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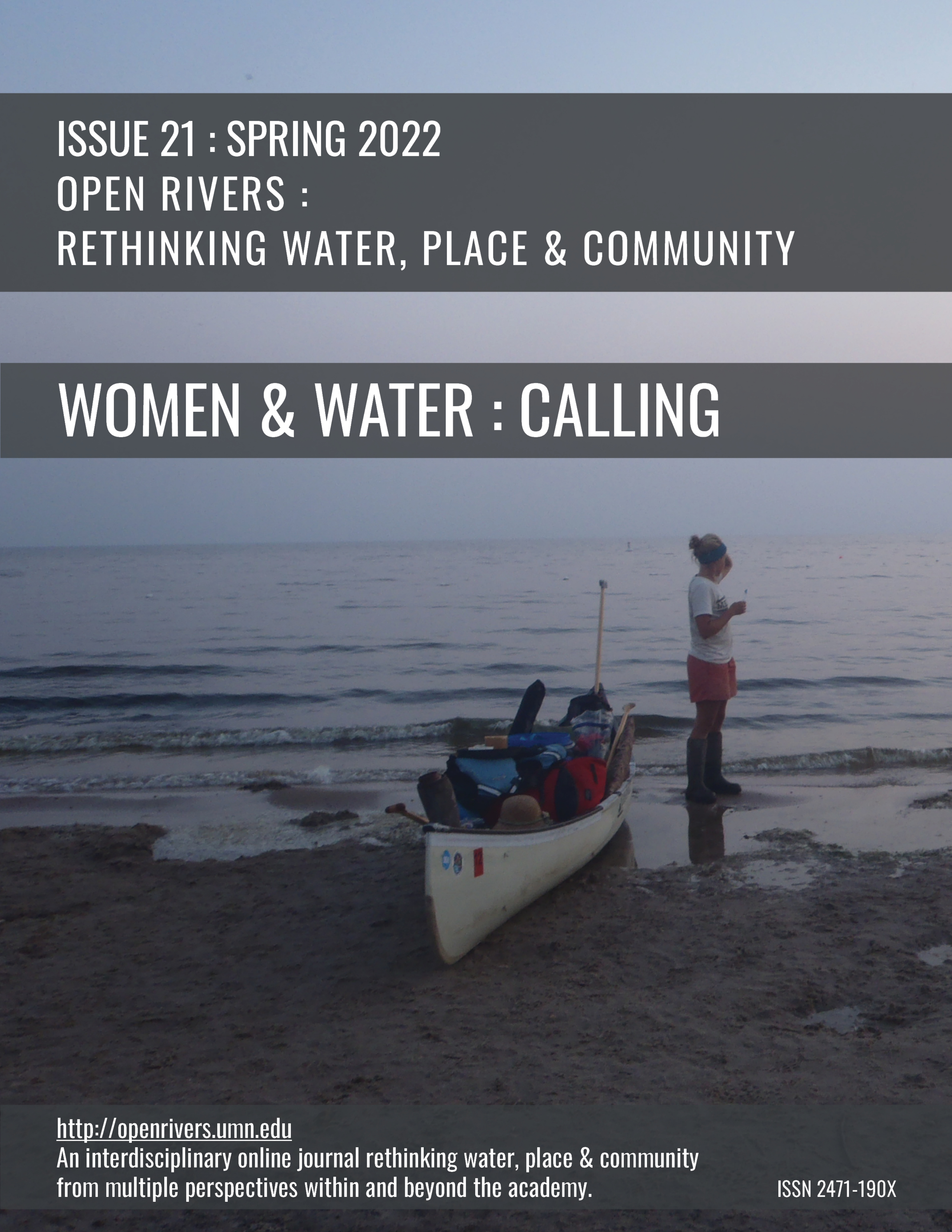
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

WOMEN & WATER : CALLING



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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image of Ann Raiho with a canoe, is courtesy of Natalie Warren.

