

People of the Northwest

The Northwest Coast, also known as the Pacific Northwest, stretched between the Pacific Ocean and the mountains to the east. It included parts of what are now Oregon, Washington, and Canada. Cool ocean winds brought heavy rains to the region, so forests grew tall and thick. These forests and the rivers that ran through them were filled with fish and other animals.

Many American Indian groups such as the Kwakiuti, the Makah and the Chinook live in this region. Instead of farming, the people of the Northwest Coast met their needs by fishing and hunting by gather plants. The coastal waters were an important resource and salmon was a staple food for most groups.



Whales were also an important resource. Whales supplied not only food but fat which could be melted into oil for burning in lamps. Some groups hunted whales in open seas from large dugout canoes. These hollowed-out trees could carry dozens of people.

The giant trees of the region provided indigenous people with wood for houses, too. The shelters (longhouses) of the Makah people were similar to the Iroquois of the Northeast forests, but much larger. All members of a clan (extended family) lived in the same longhouse together. Each person of the clan held a rank and leaders made important decisions about village life. Clans leaders also taught younger members stories about their history and skills for living off the land.

People of the Northwest traveled long distances on the rivers to trade. Trading was important to their economy. Through trading, most of their needs and wants could be met. Following successful trading trips, the clans celebrated with a "potlatch". A potlatch was meant to show wealth and divide property among the people. Potlatch means "to give". The potlatch celebration centers of food, dancing, and singing.