Spear Fishing on the South Thompson River

TEACHER RESOURCE BOOKLET

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Prepared by Janice Dick Billy
Spear Fishing on the South Thompson River

Secwepemc people have depended on salmon and fish as a food resource for thousands of years. They used many different fishing techniques and caught many different species. Sockeye and spring salmon were the most important species caught and preserved. Spear fishing was a main method of fishing.

Fishing techniques, methods and materials have changed over the years and Secwepemc people have adapted to them. Secwepemc people continue to spear and preserve the sockeye salmon today, although not on such a large scale.

Note: These lessons should be used in conjunction with the video “Salmon Smoking” available from Secwepemc Cultural Education Society. Preview lessons to see what resources are needed.
Teaching Suggestions

Lesson 1

Introduction

Discuss and cluster the students' fishing experiences.

Ask:

- Where did you fish, e.g., river, lake, ocean?
- What kind of fish did you catch?
- What type of fishing did you do e.g., ice-fishing, fly-fishing?
- What time of year did you fish?
- What equipment did you use?
- Where did you get the equipment?
- What did you do with your catch?

Save the cluster for future reference.

Activities

Tell the students they are going to learn about a traditional method of catching salmon which was used by Secwepemc people for thousands of years.

Show the video, "Spear fishing on the South Thompson River".

The students may explore the following questions:

1. Refer to the cluster “fishing experiences”. Compare a fishing method you know to the one shown in the video. How is the method the same? Different?

2. Explain why the equipment and materials (pitch, spear handle, spear head and canoe) used in spear fishing had to be of very good quality.

3. Describe how the Secwepemc really knew the rivers. Tell why this was very important.

4. Compare traditional three-pronged spear making to the pitch fork spear making method. Evaluate. What are the advantages and disadvantages of both types?

5. Explain the importance of the pitch fire lit in the canoe.

6. Why did so much preparation take place before spear fishing? Why was the fishing season such an important event to the Secwepemc?
Lesson 2

INTRODUCTION

Briefly review the spearing method in the video, “Spear fishing on the South Thompson River”. Review:
- Place spearing took place
- Equipment used

Remind students that this method of spearing is still used today on the South Thompson River near Chase, B.C.

ACTIVITIES

Read the story, “Memories of My Sla7a”, to the students. See Appendix A.

Ask them to cluster the following points as they listen:
- Equipment used
- Preparations made before spearing
- Ceremonies
- Number and size of salmon caught

The students may explore the following questions and activities after hearing the story.

1. Illustrate a scene from story. Explain illustration to class

2. Make as many comparisons as you can between the traditional method of spear fishing and the modern method shown in the video “Spear fishing on the South Thompson River”. Compare:
   - Preparations made
   - Tools and equipment used
   - Method of spearing
   - Amount and size of salmon caught

3. Explain why knowledge of the natural environment, especially the different kinds of trees, was so important to the Secwepemc.

4. What qualities and skills were necessary to be a good spear fisherman?

5. What evidence proves that the Secwepemc cared for and respected the environment?

6. How do you account for the depletion of the salmon stock and the decrease in the size of the salmon? Explore the following:
   - Natural elements (temperatures and climate changes)
   - Man made disasters (logging, pollution)
   - Over fishing
Lesson 3

INTRODUCTION

Make a group list of all the fish and salmon that students know.

Tell students that salmon and fish were a very important food for Secwepemc people. They caught at least twenty different species of salmon and fish. Although some of the fish may appear to be the same, Secwepemc people had different names for all the fish. See Appendix B for list of species caught.

ACTIVITIES

1. Write letters to the following organizations:
   
   **Ministry of Environment**
   Fish and Wildlife
   1259 Dalhousie
   Kamloops, B.C.
   Telephone: 371-6200

   **Fisheries and Oceans**
   1278 Dalhousie
   Kamloops, B.C.
   Telephone: 374-4322

   Send a list of the species of fish caught by Secwepemc people and ask for information on each species:
   - Description of species
   - Habitat
   - Time of the year caught
   - Places caught

   Ask a representative of each organization to visit the class to give information. If this is not possible, ask for information to be sent.

2. Make a chart showing the following:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Fish Description</th>
<th>Areas Caught</th>
<th>Time of Year Caught</th>
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* See “Season of Fishing” in Foods of the Shuswap, page 11. This activity may be dependent on receiving information about the various species of fish.

3. Which species do you think were the most important to the Secwepemc? Explain reasons.

4. Which species do you think were the least desirable? Explain reasons.

5. Read the information, “How Did the Shuswap Catch Fish” and study the diagrams on page 60 and 61 in, “We are the Shuswap”. Which method do you think was the most difficult. Explain.

