which eventually joins the Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories. Here the temperatures are extreme. Cold Arctic air contributes to long, frigid winters. The summer weather is affected by the meeting of Arctic and Pacific air masses, and, while temperatures can get as high as 36°C, there can be unstable weather with a heavy cloud cover.

The rivers that begin in the Rocky Mountains etch their way across the rolling hills and prairie. Three major tributaries of the Peace River—the Omineca, Finlay, and Parsnip rivers—are deep in the mountains, breaking through the Rockies in a narrow pass near

Muskeg
A swamp or bog, consisting of a mixture of water and partially decomposed vegetation, often covered by a layer of sphagnum or other mosses.

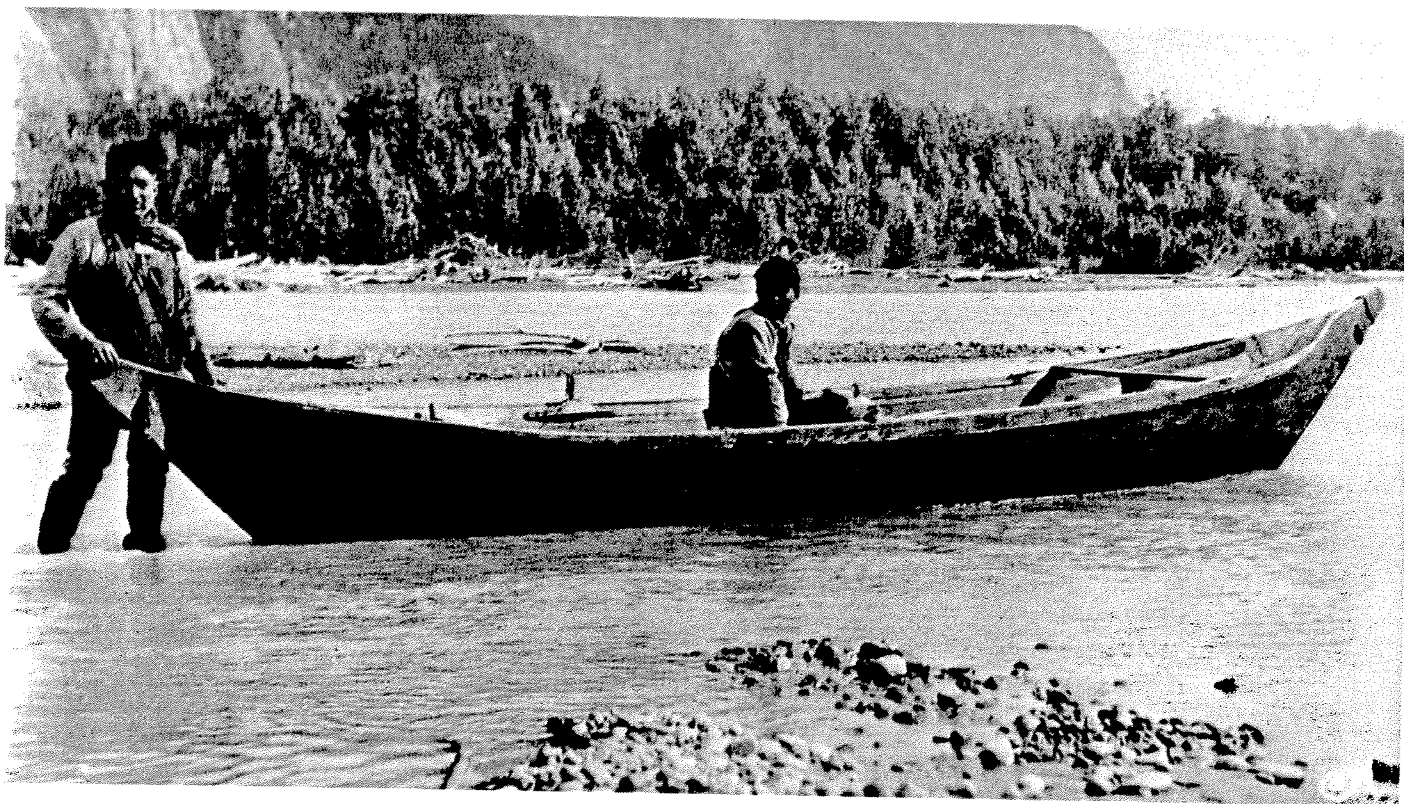
present-day Hudson's Hope. The Pine River forms a more southerly passage through the mountains, providing an age-old transportation route for First Nations people. Today a highway and an oil pipeline cross through Pine Pass. Once the Peace River reaches the foothills and plains, it widens out and cuts into the earth. The northern section of the Boreal Taiga is drained by the Liard River.

