

Title:

The Salmon in Northwest Native Indian Artwork and Culture

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Summary:

The significance of the salmon fish in Northwest Native Indian artwork and culture

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Article Body:

There are several species of salmon fish in the Pacific Northwest region. These are the Coho, Sockeye, Pink, Chum, Atlantic and the largest which is the King or Chinook. Salmon are born in the rivers and swim down to the ocean where they live in the saltwater. At spawning time, they return to the river where they were born, lay the eggs, and then die. The young hatch and start the life cycle over again. Salmon fish have always been an important mainstay food source for the Northwest Native Indian people as well as much wildlife in the region including many large birds, bears, and river otters. This is the reason why the salmon is a popular subject in Northwest Native Indian artwork and culture.

According to Northwest Native Indian legend, the salmon were actually people with superhuman abilities and eternal lives. The Salmon people lived in great houses under the ocean but since they knew that humans on land needed food, they offered themselves to the land based tribes as food by turning into salmon fish. Their spirits were returned back to the ocean where they were reborn again. One tribe on land was short of food because the salmon never came to their waters. But they heard about the Salmon people. So the chief sent out an expedition to find these Salmon people in order to ask them to come to their waters. After many days of travel, the expedition arrived in a new land where the Salmon people were. The chief of the Salmon people ordered four of their villagers to go into the sea where they became salmon as soon as the water reached their faces. He ordered others to retrieve these new salmon fish which were then cooked as a welcoming feast for the guests in the expedition.

The chief told the guests to eat as much but the bones of the salmon fish, even the smallest ones, were not to be thrown out. All of the salmon bones were

collected by the villagers after the guests were careful enough to lay them into little piles. The Salmon people then threw these bones back into the water. Minutes later, the four individuals who originally turned into the salmon fish reappeared and joined the others.

Over the next few days, the guests watched the Salmon people repeat this process with the salmon bones over and over again. However, during a subsequent feast, one of the guests from the expedition secretly held back some of the salmon bones. This time, when one of the Salmon people came back from out of the water, he was covering his face and said that some of the bones must be missing since his cheeks were gone. Another said that she was missing her chin. Alarmed by what had happened, the guest brought out the missing salmon bones he had previously held back. The two Salmon people with missing body parts then went back into the sea with these bones. Upon their return back to land, both Salmon people had their complete bodies again.

The expedition asked the chief to let some of his Salmon people visit their waters and streams to help supply much needed food. The chief agreed to do so as long as the tribe agreed to throw back all the salmon bones into the water so that the Salmon people could return home intact. If this was not respected, the tribe was told that the Salmon people would refuse to return to the tribe's waters. So the tribe always honored the return of the salmon to their streams every year and respected the rules set by the Salmon people chief. This ensured an adequate food supply for the tribe every year.

One interesting fact is that when White men first arrived to the region, the Northwest Native Indian people did not want to sell salmon to them. It was feared that the salmon not be treated with respect by the White men who were ignorant of the required customs and regulations set by the Salmon people.