

First Salmon Ceremony (Coastal, Puget Sound and Plateau Regions)

Indian ceremonies and religious practices are closely linked to seasonal cycles. A ceremony over the first salmon taken in a run of a fishing expedition is an important event celebrated by Native Americans in all three culture areas (Coastal, Puget Sound and Plateau) within Washington. Throughout each area there were special attitudes and behavior toward the salmon.

In detail there are almost infinite variations of this ceremony, but the basic procedure and protocols for the first salmon are followed. The salmon caught was carried back home by the fisherman and laid aside for special preparation. Traditionally, it was the role of women in the home to prepare the fish in a customary fashion taught to her by the Salmon Chief for the First Salmon Ceremony. The Salmon Chief also directed and controlled the rituals of the ceremony. Everyone in the village attended the feast and gave thanks. Since time immemorial, the bones of the salmon are carefully returned to the water, making sure the head is pointed upstream. The rite is believed to insure the salmon run for the future and honors the place in which the salmon was caught.

The spring or Chinook salmon, the first run of the year, came in for special regard; and Indian people were very particular about how this fish was caught. No one could talk casually or carelessly about it. In rivers in which several species ran, the first of each species might be given identical treatment, or the earliest species might receive the most elaborate attention while the others would receive less formal handling. All were treated with respect.

Many tribes have yearly First Salmon Ceremonies following the traditions of their ancestors honoring the special relationship Indian people have with salmon and with fishing.

Additional information about the First Salmon Feast within Plateau/Columbia Basin tribes can be found at <http://www.critfc.org/salmon-culture/tribal-salmon-culture/first-salmon-feast/>