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FEATURE

MARINERS, MAKERS, MATRIARCHS: CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COAST SALISH WOMEN & WATER

By Alexandra M. Peck

Water as Key to Coast Salish Womanhood

In the Pacific Northwest, where masculinity is often romanticized and associated with the luscious, rugged evergreen landscape, problematic gendered and geographic tropes maintain a tight grip. The region's mountains and waterways are frequently linked to male exploration, adventure, and conquest. Questioning this emphasis on masculinity, this article employs Native case studies from western Washington and southwestern British Columbia—the traditional homelands of Coast Salish tribes—to examine the historical ways in which Coast Salish women interacted with, navigated, and depended upon water in their daily lives. Despite settler colonial attempts to associate femininity with domesticity or docility, Indigenous women were not confined

Detail From Figure 8. Point Hudson, a well-known camping spot for Indigenous individuals who were traveling to hop fields in search of work. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

to private spheres or bound to the land. Rather, Coast Salish women were mobile mariners who regularly accessed waterways for trade routes and crop cultivation, as well as for maintaining crucial family ties and economic independence. Activities conducted by women demanded mastery of canoes and careful study of water. Familiarity and interactions with maritime sites allowed Coast Salish women to adeptly adapt to a rapidly changing society introduced by nineteenth-century European arrival. By relying upon waterways, water knowledge, and maritime skills, Indigenous women preserved their cultural authority and autonomy. Citing Coast Salish examples, this article highlights the ways in which Coast Salish women used water to subvert patriarchal and settler colonial expectations of femininity before, during, and after the early colonial period.

Prior to settler colonialism, women traveled along maritime routes to visit relatives, trade with tribal allies, seek shelter during hardship, and marry outside of their villages to increase their community's standing. Salish wooly dogs, whose fur was spun by women to weave impressive textiles and secure a woman's high socio-political status, were segregated on small islands accessible via canoe. Diatomaceous "clay," formed from the skeletal remains of algae and used as an important insecticide for wool garments, was located in wetlands and tsunami zones guarded carefully by women. As settler colonial imposition interrupted and restricted these water-based practices, Coast Salish women gradually lost control of their connections and legal claims to maritime environments. These included the camas prairies, which necessitated careful riparian travel and which represented land plots that Native women formerly owned. Sensing that their homelands and waterways were under threat in the late 1800s, Coast Salish women began to work in mining and canning operations where their specialized maritime knowledge proved extremely desirable. As hop farming gained popularity, Native women took advantage of the seasonal travel by collecting basketry materials from wetlands and selling their woven vessels in metropolitan centers. Even as female maritime practices changed drastically throughout the pre-colonial and colonial periods, Coast Salish women imagined new ways to maintain connections to water. In doing so, these powerful women also retained female independence and preserved Coast Salish definitions of femininity as autonomous and mobile. Subverting the white male gaze was no easy task and, as this article demonstrates, necessitated creative approaches.

Pre-Colonial Female Autonomy & Financial Independence

Rather than hoarding wealth or limiting definitions of community membership, pre-colonial Coast Salish society aimed to grow as large as possible. Although women clearly possessed reproductive abilities that led to larger communities, a woman's kin and trade networks were arguably of more importance (Walter 2006). "The more relatives one had dispersed over the widest range of microenvironments, the greater the potential for exchange of scarce raw materials, finished goods, and services" (Collins 1979: 250). Mobility was of utmost importance to Coast Salish women who were encouraged and expected to marry outside of their immediate tribal nation (Peck 2021). After marriage, women would generally relocate to their husband's village while traveling back to their "motherland" territory throughout the year. These trips were taken in canoes with women navigating rivers and coastlines that functioned as ancient highway systems (Figures 1–2). A large, extended kin network was highly coveted for increased trade, alliances during times of conflict, a healthy gene pool, and broader access to diverse resources and territories (Wellman 2017, 2019). By marrying those from other Coast Salish communities, Indigenous women increased their family's influence and gained wealth. Women with strong family connections and trade networks were highly valued as marriage partners because they were viewed as well-traveled, industrious entrepreneurs (McIlwraith 1948).

In pre-colonial Coast Salish society, a woman's ability to create and inherit wealth via crops and handiwork granted her seemingly "unlimited status and authority" (Littlefield 1995: 52). The flexible nature of Coast Salish culture allowed for individuals to occupy different social ranks at different times in their lives, with community members often gaining or losing prestige, rather than being prescribed an immutable status at birth (Peck 2020). Women's property rights were well established, as nineteenth-century ethnographer George Gibbs (1877: 187) reported when he observed that "men own property distinct from their wives," with women owning "her private effects" such as "blankets…mats and baskets." Elmendorf (1974) noted that a Coast Salish woman would inherit property from both her father and her mother. Similarly, when a woman's parents died, or when a woman entered marriage, she received an inheritance from her family. Unlike a dowry, the payment remained a Coast Salish woman's distinct property throughout her marriage (Littlefield 1995).