6. Explain how the Secwepemc were ensured of a fresh supply of fish throughout the year.

**PROJECT SUGGESTIONS**

1. Invite a resource person from Fisheries and Oceans and/or Shuswap Nation Tribal Council to talk to the class about the importance of fish conservation. Topics could include:
   - Fish hatcheries
   - Fishing regulations
   - Present numbers of fish in various areas
   - Salmon enhancement

2. Show the video, ‘Silver Swimmers’ or ‘River of Return’. Both are available from Fisheries and Oceans. ‘Silver Swimmers’ is available from PEMC. Compare the fishing methods described in the video to the methods used by the Secwepemc.

3. Study commercial fishing. “Salmonoids in the Classroom, Unit 11” is an excellent resource. Compare commercial fishing to Native food fishing. Include:
   - Areas fished
   - Species caught
   - Methods used
   - Amounts caught

   Prepare a display showing the comparisons.

4. Make a list of natural materials traditionally used by the Secwepemc and find a similar product that is used today.
   - Hot, liquid pitch
   - Pitch wood for making bright fire
   - Wooden, three-pronged spear
5. Read, 'How Fish Came From the Upper World', in Shuswap Stories. It contains an explanation of how fish came to be what they are today. Find a similar legend from another group of Native people. Compare similarities and differences.

6. Write an informative article describing spear fishing that would be suitable for a wildlife magazine. Include:
   - Areas fished
   - Species caught
   - Equipment and materials used
   - Use of the salmon

**RESOURCES NEEDED**

1. We Are The Shuswap by Heather Smith Siska. Available from Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, 355 Yellowhead Hwy., Kamloops, B.C.


4. Video “River of Return”, Available from Fisheries and Oceans. Contact Kamloops office.

5. Video “Silver Swimmers”. Available from Fisheries and Oceans and PEMC.

6. Fish reference books such as:
   - Fresh-Water Fishes of B.C.
   - G.C. Carl and others. B.C.
   - Provincial Museum Handbook No. 5
   Victoria, B.C.

REFERENCES

Utilization of Fish by the Chase-Shuswap Indian people of B.C. by Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy. B.C. Indian Language Project, 1975.

APPENDIX A

MEMORIES OF MY Sla7a

We began preparing for the fall fishing season when the last warmth of summer faded. Everyone in the community was kept busy for there was much work to be done.

We set up camp on the river’s shore. Huge tents were put up. Food and household supplies were brought to the camp. My Sla7a said long ago a messenger was sent to the village to tell the people of the upcoming salmon run. Everyone was moved to the river to begin preserving the salmon. There would be many festivities such as gambling, foot races, and singing while they waited for the salmon’s arrival.

My grandmother and the women and girls made sure all the cooking utensils and bedding were ready. Key7e always made sure she had her sharp knife so she could butcher the loads of salmon quickly and easily.

The men and boys began checking over equipment. Some of the canoes and spears were in good order while others needed repair. The dug-out canoe was the most important piece of equipment so much time was spent repairing it. I wondered
why we had to use the biggest canoe. Sla7a explained that the canoe had to be big enough to hold at least three men - one to steer and two to spear. A big canoe wouldn't tip easily with movements involved in spearing. The smaller canoes were put away for long hunting and lake fishing trips. They were faster but easier to tip so they wouldn't do for spearing.

I loved the special times in the woods with Sla7a as we gathered what we needed. His knowledge of the woods always amazed me and each time I would learn something new.

As soon as we reached the woods, he searched for the best pitch. He knew just where to find it - in fir wind-falls or rotten stumps. He would collect the amount he needed. Some for repairing canoes and spears and some for the fire which would burn in the basket. While we were there, he would look for nice long fir saplings for spear poles. I tried to help, but what I found wasn't straight or strong enough. If he happened to spot a saskatoon bush with good straight branches, he would take it to be seasoned and saved for next year.

We returned to camp with everything we needed for spearing. Everyone did their share. Sla7a was considered an expert in canoe repairing so that was his main job. He would thoroughly examine the canoe. If a crack was found, he would pour hot, liquid pitch over the crack. Then a piece of canvas was stuck over the crack, more hot pitch was poured on, another piece of canvas was put on, and lastly more hot pitch was poured over the canvas. When it dried, no water could come through the crack. Sla7a tested his work by pushing the canoe in the water making absolutely sure it didn't leak. Satisfied he'd done a good job, he worked on the next canoe in need of repairs.

The spears and wire baskets had to be checked and repaired if necessary. Both the harpoon and three-pronged spear were used so they had to be ready.

Key7e called Sla7a over to check and repair the smoke house and the racks inside. Everything had to be ready when the salmon came. There would be no time to waste by stopping and fixing things. Many salmon had to be caught, butchered and smoked for the long winter months ahead.

Finally, all the repairs were finished. Then came the exciting part. I could hardly wait for nightfall. At 12 years of age, I was considered old enough to help with spearing. I would go with my sla7a and uncle. The first big job was pushing the canoe with poles about 5 miles up the river. We had to reach our starting place by dark.
Just before going out, we’d light the basket of pitch wood which burned very brightly. We needed a good, bright fire to see right to the bottom of the river. If the fire wasn’t bright, we wouldn’t spear as many salmon. My job was to sit in the stern and direct the canoe as we drifted downstream. I had to keep it at a certain angle so the spearers would have a good view of the salmon as they swam under the light.

