

Montana Creek Fish Trap Fast Facts:

- ◆ First spotted in 1989 on the banks of Montana Creek in Juneau, Alaska by retired Department of Fish & Game employee Paul Kissner.
- ◆ Emergency excavation conducted by Wally Olsen (University of Alaska Southeast) and Steve Henrikson (Alaska State Museum), who removed the top part of the trap to prevent its loss due to erosion.
- ◆ Remainder of the trap salvaged in 1991 as a joint project of Sealaska Corporation, the City & Borough of Juneau, the Alaska State Museum, and the Aak'w Kwaan.
- ◆ Trap is 2.8 meters (9.2 feet) long, 1 meter (3.3 feet) wide.
- ◆ Analysis indicates longitudinal staves of hemlock (i.d. by Bruce Hoadley), hoops of spruce branch (Royal British Columbia Museum), and lashings of spruce root (Helen Alten/Jon Loring).
- ◆ Radiocarbon dating (Washington State University) indicates the trap is 500-700 years old.
- ◆ First trap of its kind to be excavated on the Northwest Coast.
- ◆ Thought to have been made by ancestors of the Tlingit people.

Montana Creek Fish Trap Replica Project Receives Two National Awards

In August 2006, the Juneau-Douglas City Museum received two awards from the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) for the Montana Creek Fish Trap Project. The project received the association's merit award which is presented to history institutions for excellence in history programs, projects, and individual achievement. In addition to the merit award, the project was deemed highly inspirational, exhibiting exceptional scholarship, and unusual and exceptional creativity, and was awarded a WOW award by the association.

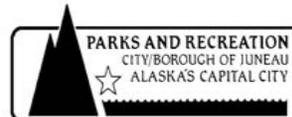


The Montana Creek fish trap replica project was supported in part by Sealaska Corporation, and by a grant from the Alaska Humanities Forum and the National Endowment for the Humanities, a federal agency. Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



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.

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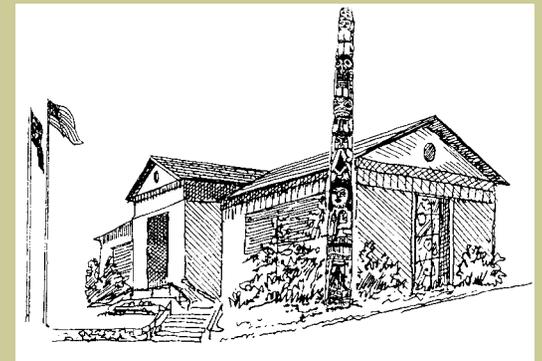


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The Montana Creek Fish Trap

Kaxdegoowu Héen Sháali

Facts & History



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 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.

Excavation

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 trail-head 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 Carlee, JDCM Curator of Collections & Exhibits, works on the Montana Creek fish trap at the Alaska State Museum.

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 would have directed the fish to the opening.

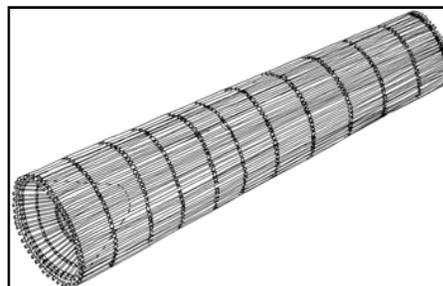
Conservation

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. 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 (ASM) 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.

Significance of the Trap

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 of the Dog Salmon Clan 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 probably relied on 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, which was determined by radiocarbon dating to be 500-700 years old.



Sketch of the replica based on measurements from the Montana Creek fish trap.

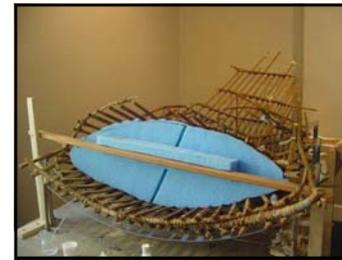
Drawing by Steve Henriksen.

Frequently Asked Questions

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

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 the camp. Logically, if there were more than one trap found at a



Reconstructing the Montana Creek fish trap at the City Museum.

location, the likelihood increases 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. 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 pulled to allow the fish to move along to the next family's trap.

4. What time of year were fish traps used?

Spring and summer. Based on known past runs in that particular stream (from oral tradition and family/clan right to know this information), the traps would be placed when the run was for that particular 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 may have been caught in the trap. Coho, pinks, and chum also went up Montana Creek, although the trap opening may have been too small for salmon. No eulachon and no king salmon went up Montana Creek.

7. How else were fish caught?

In recent times, the Tlingits gaffed fish out of Montana Creek.