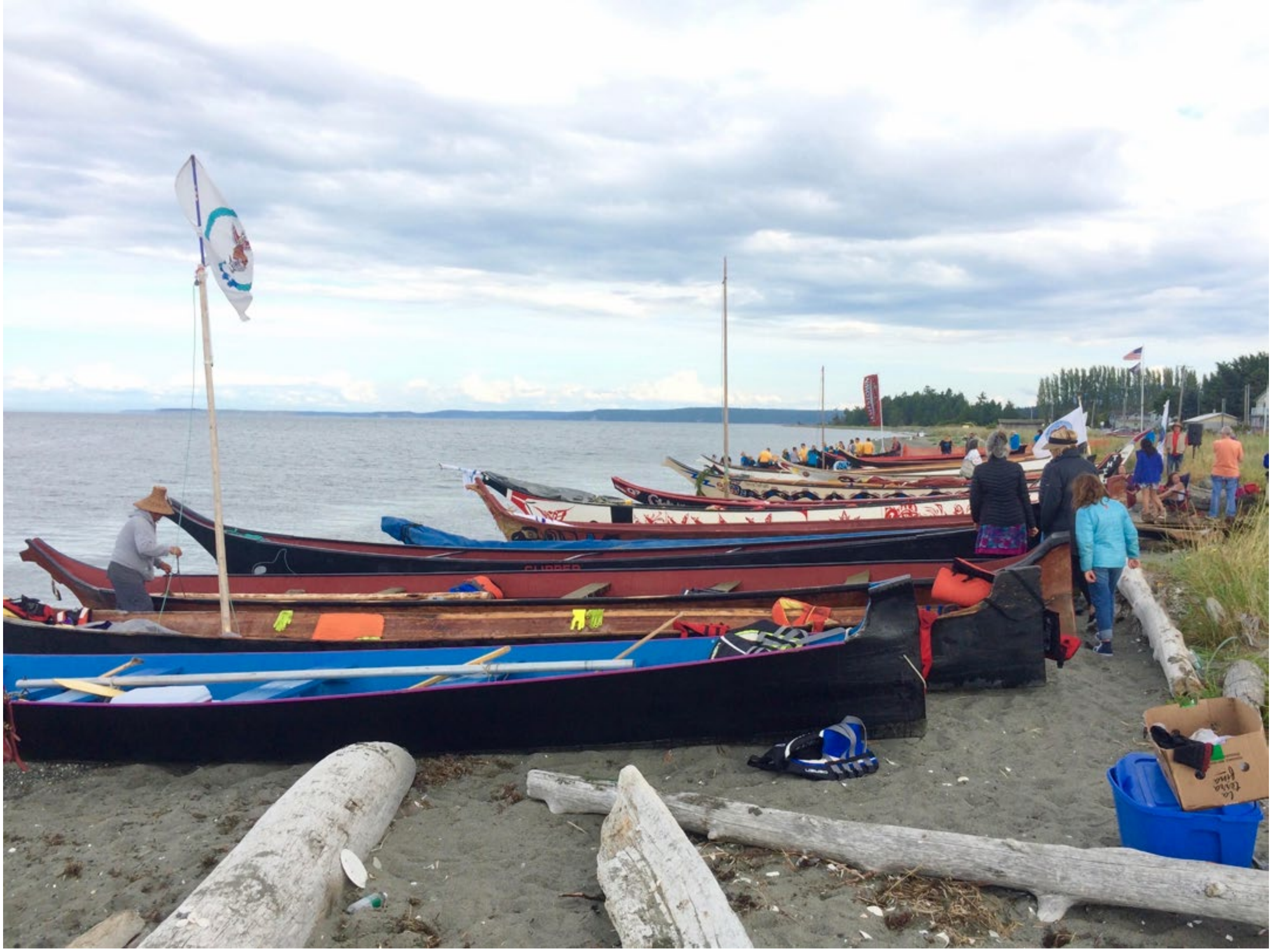


Figure 1. Located at Jamestown Beach in Washington, these contemporary Coast Salish canoes are carved by hand and resemble historical Coast Salish vessels. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

Salish Wooly Dogs as Maritime & Economic Mainstays

Prior to European exploration of Coast Salish territory in the late 1700s—and eventual settler colonial arrival in the mid-1800s—Coast Salish women domesticated Salish wooly dogs. This medium-sized dog breed was highly valued for its white or light brown fur, which was sheared and spun to create clothing, regalia, and blankets (Figure 3) (Tepper 2008). Breeding dogs for their use in fiber arts was rare in pre-colonial North America, making this Coast Salish example a particularly unique one (Gustafson 1980).

