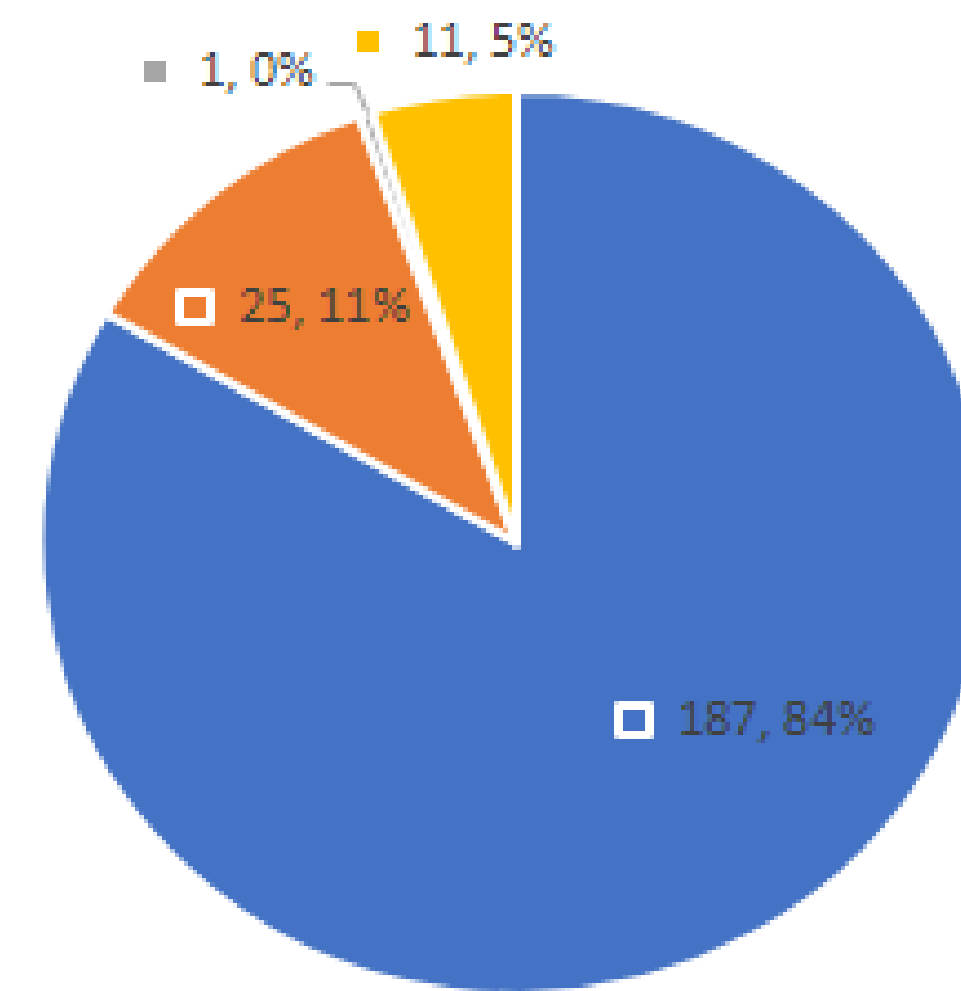


The Significance of Salmon to the Coast Salish

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Depictions of Salmon in Salish Coast Artifacts



Introduction

For some, salmon is simply a delicious seafood, greatly abundant in the waters of the Pacific Northwest. For others, the salmon holds great significance. This poster will be addressing the significance of salmon to the Coast Salish people that inhabit the Pacific Northwest, done so by analyzing art style of artifacts over several centuries from a cultural perspective and comparing the findings with interviews performed with local salmon fishers. Our thesis is that the Coast Salish people greatly valued salmon as not only a food source, but an animal with vast cultural significance that's represented through artifacts.

We hypothesized to observe a great number of salmon depictions in ancient artifacts, with the ancient inspired approaching such depictions from a cultural/spiritual sense, with modern fishers having a different perception more attributable to economic necessity following brutal colonialism.

Research Question & Background

Our research question is to explore what significance the salmon held over the Coast Salish peoples, and whether such perceptions have weakened over time? The salmon within folklore serves as a creation story, where a group of salmon longed to join their human relatives on land and were granted humanity by Grandfather King Salmon on the terms that the humans honor the salmon with a great feast in the spring and maintain the waters in which the salmon live, thus the Salish became "Salmon People" (Pacific coast).

