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Northwest Coastal People

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The Northwest Coastal People lived on the west coast of Canada, occupying the western shore and the islands of British Columbia, and reaching up into the Yukon.

The Environment

- The First Peoples of the area lived in a narrow section of coastal land stretching from Washington State to Northern B.C., and into Alaska.
- Temperatures were moderate, which allowed the people to fish all year.
- The environment of the Northwest Coast of Canada was very diverse, and often extreme. It included:
 - Rugged coastline (Pacific Ocean)
 - Wide and narrow beaches
 - Deep fjords
 - Mountains (near coast)
 - Many islands
 - Spruce, cedar, and fir forests
 - Inland rivers and lakes
- All the people lived near the water, either the Pacific Ocean or an inland river or lake, and relied heavily on water for their survival.
- Salmon was the single most important food the Northwest Coast peoples, and the rivers were full of them.
- The people had access to the Pacific Ocean for fishing and collecting other food like clams and shellfish.
- They also took advantage of the expanse of forest in the area and used cedar trees to make everything from their houses and canoes, to their blankets and clothing.
- They also hunted for deer and elk in the forests.



Yakoun Lake, Haida Gwaii, Queen Charlotte Islands



Vancouver Island Coastline



Bella Coola, BC

Cedar Trees

- The Northwest Coastal People used cedar trees to make many things, including:
 - houses
 - baskets
 - boxes



Cedar tree in BC forest

- blankets
- canoes
- masks



Chilkat Blanket



Kwakwak'wakw House



Coast Salish Mask



Haida Canoe

Settlements and Housing

- Due to the fact that the people of the Northwest Coast had access to food year-round, they were able to live sedentary lives in permanent settlements.



Longhouses at Ksan Village



Kwakwaka'wakw painted longhouse and totem pole



Kwakwaka'wakw house front



Longhouse frame (cedar logs)

Housing - the 'Big House'

- They lived in longhouses or 'Big houses' constructed out of cedar planks.
- Each longhouse was 50-150 feet long and 20-60 feet wide, and housed several families.

Constructing the House

- Since it rained a lot along the coast, the trees grew very thick and tall. The huge red cedars were especially important to the people because they could make large houses with them. They cut the trees with stone axes, and floated them to their villages.
- First, a frame was built out of cedar logs.
- Then, cedar planks were attached to the logs. It was important to overlap the planks to keep the rain out.
- They used wooden pegs as nails to hold the wood together.
- They made their houses as huge rectangles, with many



Model of Haida house

posts to hold up the roof and covered them with cedar planks.

- There were no windows in the longhouses. There was only a hole in the roof to let smoke from the fires out, and a single front door to keep the heat in.
- The longhouses were built with low roofs, because they were easier to heat in the winter.



Interior of Nuu-chah-nulth longhouse

Interior of a House

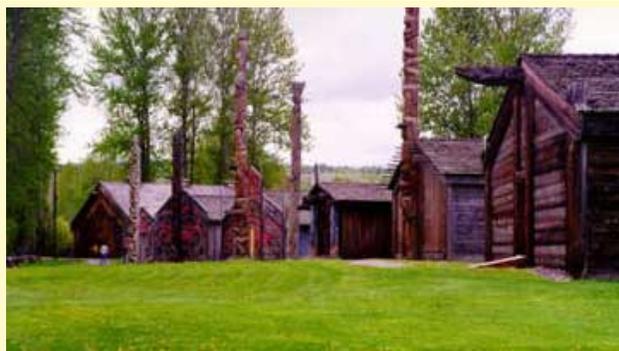
- Inside a longhouse, there was only simple furniture. Each family had bunk beds lined up against the wall for sleeping. Above each bunk, there were storage areas and open shelves. Below the bottom bunks, they dug holes (around two feet deep) to store and cool food.
- Each family would also have their own small fire pit for cooking.
- Woven cedar mats were hung from the ceiling to separate the different family areas.



House screen to separate Chief's area



Nuxalk longhouse



Village of Ksan

Villages of the Northwest Coast

- Houses were always grouped together forming small villages.
- Some villages had as many as 1,000 people, all living in only 30 houses.
- Each village was marked by totem poles.
- All the houses in a village were lined up side-by-side facing the same direction- towards the water.
- House fronts were commonly painted, as were the house posts (totem poles), which were carved with the family crest.
- If an individual built a longhouse for his family, the he lived there with his wife and children, and then their children.
- When the children got older, they were assigned (by the head of the family) a new space inside the longhouse.



Massett (Haida) village

- On the other hand, if the village built the longhouse together, then it would be the Chief's responsibility to assign living spaces to each family.
- When the owner of a longhouse died, the family gave the longhouse away or burnt it to the ground. It was believed that if the family stayed after the death, then the spirit of the dead person would worry too much about the family.



Massett (Haida) village

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