Resembling a white, downy Pomeranian, Salish wooly dogs were bred by Coast Salish women primarily for their fur, although the small canines were also trained as seeing-eye dogs, guard dogs, and were even credited with taking care of young children when their parents were away. Yet, by 1866, Salish wooly dogs were rendered extinct with the introduction of sheep's wool and European-style attire (Figure 4) (Stopp 2012).

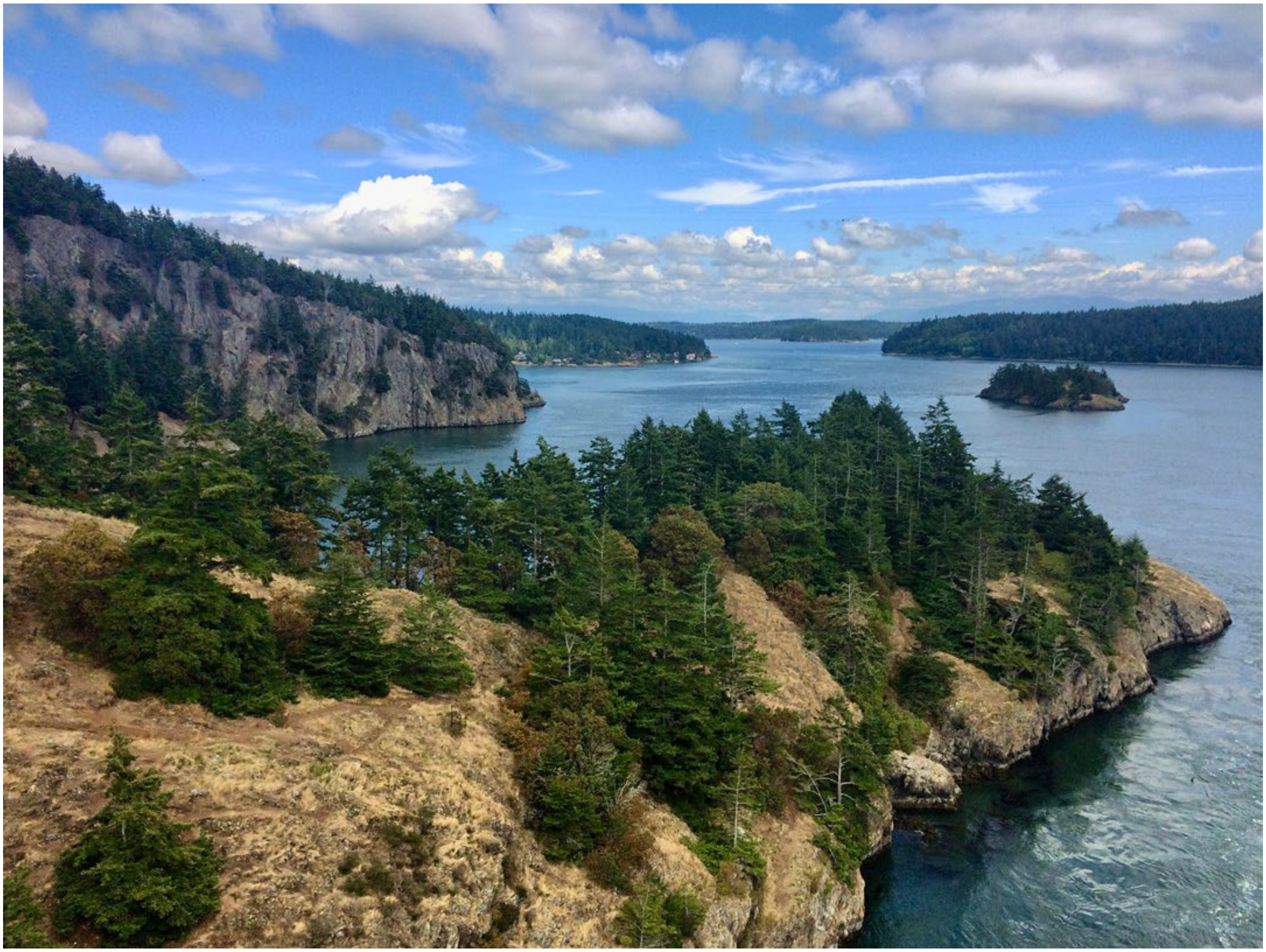


Figure 2. Deception Pass, a waterway that connects the Strait of Juan de Fuca to Skagit Bay in northwestern Washington, has been navigated by Coast Salish women in canoes for millennia. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

