

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Courtesy of Tlingit Elders Austin Hammond, Cecilia Kunz, Horace Marks, and Bessie Visaya, Sealaska Heritage Institute, and Steve Henrikson.

1. Were fish traps close to the camps?

Whether it was a semi-permanent fish camp or just an overnight location to check the traps, the fish trap was typically near a camp. Logically, if there was more than one trap found at a location, the likelihood increased of a more 'serious' fish camp being located nearby. Each fish stream was usually used by a single family or clan.

2. How were fish directed to the trap?

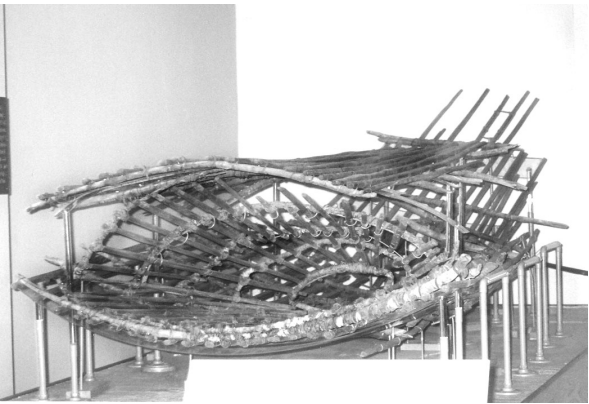
Sometimes stakes were driven into stream beds with sticks woven into them to create walls directing fish to the traps. These woven walls are called weirs. Remains of rock walls serving the same purpose have also been found.

3. Where were the traps placed in relation to the river?

It depended on the river. Multiple traps were sometimes used at a single location. According to one elder in Yakutat, multiple fish traps were placed at intervals up the stream with the Clan leader's trap first; as he and his family had enough, his trap would be opened or removed to allow the fish to move along to the next family's trap.



Kids get hands-on with the fish trap replica.



Front view of the Montana Creek fish trap.

4. What time of year were fish traps used?

Spring and summer. The traps would be placed at the time of the run for that particular stream. The knowledge of when runs happened was passed down through oral tradition within the family or clan who had rights to that stream.

5. Who built fish traps?

It was the women's job to dig and process spruce roots. Both men and women built traps together as a family.

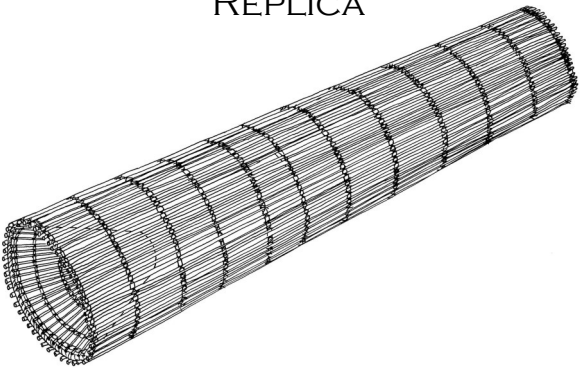
6. What kind of fish were caught in Montana Creek?

Dolly Varden trout (x'wáat') may have been caught in the trap. Coho (l'ook), pinks (cháas), and chum (téel') also went up Montana Creek (Kaxdigoowu Héen), although the trap opening may have been too small for salmon. No eulachon (saak) and no king salmon (t'á) went up Montana Creek.

7. How else were fish caught?

In recent times, the Tlingit gaffed fish out of Montana Creek (Kaxdigoowu Héen). Before that, people remember spearing fish.

MONTANA CREEK FISH TRAP REPLICA



Replica based on measurements from the Montana Creek fish trap. Drawing by Steve Henrikson. JDCM 2006.46.001

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The mission of the Juneau-Douglas City Museum is to foster among its diverse audiences an awareness of Juneau's cultural heritage, values and community memory so we may draw strength and perspective from the past, inspire learning, and find purpose for the future.

Juneau-Douglas City Museum
Located at 4th and Main Streets
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MONTANA CREEK FISH TRAP

Kaxdegoowu Héen Sháali

FACTS AND HISTORY



Replica and original trap on display at the Juneau-Douglas City Museum.