Resources of the Northeast

The northeast region is laced with rivers and streams which join the Peace or the Liard river, but these are Arctic rivers and salmon do not live in them. The richest resource for people living here is the wealth of large mammals. This area has the greatest density of moose in the world. Mule deer abound, as do caribou, elk, grizzly, and black bear. Beaver find the perfect habitat in the myriad lakes and streams of the muskeg. On the plains, wood bison once lived, though they no longer do. Many other smaller animals and fish species such as Arctic grayling, trout, whitefish, and northern pike add to the resources of the region.

People of the Northeast

The people who traditionally inhabited this region belong to the Athapaskan language family, which was spoken from Alaska to the southwest United States. Three Athapaskan-speaking groups lived in the northeast region. Farthest north was the southern limit of the E'cho Dene or Slavey people's territories. Their large territories in the Mackenzie River watershed included parts of the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and northern Alberta. The Dunne-za (previously known as the Beaver) inhabited the foothills and forests between the Liard and Peace rivers. In the mountainous regions to the south were the Sekani people.



A northern-style canoe on the Taku River.

The First Nations people of the northeast traditionally led highly mobile lives. Moose was their principal resource. The Dunne-za also hunted or snared rabbits, beaver, bear, muskrats, and marmots for food and furs. Other large mammals—elk, caribou, and wood buffalo—were hunted when available. Birds like grouse, ducks, and geese added to the diet, as did fish. While meat made up a large part of their diet, a wide variety of berries such as chokecherries, huckleberries, and saskatoons were harvested, as were some roots.

The Northern Interior

The northern interior covers a large part of British Columbia, and also extends into the Yukon territory. The environment of the northern interior is similar to most of northern Canada, being part of the great Boreal Forest which stretches across the continent as far as Newfoundland. Spruce and fir dominate in an area where the climate is cold and precipitation is low. Because the climate is harsh, there is less diversity of plants here and fewer people live in this region than in the rest of the province.

An abundance of fur-bearing animals in the northern interior led the people to develop skills in making clothing from furs. This young woman, photographed around 1897 in Hagwilget Canyon, is weaving lynx strips.

The land of the northern interior is made up of mountains and plateaus, interspersed with many lakes. Due to the low evaporation rate of water in the cold climate, the soil is often very moist where poorly drained, resulting in large expanses of muskeg or peat bogs.

The central area of this region lies east of the Coast Mountains and stretches from the rolling lands of the Chilcotin and Cariboo Plateaus to the southern two-thirds of the Nechako Plateau. This area has a typical continental climate with cold winters and warm summers. It lies in a rain shadow of the Coast Mountains. Two major river systems, the Fraser and the Skeena, drain this region, providing abundant quantities of Pacific salmon.

North of the central plateaus, the boreal region extends across the province to the Rocky Mountains and north into the Yukon. The plateaus of the southern sections give way to a more mountainous terrain, punctuated with a series of wide valleys and lowlands.

Resources of the Northern Interior

The vast northern interior, with its harsher climate, generally has fewer resources available than the more southern regions. Moose are the most widespread member of the deer family throughout the northern interior. Caribou are common in the northern areas, while mule deer occur in large populations in the southern plateaus. Cougars, black bears, coyotes, and wolves are also common. Many smaller fur-bearing animals are found, including lynx, fisher, muskrat, marten, and mink. Beaver thrive in the many ponds and lakes of the region and porcupines abound.

