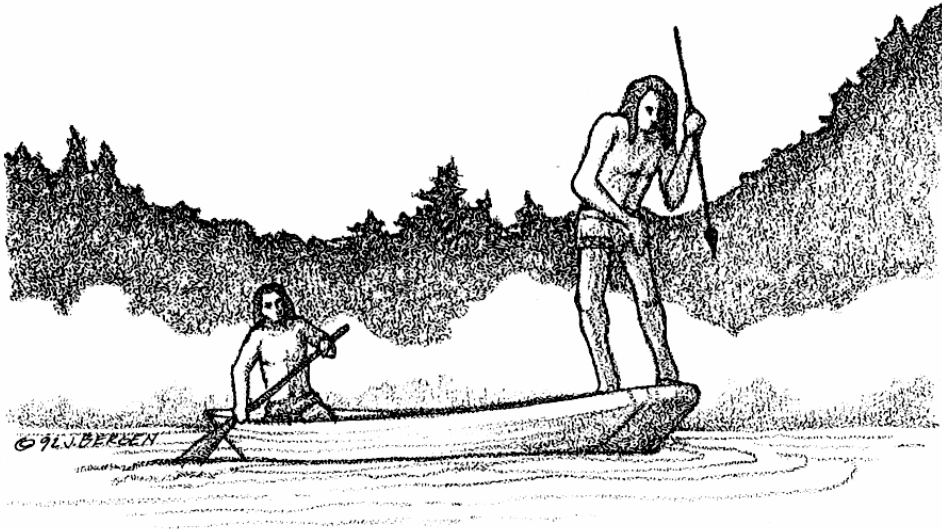


How Indians Used Coos Bay

by Kenn Oberrecht



Imagine a dawn on Coos Bay in 1790. No bridges span the bay. No highways, causeways, or railways cross the inlets or sloughs or cut through the vast forests. Great marshes, teeming with waterfowl, spread from the mouths of creeks. The only hints of human habitation are the feint, sweet smell of alder smoke mingled with the morning mists, and the occasional rustling of Miluk or Hanis women, who have left the sleeping mats of their warm plank houses to bathe at the edge of the chilly waters before first light.

One archeologist estimated that 2,000 Coosan Indians might have lived along the shores of Coos Bay then: the Miluk-speaking people on the lower bay, and those who spoke Hanis residing on the main body and upper reaches.

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Coosans were hunters and gatherers who thrived here the year around. During seasons of plenty, they ate well, but also preserved food to see them through sparse times.

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Millions of chinook, coho, and chum salmon swam the waters of the Pacific, gorging and growing fat on herring, smelt, squid, and other abundant foods. Seasonally, they migrated by the hundreds of thousands into the bay and up its many tributaries to spawn.

The Coosans built weirs of alder and vine maple to trap the salmon, the flesh of which they consumed fresh and sun-dried or smoked for later use. They also speared salmon and flounder, and they sometimes did so at night, guided by light from fires they built on beds of sand in their dugout canoes. In the upper bay and its tributaries, they captured "eels"--actually eellike, parasitic fish known as lampreys--in basket traps, most of which they preserved for lean times.

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They also pit-steamed clams, mussels, and oysters, then preserved them by drying or smoking. Although they relished the plentiful crabs of the bay, they always ate them fresh instead of trying to preserve them.

They hunted sea mammals, and gladly took advantage of the occasional whale that entered the bay and became stranded in shallow water. They used the whale's flesh and blubber for food and oil. Even the vertebrae from the whale's skeleton served as comfortable camp stools.

In the forests and meadows on the fringes of the bay, they hunted deer and pit-trapped elk. Women and children gathered and dried the plentiful berries and a number of other edible plants.

They also depended on the bay to supply most of their timber--the drift logs washed down by winter floods--from which they made dugout canoes and planks for their houses and huts.

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