As I looked about, I could see six other canoes, their pitch fires lighting up the river. Sla7a said long ago the canoes would be positioned in a parallel row diagonally to the river bank. A “head man” stood in the centre of the canoe which was in the middle of the river. He called out which way the salmon were swimming. This, he said, was a good way of helping each other so many salmon could be speared.

We could only drift downstream once in an evening so we had to work hard. I could feel the excitement rising as the first salmon was speared. This was the beginning of a very busy night. We would catch as many as two hundred salmon within a couple of hours. We would catch about fifty, unload them, and go out again. The river was just loaded with sockeye and spring salmon. The spring salmon we caught were between sixty and seventy pounds. Luckily Sla7a always remembered the harpoon because the three-pronged spear was just for sockeye salmon. I was always glad when we brought our last load ashore because I was so tired.

Sla7a remembered long ago when the men used to empty the fish on red willow branches. Before any salmon were taken, the Chief conducted a ceremony. He offered the fattest fish to the Great Spirit to give thanks and show respect. The salmon was boiled and distributed evenly among the people. Elders were always fed first. The entrails were buried, never thrown in the river, because it would offend the salmon. A young woman gathered the bones and threw them in the river. When the feasting was finished, a man or woman was selected to distribute the salmon evenly among all the people.

A night’s work would keep us busy for many days. The woman and girls worked hard - butchering and hanging the salmon to smoke. I remember the delicious aroma of the smoked salmon.

Now the days of spearing and preserving salmon are long gone. I feel sad as I think of the changes in my lifetime. There’s so few salmon now. Even the big run every four years is not as big as it used to be. Nowadays if we catch a spring salmon about twenty-six to thirty pounds, we think that’s big but it’s not compared to years ago.
Many of our people now go salmon fishing in Lillooet. The salmon is frozen and canned to be used throughout the year. Very few Secwepemc people smoke salmon the way we used to. I hope as the younger people learn about our old ways, they will bring some of these things back. My heart will fill with happiness when that special day comes.

APPENDIX B

Fish and Salmon Caught by the Secwepemc People

1. Coho salmon
2. Sockeye salmon
3. Pink Salmon
4. Spring Salmon
5. Rainbow trout (Salmo Gairdneri)
6. Kamloops or Silver trout (Salmo Gairdneri)
7. Steelhead (Salmo Gairdneri)
8. Lake resident steelhead (Salmo Gairdneri)
9. Dolly Varden (Salvelinus Malma)
10. Lake trout (Salvelinus namavush)
11. Mountain whitefish (Prosopium Williamson)
12. Lake whitefish (Coregonus Clupeaformis)
13. Chiselmouth (Acrocheilus Alutaceus)
14. Peamouth (Mylocheilus Caurinus)
15. Northern squawfish (Ptychocheilus Gregonensis)
16. Redside shiner (Richardsonius Balteatus)
17. Longnose sucker (Catostomus Catostomus)
18. Bridgelip sucker (Catostomus Columbianus)
19. Ling (Lota Lota)
20. Mottled Sculpin (Cottus Bairdi)

* Scientific names are given for easier identification.
OTHER RESOURCE MATERIALS

AUDIO VISUAL PRODUCTIONS
(resource booklets available)
• The Saskatoon Berry (7 min.)
• Smoking Salmon (16:30 min.)
• Spearfishing on the South Thompson (8:30 min.)
• Smoking Deer Meat (7:00 min.)

SHUSWAP COMMUNITY HANDBOOK
The “Shuswap Community Handbook,” was developed to present information on the culture, history and contemporary lifestyle of Secwepemc people. It is intended that this manual will serve as background information and as a resource for teachers of Shuswap First Nations children.

SHUSWAP MAPS
A series of wall maps (30"x40") and small working maps (8 1/2"x 11") for students have been developed in the following areas:
• Shuswap Nation Fishery Management Plan
• Shuswap Traditional Place Names
• Residential Schools Attended by Shuswap People
• Shuswap Fishing Methods
  - Dip Nets and Spearing
  - Weirs
  - Gill Nets and Set Nets

Many books of Native legends are available, but few are easy for elementary school students to read. *Coyote as the Sun* is a new release from SCES that students in Grade 4 will find both readable and entertaining.

*Coyote as the Sun* is the first in a series of books of legends that will be published by SCES. Most of the stories included were told to anthropologist James Teit by Shuswap storytellers in the early 1900s. The stories describe a mythological time when “animal people” lived in Shuswap territory. Many of these beings used their special powers to shape the natural world.

The nine stories in *Coyote as the Sun* tell what Coyote, Grizzly Bear, Grasshopper, and others did to alter the earth or themselves. Each story is illustrated in full colour. A brief introduction describes the mythological past of the Shuswap people in terms that students can understand.

ISBN: 0-921235-21-6
Full-colour illustrations
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