People of the Northern Interior

Most of the First Nations in the northern interior belong to the very large Athapaskan language family. In the Yukon Territory, seven languages from the Athapaskan family are spoken: Gwich'in, Han, Kaska, Northern Tutchone, Southern Tutchone, Tagish, and Upper Tanana. Inland Tlingit is spoken in northwestern British Columbia and southern Yukon. Tlingit, also spoken in this area, is very distantly related to the Athapaskan language family.

The Athapaskan-speaking people living in most of the northern interior are known as Yinka Dene, which literally means "the people on the land." In some dialects, the equivalent term Yinka Whut'en is preferred. The Dakelh people, who live throughout most of the central interior, are also known in English as the Carrier.

The Tahltan people live in the Stikine watershed. East of them, on the Upper Skeena River, are the Gitxsan, who occupy lands that are transitional between the ecosystems of the northern interior and the coast. Their language and culture are closely related to the Tsimshian and Nisga'a. Their neighbours to the southeast are the Wet'suwet'en, who are related to the Dakelh people, but have also adapted many aspects of the Northwest Coast culture of the Gitxsan.

In most of the northern interior, people adapted to the harsh climate and more limited resources by developing a very flexible society. The basic social unit was the extended family, which moved about during the year according to the season and the availability of game. Theirs was a mobile society, ready to hunt, fish, and trap to gather resources as they travelled throughout a large territory.

Dakelh society, whose territories extend across the central province from the Bulkley River to the Rocky Mountains, was more structured than some others of the northern interior. Its clan and potlatch system regulated Dakelh resource territories called *keyoh*.

CASE STUDY

How the Kwakwaka'wakw Adapted to their Environment

The Kwakwaka'wakw of northern Vancouver Island and the nearby mainland coast live in a rugged landscape of islands and channels, mountains and inlets. The climate here, like on the rest of the coast, is mild and wet. By looking at the way the Kwakwaka'wakw settled and used their territories, we can see how they adapted to their environment.

Kwakwaka'wakw people in the past did not need to travel great distances to obtain most of the food and materials they required. The mountains made it difficult to travel by land, so cedar canoes were the mainstay of life on the coast.

A wealth of resources from the land and the sea was concentrated in their territories. This region had beaches where shellfish, crab, seaweed, and other intertidal resources thrived. Seals, sea lions, and deep-water fish abounded in the ocean. Along the shore a wide range of trees, bushes, and plants offered wood, berries, shoots, and roots.

More than any other resource, however, salmon were the principal resource for the Kwakwaka'wakw people. Salmon runs in this region were prodigious. Half a million salmon spawned on Gilford Island alone. The Nimpkish River had runs of over a million sockeye and 300,000 coho. In most years people could harvest more than they required for basic subsistence. They stored food for over the winter and still had a surplus to trade. The readily available supply of resources was able to support a relatively high population. As well, it gave the Kwakwaka'wakw, like other First Nations of the coast, the precious commodity of time, which gave rise to highly-evolved technologies and complex social structures.