To prevent Salish wooly dogs from breeding with other local dog breeds, as well as to protect them from coyotes and other dangers, Coast Salish women used canoes to transport the wooly white creatures to isolated islands. Islands were usually located near villages, where women could regularly tend to the dogs or remain with them while raising their pups. Although it could be argued that Salish wooly dogs were reared solely by women because of the dogs' role in weaving (traditionally, a female activity), women's participation in dog-keeping was reflective of the economic, cultural, and political influence that women held in Coast Salish society. Myron Eells, a Congregationalist missionary who lived on various Coast Salish reservations throughout the 1800s, noted that a Coast Salish woman's wealth depended upon how many Salish wooly dogs she owned (Castile 1985). Weavers were considered women of high status, despite that Europeans viewed the art form as a lowly craft that was not considered "high art" (Ariss 2019).

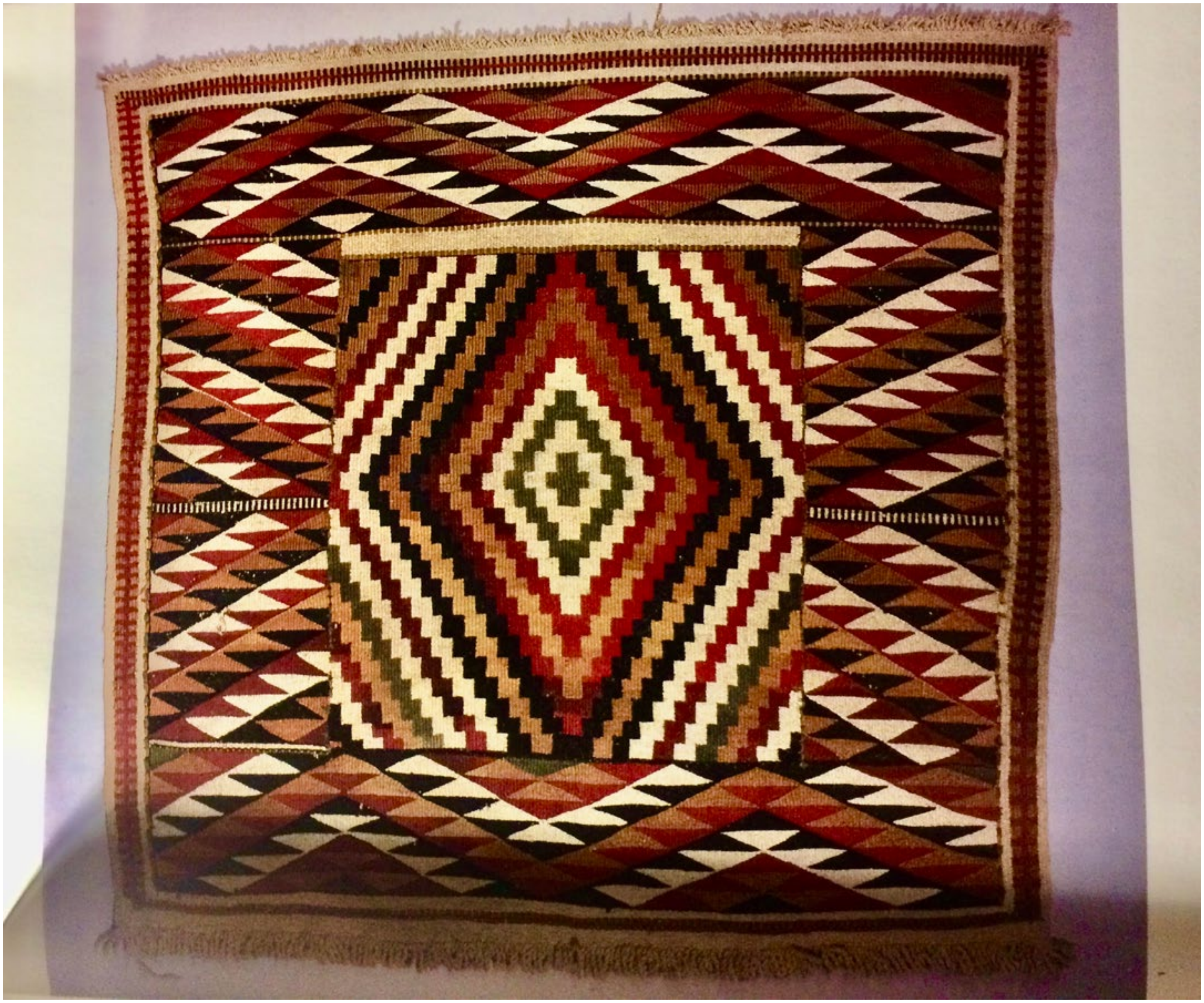


Figure 3. A Coast Salish weaving (circa pre-1841) created from spun and dyed Salish wooly dog fur. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

