Stone Fish Traps

Stone traps were widespread along the whole coast, with the Kwagiutl people making the most extensive use of this effective method of catching fish. In their central coastal area, almost every creek or stream contained some kind of stone trap. Many and often elaborate were the stone-walled structures that relied on "tidal drift" for their success.

Salmon often congregate at the mouth of a stream or creek so that spring runoff or late summer rains may swell the river and make it deep enough for their passage upstream. As the tide rose, the waiting fish drifted shoreward with the flow of the water, swimming over the tops of the traps. As the tide receded they became trapped behind the stone walls, unable to retreat to deeper water.

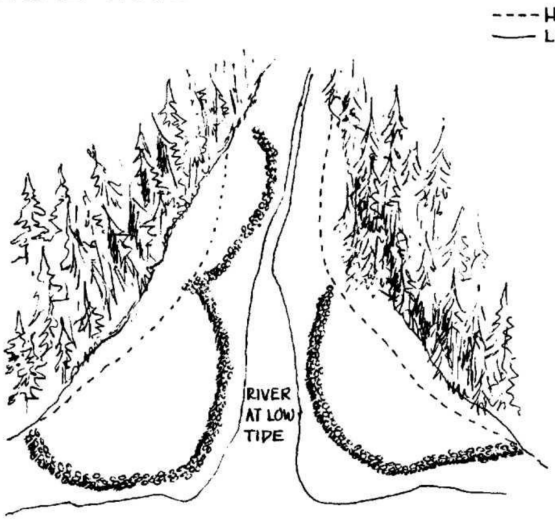
So successful was this system that frequently a whole series of stone traps was built at one river mouth. Boulders reached a fair size, and the supply was not always close at hand. The large amount of labour involved in moving so many tons of rock into place, and the quantity of fish they would catch, suggest joint ownership and use by a whole village or groups of people. Smaller, single stone traps in suitable places would catch shiners and other small fish for bait.

An elderly and knowledgeable man of the Qualicum Band, Alfred Recalma, told me that there were once so many salmon in the sea at migration time that the traps did not have to be at the mouth of the river; traps along the beach anywhere in the vicinity would catch fish. "The salmon would go up the stream packed together so tight you'd swear there wasn't room for one more fish," he said. He blamed logging and the destruction of the watershed for the present-day lack of salmon. Heavy rains pour down the denuded mountain sides and swell the creeks to rushing torrents that sweep away the fertilized salmon eggs.

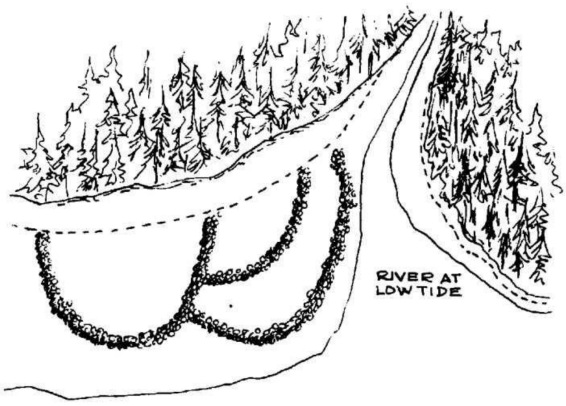
It is still possible to spot the remains of some of the stone fish traps in bays and inlets, even though many years of tidal action have torn apart walls that once stood much higher. On Mitelnatch Island (south of Cortes Island in Johnson Strait), in a large bay drained by the outgoing tide, is a fairly obvious V-shaped rock alignment. This is pointed out by a sign put up by the park naturalist on the island, and can be seen at low tide. Less obvious, though, is a series of small, half-circle rock wall remains, also within the bay. Their demarcation is helped by the fact that the oysters now growing there are concentrated on the outer side of the traps, but are sparse on the inner side. Often no more than one boulder high, the rocks of these old stone traps are usually larger than others in the immediate area, and fairly evenly placed in a straight or curved line.

Remains of stone fish traps are evident in Deep Bay on Vancouver Island, and are best seen when the tide is just high enough to allow the lines of the large boulders to appear above the water. Camping at Bajo Point, north of Friendly Cove on the outer west coast of the island, I found a large bay with the tide out and the remains of a series of small stone traps. Near our beach camp was the site of an ancient Indian village. Relatively young spruce trees marked out the rectangular areas where house floors had once been, each outlined by high mounds of earth now tall with wet grass. The rotted bow of a small dugout canoe, moss covered, silent, lay at the edge of the forest within sound of the sea.

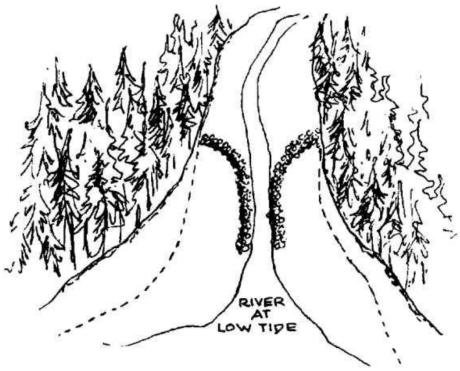
STONE TRAPS



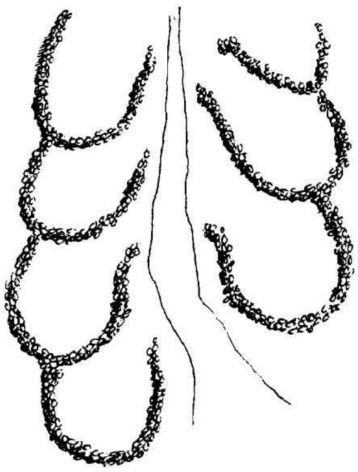
STONE TRAP AT MOUTH OF RIVER IN TIDAL WATER WHERE SALMON CONGREGATE PRIOR TO MIGRATION UPSTREAM. FISH DRIFT IN OVER ROCK WALL WITH INCOMING TIDE, ARE TRAPPED WHEN TIDE GOES OUT.
54·KW



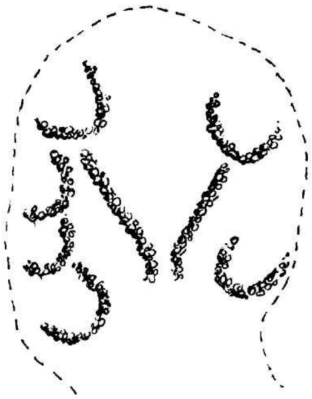
SERIES OF STONE TRAPS ON RIVER MOUTH BANK EXPOSED AT LOW TIDE - 54·KW



ROCK ALIGNMENT - QUITE LIKELY USED WITH BASKET TRAP AT NARROWED NECK
54·KW



WING DAMS SOMETIMES BUILT IN MULTIPLE GROUPS ON RIVER BANKS
28·KW



APPROXIMATE LAYOUT OF TRAPS IN BAY ON MITELNATCH ISLAND - V NECK PROBABLY FUNNELLED FISH INTO BASKET TRAP. CS