

Early Secwepemc Fishing Techniques



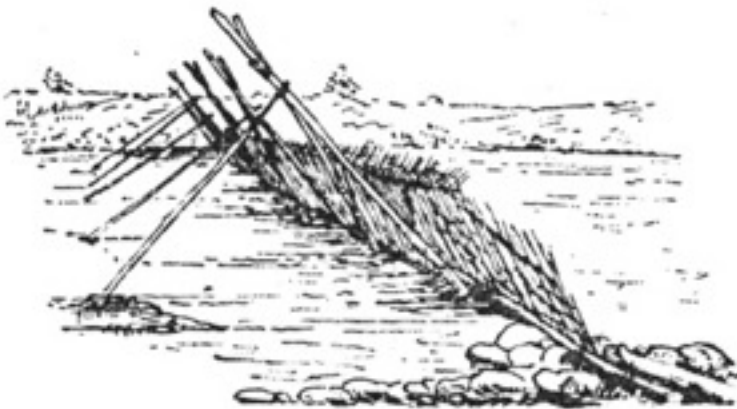
For thousands of years, the Secwepemc people employed a variety of fishing techniques throughout the Thompson Plateau region of the interior of British Columbia. Many of these techniques were practiced, and passed on from generation to generation, and involved exceptional levels of skill, innovation and cooperation.

The Secwepemc were well aware of the importance of local fishing to their survival – both present and future – and as such, were careful to ensure that any techniques and practices used, would maintain the sustainability of this critical resource. They were a society with sound knowledge and understanding of fish habitats & life cycles, who caught and used that which was required. To the Secwepemc, the salmon were sacred, and they were, therefore, diligent and well versed in the preservation of these species.

With the incredible abundance of running salmon throughout the Secwepemc territory, there is little disagreement that these species were the most important food fish for the local aboriginal people. The most abundant, and important of these species were the Chinook, and the Sockeye salmon. Large volumes of these salmon species were caught using a variety of techniques, and were dried as the principle method of preservation for winter consumption. Other species were also consumed – many year-round inhabitants of streams and / or lakes – though to nowhere near the same extent of the salmon harvested during annual runs. Some of these species include (but are not limited to) whitefish, lake trout, steelhead (sea run rainbow trout), Dolly Varden, lake trout and burbot. As these fish were available throughout the year, they were often eaten fresh soon after having been caught.

The following is a list of several traditional fishing methods employed by the Secwepemc people. They are described to the best of my own abilities (based on very limited knowledge and research).

Weirs / Basket Traps



Weirs were basically fences or nets, made of willow lengths lashed together, which were erected in rivers and streams through which fish could not pass. Fishermen would often set up platforms over the weirs, so they could spear or net fish that were stuck behind these barriers. Use of these weirs greatly facilitated fishing by net or by spear, as the fish looked for an alternate route upstream. Fishermen still had to be quick and skillful in order to

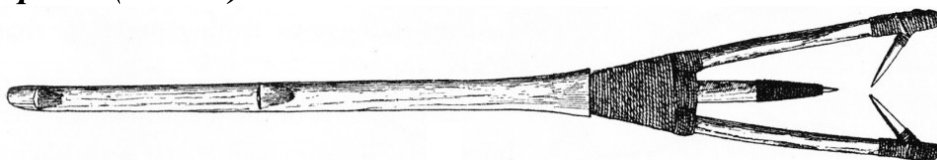
quickly capture fish while they were against the weir. Some were more elaborate and resembled “cages” with tapered openings (narrowing further upstream) that allowed fish to enter but not escape back through. Fish could then be later retrieved using nets or spears after prolonged amounts of time had passed, with little fear of the fish escaping.

Dip Nets



Dip nets were used to scoop fish out of back eddies, and those that stayed close to the riverbanks. They consist of a long handle, with a ring at the end. On this “ring” there were mounted a series of smaller rings, onto which a net was attached. These smaller rings could slide freely – allowing the net to close once a fish was caught. The fisherman could control the sliding of the smaller rings by means of a long “Indian-hemp” rope attached to the back of the net. This rope was held tight until a fish was captured. Releasing the rope would result in the rings sliding forward, and greatly reducing the opportunities for the fish to escape. Often, this technique was performed with an assistant, who would remove the fish from the net, and begin preparing the catch while the fisherman pursued his next target.

Spears (Leister)



The leister was a three-pronged spear, consisting of a handle and three prongs (often made of fir) with a bone point and two bone barbs that were lashed onto the prongs. These spears were used in shallow water or where a natural barricade (or a weir) slowed or halted the progress of the salmon upstream. When the spear was thrust at the back of a fish, the center prong often struck the spine, while the prongs were forced outward, then recoiled back to impale each side of the fish with a barb.

Hook & Line



Fishing with hooks and bait was certainly not the preferred method of fishing among the Secwepemc. For the amount of time, effort, and fish that were lost, it was far more effective to use weirs, nets & spears to capture running salmon. Hooks were quite crude, and usually consisted of two pieces of bone (one of them sharpened) that were lashed tightly together at about a 70-degree angle. It was difficult to get fish to bite, because the hooks and lines were big, and visible to the fish. If one was lucky enough to get a bite, it was even more difficult to set the hook in the fish’s mouth (since they were quite thick). It was even harder to keep the fish on the hook, as they could slip out of the mouth very easily. Nevertheless, when there were no salmon running, local freshwater fish were a quality food source, so there were times when it was necessary to persevere and put in the time and effort. During the winter, when the waters were frozen over, baited hooks with line made from sinew or “Indian Hemp” were used to lure fish to the ice hole where they could be speared. In these cases, the hooks were not intended to actually catch the fish, they were primarily used to hold the bait needed to lure the fish beneath the hole. Fishermen often tried to shade their eyes (often with deerskin “goggles” with slits in them, or shade the holes with blankets, to cut down the glare. This allowed them to see the fish more easily below the ice.

Pit Lamps (for Night Fishing)

Fishing was also performed at night. Since many types of fish are attracted to light, Secwepemc fishermen would use a technique called “pit-lamp fishing”. This type of fishing is done out of canoes, and required a few people to make it work. The idea was that younger boys (who may not be skilled at netting or spearing fish) would hold torches (made of wood soaked in pitch) near the water. Fish would often come towards the torches, where they could be speared or caught in dip nets by the older, more experienced fishermen. Due to the low visibility, and the fact that canoes could catch fire, this could be a dangerous method of fishing. Below is a mural showing Secwepemc man pit-lamp fishing at dusk. In the mural, the fisherman is fishing alone, and has the lamp secured off of the side of the canoe.



The Secwepemc people demonstrated a strong sense of community and cooperation through their fishing practices, and through the allocation of their catch. People from several families would often set up weirs, together, and share dip netting and spear fishing locations. Other family members would also share the work associating with cleaning, gutting, and drying the flesh in order to preserve it for winter. The total catch, was then divided up evenly among the families who helped to catch and prepare the fish, meaning no one would go hungry.

Though much of the equipment has changed, many of the traditional Secwepemc fishing methods are still used today.

