

Our Bones Are Made of Salmon

Background Information on the Fraser River:

The Fraser River starts as a trickle of melted snow at the top of Mount Robson which is in the Rocky Mountains, sitting on the border of British Columbia and Alberta. The river travels 1,375 kilometers through BC and empties into the Pacific Ocean. There are many tributaries (a river or stream that flows into a larger river or lake) that add water to the Fraser as it travels through BC. The Fraser River is longest river in BC, and one of the largest in all of Canada.

The landscapes of the Fraser River change from the beginning of its journey to its end. As you exit the headwaters on Mount Robson the water is crystal clear, shallow, and extremely cold. The middle portion of the river is called the Fraser Canyon, where the river is squeezed between mountain ranges, increasing the speed, and creating many impressive rapids. The point at which the fresh water of the Fraser River meets the salty water of the Pacific Ocean is called the estuary. Because estuaries have access to both riparian (river) and marine nutrients, they are home to an incredible diversity of life. The lower mainland is located in the estuary portion of the Fraser River.

Indigenous people have been living in what we now call Canada for time immemorial, meaning that Indigenous communities have no stories of arriving here. They have always been here. There are many different First Nations along the River; each group is unique, with their own language or dialect, specific traditions, particular relationships with the landscape, stories, etc. The river has been used by Indigenous communities for thousands of years and they have specialized technologies, traditions and celebrations related to the river, nature, and biodiversity. Hul'q'umi'num', Halq'eméylem, and hənq̓əmin̓əm' are Indigenous language dialects spoken in the lower portion of the Fraser River. In Halq'eméylem, the language dialect spoken in the upper portion of the lower Fraser, the word for river is Stolo. In hənq̓əmin̓əm', a language dialect spoken in the lower portion of the lower Fraser, the word for river is stalə'w'. Indigenous communities throughout BC speak other languages and dialects and will have other names for the river.

The Fraser River Discovery Centre is located on the traditional and unceded territory of the hənq̓əmin̓əm' and Halq'eméylem speaking peoples. Territory acknowledgement is one small part of Reconciliation. We ask you take a moment to think of other ways you can participate in Reconciliation with Indigenous communities.

The River is also now known as the Fraser River, named after Simon Fraser, a European fur trader and explorer who led an expedition in 1808 along the river, establishing trade routes for what is now called the Hudson Bay Company.

The Fraser River Basin is an extremely biodiverse region, with hundreds of species of plants, animals, and fungi. The major habitat types along the Fraser River include brackish and freshwater marshes, salt marshes, tidal flats, sloughs, and flood-plain forests among others.

The Fraser River watershed is also home to 60% of BC's population, approximately 3 million people. A watershed is an area of land that drains all the water into one main river. You could imagine this as the watershed being a sink, and the Fraser River the drain; anything poured along the sides of the sink will end up in the drain, just like all the rivers and streams around the watershed end up in the Fraser River.

Program Overview:

This program explores the connection between Indigenous peoples and salmon on the Fraser River. Students get hands-on experience with fishing technology, learn about wind-drying salmon, and discover that salmon is in the hearts of Aboriginal people living along the Fraser River today.

Program Objectives

- to show the importance of the Fraser River to Indigenous peoples.
- to share the importance of fishing to Aboriginal people on the lower Fraser River.
- to explore the complexity of fishing methods and technology.
- to explore the diversity of First Nations along the river.
- to link traditional fishing practices with contemporary issues in the Indigenous fisheries.

Helpful Vocabulary

Indigenous: originating or occurring naturally in a particular place, in this case, modern-day Canada

Coast Salish: a First Nations language group consisting of groups along the lower Fraser River

Sockeye: a type of salmon prevalent in the Fraser River

Spawn: an act of reproduction of fishes; mixing of the milt of a male fish and the eggs of a female fish

Estuary: where the freshwater of the river meets the salt water of the ocean

River basin or watershed: the area of land that drains into a river

Oral storytelling: a reliance on passing history to future generations through spoken means rather than written

Tradition: the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, information etc. from generation to generation

Life cycle: the continuous sequence of changes through the development of an organism (i.e. – salmon from birth to death)

Elder: an influential member of a First Nations group; respected by virtue of age and wisdom.

Hemp: a plant fiber used to make rope and fabrics

Dogbane: a strong, grass like plant used in making netting

Nylon: a modern fiber used in the production of many types of fishing equipment, among other things

Canyon: a deep valley with very steep sides

Granite: a course rock, often found in canyon walls

Dehydrate: to preserve by removing water from a substance (ie – drying salmon using wind or smoke)

Wind tunnel: a narrow channel with a constant stream of wind

Radiating: to emit stored-up heat energy (ie – stored heat in canyon walls)

Preservation: in relation to food, preparing to avoid spoiling or decomposition

Entrails: the intestinal part of an animal that is generally removed before consumption

Kwetsel: a flat slate blade used to process salmon

Trade: the exchange of commodities between multiple people or groups

Community: a group of people working together towards a common goal or objective

In- class activities:

Here are some ideas to help prepare your class for the program, and to continue the learning back in the classroom.

Pre-visit:

1. Start thinking about traditions. Have students think about traditions that exist in their own families. These could be traditions from holidays or things their families do regularly. Share traditions with the class. Are there any families who have the same or similar traditions? Where did these traditions come from?
2. In this program, we will be talking about a particular way to preserve salmon. Preserving food was vital before the spread of home refrigeration (early to mid 1900s), however, we still rely on it today.
 - a. As a class, brainstorm ways to preserve food besides refrigeration (ex. drying, salting, pickling, curing, smoking, burying, alcohol, soaked in oils). Really, most foods that aren't fresh produce has been preserved in some way.
 - b. Have students do a survey of their lunch. What did they bring in that was preserved in some way?
 - c. Research what it is in season at this time of year. If we couldn't preserve foods, this is all we would be eating. Try to come up with some recipe ideas using ONLY these foods.
3. In this program, we'll be touching on the salmon life cycle. If you haven't talked about it yet, or need a refresher, try one of these videos:
 - a. This National Geographic video provides a good overview, with high quality video.
 - i. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZR4_LhPCgbo
 - b. This is a parody of "I Will Survive". While not the best quality audio, the lyrics are very clever.
 - i. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qV30UZ9aF04>

Post visit:

1. Recall what you learned about traditional fishing and preservation methods by working together as a class to make a model of the fishing tools and wind-drying rack. Assign different groups of students to each of the following components: wind-drying rack, six steps for processing salmon, harpoon, dip net, and gill net. You could use classroom materials like construction paper, skewer sticks, glue, etc, or you could try to construct the entire thing out of recycled materials, like egg cartons, orange juice containers, etc. Go a step further and make the Fraser Canyon to house your drying rack and tools, turning it into a diorama.
2. Elders are a very important part of the First Nations communities. They have lived on the river for thousands of years, and throughout this time have managed to continue to pass down traditions, skills, and stories. Ask your students to think of a skill they learned from their elders. This could be a parent, grandparents, or other older person in their life. For example, perhaps a student learned to build something out of wood because their parent or grandparent taught them, or maybe a student learned to cook a special meal or dish because their families enjoy it and want to pass it on. Write these elders thank you letters. The students can explain what the skill was, what it meant to them, and perhaps draw a picture.