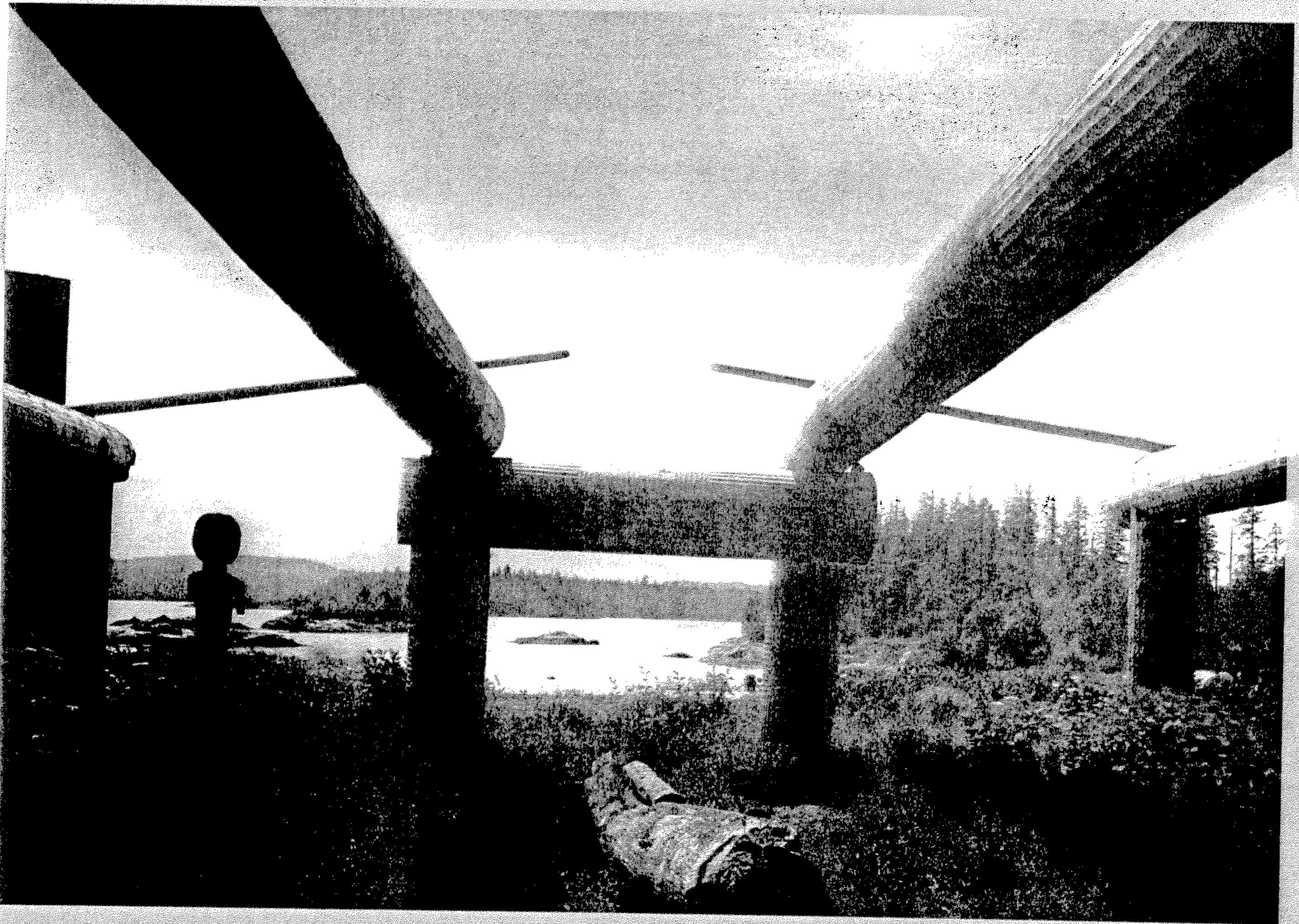
Kwakwaka'wakw people living before Europeans arrived had strict laws to follow. First there were the laws of nature, which dictated the way they interacted with their land. Most of the resources became available at specific times of the year, so the Kwakwaka'wakw people adapted their lifestyle by moving to different sites depending on the season. Their settlement patterns included a variety of resource gathering sites which they returned to year after year.

The other set of laws was their social organization, which developed as an efficient way to manage the resources. Before European contact there were thirty tribes in the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation. Each tribe was made up of a number of resource groups called *numaym*, meaning "one kind." The *numaym* is the central unit of Kwakwaka'wakw society, each with its own resource camps and hunting territories within the tribal territory. As well, each *numaym* has hereditary rights to its own crests and its own narratives, songs, and dances, which are performed at potlatches.