The return of the salmon was signified by white butterflies in the spring. Seals as natural predator of the salmon, and the orca serving the purpose of culling seals as referenced in the *Seal Hunting Brothers*, protecting the salmon (Lamont). With this information, we then were able to form our categories for artifacts. Tools used for salmon fishing (hooks, net sinkers, cedar-woven nets) The second category, artifacts that depict the salmon outright. Third, artifacts that reference folktales with salmon, those being the prior mentioned animals as they hold a significant connection with the salmon in their lore. Finally, artifacts that don't contain any of these. This is drawn from our samplings and does not reflect the entirety of Salish artifacts.



Left to Right

Picture 1: Bentwood cedar box depicting what appears to be a bear, eagle, and other unidentifiable animals from Whatcom Museum, Lightcatcher.

Picture 2: Totem carving of orca and river monster from Hibulb Cultural Center.

Table 1 (above). Pie ratio of Salish artifacts by 4 categories: No salmon, artifact with salmon, tools for salmon fishing, artifacts that reference salmon folktales.		Table 2 (below). Table illustrating the results of conducted interviews.		
All surveys were anonymous.	What does Salmon mean to you?	Does the salmon hold any significance for you or your family?	What preparation of salmon is your favorite?	How are the salmon populations compared to when you started fishing?
Non-Native American response summary	A fun fish to try and catch. Some enjoy taste. Some see it as a challenge.	Is a decent meal for themselves or family.	Smoked, candied, and blackened.	Salmon population seems stable.
Native American response summary	From local tribes, those surveyed felt a connection to their relatives of the past.	Saw it as a gift from the creator.	Roasted and cured.	Salmon population had declined, but is regaining it's numbers.

Methods

May 16th unto May 22nd, we explored the Lightcatcher Building, Hibulb Cultural Center, and Suquamish Museum. We chose these as they house a great number of relevant Salish artifacts to analyze. We then took as many photos of different artifacts as we could, resulting in our pool of 224 total artifacts, which we then sat down and separated into the prior mentioned categories.

April 20th to the 30th, we conducted a series of interviews at two fishing locations, 15 at Fairhaven's Marine Park, 5 at Lake Whatcom. These interviews were done to determine the significance of salmon to modern varied individuals with questions asking:

- What does the salmon mean to you?
- Do you make profits off your salmon?
- Does the salmon hold any significance to you, family, upbringing, heritage, etc.?
- What preparation of salmon is most popular (raw, smoked, cured, etc.)?
- How are the salmon populations now, compared to when you first started fishing, and is the decline noticeable? Does/could it be a problem later down the road?

Discussion

We were surprised by the lack of salmon representation amongst the artifacts, contradicting our beginning hypothesis that we expected the imagery to be abundant. 1 of the 224 artifacts had a depiction of salmon. 25 of the artifacts were fishing tools. Then we had 11 artifacts that made a reference to one or more of the Salmon People creation stories, few of these were found on paddles and bentwood boxes, while most were present on cedar carvings and totems, dating within the most recent decades. The remaining 187 artifacts from the sampling lack a connection to salmon, folklore, and fishing. One interesting thing of note from the Suquamish Museum; Chief Seattle's home (Old Man House) south of Suquamish was found to have a great deal of salmon bones, which would make sense as its purpose was for gatherings and potlatch (Suquamish).

From the interviews, we found that a majority viewed the salmon as simply a good meal, and nothing more, with fishers gaining little to no profit, doing so purely for pleasure. Those interviewed of Native American background gave answers that were more relevant towards our research, that the salmon is a gift from the creator, while also being more likely to utilize traditional cooking methods for preparation. The most common method of preparation for Native American interviewees was roasted and cured, the former being typical for potlatch, and the later for preservation over winter months.

One possible explanation for us finding such little artistic representation could be on account of the society of the Salish, being a hunter-gatherer people that relied on the graciousness of nature and its yearly cycles, there may have not been enough time to sit down and pursue creative activities, hence the significant prevalence of generational spoken story, which could have defeated the purpose for physical art. This would tie in with our concluding thoughts, that despite the physical evidence for significance, there's still a heavy role the salmon played through storytelling.

Our interviews offer an interesting insight which partially contradicts our prior hypothesis that the significance of salmon has dwindled. This makes sense for non-Natives that lack cultural ties, but Native fishers were more likely to possess greater meaning towards salmon in relation to culture and heritage, connecting our implication that salmon holds a more abstract significance within spoken-word as opposed to physical representation. This brings up our greatest limitation, that being time, which restricted the number of unique interviews conducted.

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