DISCOVERY OF THE TRAP

The archaeological remains of the Native basketry-style fish trap were found in 1989 in Montana Creek (Kax̣digoowu Héen) near its confluence with the Mendenhall River approximately 13 miles north of downtown Juneau. Exposed remains were seen in the riverbank and reported to the Alaska State Museum. The layers of gravel, sand, and mud around the trap suggested it was buried quickly by an advancing river bar and tidal action. Quick burial limited the exposure to oxygen needed for decay. Furthermore, reddish gravels and testing of the groundwater nearby suggested the presence of iron in the groundwater that may have helped kill bacteria and thus slowed deterioration of the trap.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRAP

The object was identified as a basketry-form fish trap and the upper portion was recovered to prevent its loss due to erosion. The rest of the trap was excavated in 1991 by Robert Betts, Greg Chaney, and Jon Loring, with assistance from many others. Despite nasty weather, the excavators had a steady stream of curious onlookers and eventually had to post a sign at the trailhead with hours for viewing the trap. It took almost two months to remove the trap from the stream. Someone was there 24 hours per day. When found, it was the first trap of its kind to be excavated on the Northwest Coast.



Ellen Carrlee, former Juneau-Douglas City Museum Curator of Collections & Exhibits, works on the Montana Creek fish trap in 2006 at the Alaska State Museum.

EXCAVATION

This is the first basketry-style fish trap to be discovered in an archaeological context on the Northwest Coast. The traditional caretakers of Montana Creek are members of the Dipper House (Yax̣te Hít) of the Dog Salmon Clan (L'eeneidí) from the Raven moiety. Traps were usually removed from the streams after the runs of fish ended each year. They were stored near the fishing site or returned to camp for repair. Fish traps were very important to a family because they may have relied on the fish gathered for food. Traps were not easy or quick to make, so a trap would be preserved and reused. Wooden artifacts tend not to survive in archaeological sites because organic material deteriorates easily. High iron content in the groundwater along with quick burial of the trap by an advancing river bar and tidal action are thought to have contributed to the survival of this trap. Radiocarbon dating determined the trap to be 500-700 years old.



HOW IT WORKED

The fish trap had a funnel in one end for fish to enter, but the sharp points around the opening prevented them from exiting again. The cylindrical section may have been a storage area where fish waited until they were pulled from a door on the top of the trap. Another possibility is that the trap was open in back and fed into a pool, which trapped the fish until they could be removed. The trap was anchored to prevent the current from carrying it away. To maximize the number of fish caught, an accompanying structure, called a weir, would have directed the fish to the opening.

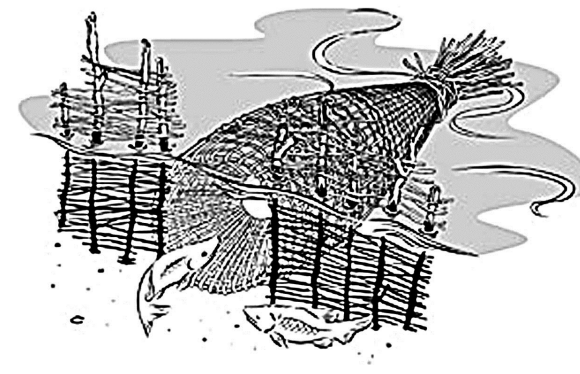
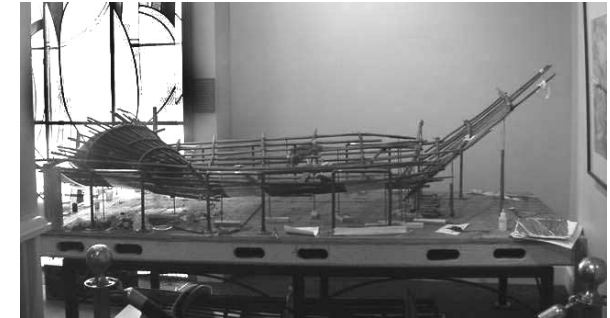


Diagram of a fish trap used by Indigenous Australians. Image courtesy of http://burarra.questacon.edu.au/pages/fish_trap.html



Side view of bottom half of the Montana Creek Fish Trap on display at the Juneau-Douglas City Museum.

CONSERVATION

The waterlogged trap was in danger of severe damage from warping and cracking if it dried out. It was kept wet during excavation, and fragile lashings were wrapped with roller gauze bandages to protect them and prevent loss. A supportive mount of tubular aluminum, polyethylene foam, and nylon webbing was made for transportation and treatment at the Alaska State Museum (ASM). The trap was soaked in polyethylene glycol (PEG) for approximately one year and then slowly air-dried. The PEG took the place of the water that supported the structural cells of the wood. It was stored at the Alaska State Museum after treatment. The Juneau-Douglas City Museum was awarded a Grant-in-Aid from the ASM to exhibit the trap, and it was put on display in 2005. It was taken from storage, the gauze bandages removed from the lashings, and the surviving lashings repaired. The trap is very fragile, and dozens of small Plexiglas and brass mounts were custom-made to support the trap for display.