The organizational structure of the *numaym* allowed the resources to be harvested in an efficient manner. Tribal territories were divided into individual areas for each *numaym*. Most of the sites were concentrated within a relatively small range. For example, the Mamalilikulla tribe has traditional territories at the mouth of Knight Inlet, including a number of small islands, sections of larger islands such as Turnour and Gilford, and the northern shore of Knight Inlet. From east to west this is a distance of about 70 kilometres. Within this territory were a variety of resource sites: halibut fishing grounds, salmon rivers, berry grounds, clam beds, and hunting and trapping areas. The Mamalilikulla tribe was made up of eight different *numaym*.

The Kwakwaka'wakw seasonal round had three major periods. First was the winter ceremonial season. About the end of November, members of a tribe's *numaym* gathered together in the tribal winter village. For the Mamalilikulla, this was on Village Island. Great cedar longhouses with painted house fronts and totems standing before them displayed the crests of the chiefs of each *numaym*. Each *numaym* had its own property within the village. At the centre stood the largest house, which belonged to the head chief of the tribe. These massive buildings provided both living space and the arena where potlatches were held. As well as participating in potlatches, people spent part of the winter months creating the many items that were needed both for the coming year's resource gathering and for potlatches. This was the time for weaving cedar mats or crafting bentwood boxes. Canoes could be finished and totem poles or masks carved.

Spring arrived, bringing the second period of the seasonal cycle. Most Kwakwaka'wakw people moved to oolichan fishing camps at the head of Kingcome Inlet or Knight Inlet. The



The distinctive house frame of the Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw people at Mamalilikulla.

Mamalilikulla travelled up Knight Inlet along with members of eight other tribes. They all lived in close quarters along the river banks where they trapped or dip-netted the tiny rich fish. Although the Klinaklini River is in the territory of one tribe, the Tenaktak, it was shared during oolichan season by the others.

People spent the greater part of the year at their individual camps to catch and process salmon. From spring until late fall, the salmon dictated where the people lived. Usually this was at the mouth of a salmon river, where salmon could be trapped in intertidal stone traps or in wooden traps placed across the river. Other activities accompanied this major occupation. Food such as berries and roots could be gathered from areas near the salmon camps as they ripened. Fall activities included hunting and trapping. Much trapping was done along the shore and river banks, while hunting more often took men to the mountains for deer and mountain goat.

You can see how the environment shaped the lives of the Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw. The abundance of salmon and cedar supported a large population. The coastal geography dictated a canoe-based society, allowing people to be highly mobile on the water. The seasonal availability of foods meant people travelled to different sites throughout the year. To efficiently manage the resources, a highly structured political system developed, with the potlatch at its core. This system, hand in hand with the extra time allowed by the abundance of resources, created an artistic tradition that today is one of the most highly regarded in the world.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The great diversity in the geography of what we know today as British Columbia led to an equally great diversity of First Nations societies, each with a unique identity and relationship to the land. The province can be divided into four regions according to the topography, climate, and vegetation: coast, southern interior, northern interior, and northeast. The coast, with its mild climate, is characterized by many inlets and passages bounded by steep mountains and valleys blanketed with lush temperate rain forest. The southern interior, the hottest region in the province, is built from a series of parallel mountain ranges, lakes, and plateaus laced with a network of interconnecting rivers which eventually form the Fraser and the Columbia rivers. The northern interior, the largest region, has a sub-Arctic climate with broad expanses of boreal forest clothing its plateaus and mountains. The northeast is the only region of the province east of the Continental Divide, meaning its rivers, including the Peace River, drain into the Arctic Ocean. The resources of these regions vary, but in all except the northeast, the Pacific salmon is a key resource. Large game animals such as deer, moose, and elk were also vital to the survival of most First Nations, especially in the northern interior and northeast, where moose abounded. People adapted their settlement patterns and the structure of their societies according to the places they lived. Coastal nations, who primarily depended on the salmon resource, developed highly structured political and social systems, while those of the interior, whose principal resource was the moose or deer, generally had more flexible and egalitarian societies.