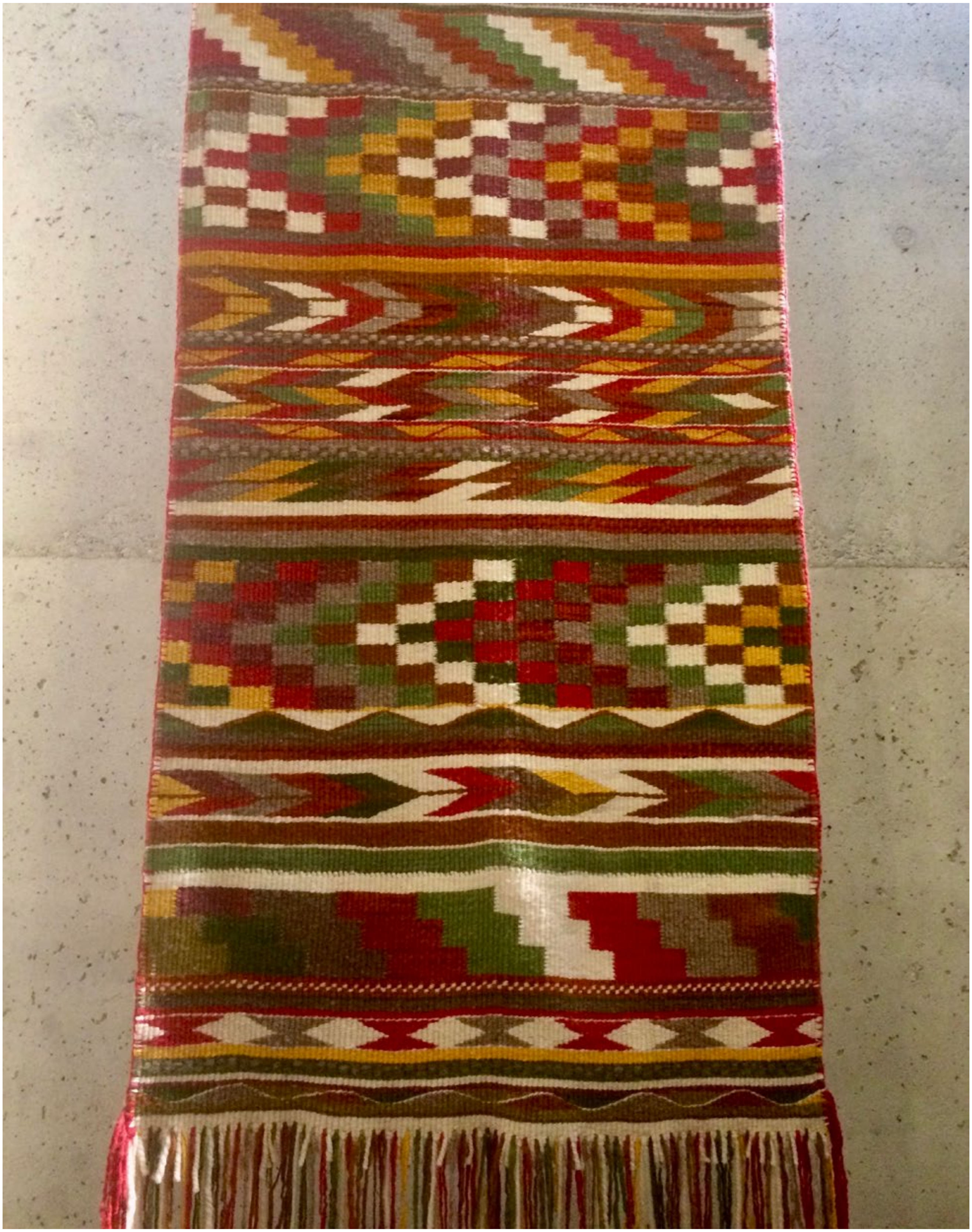
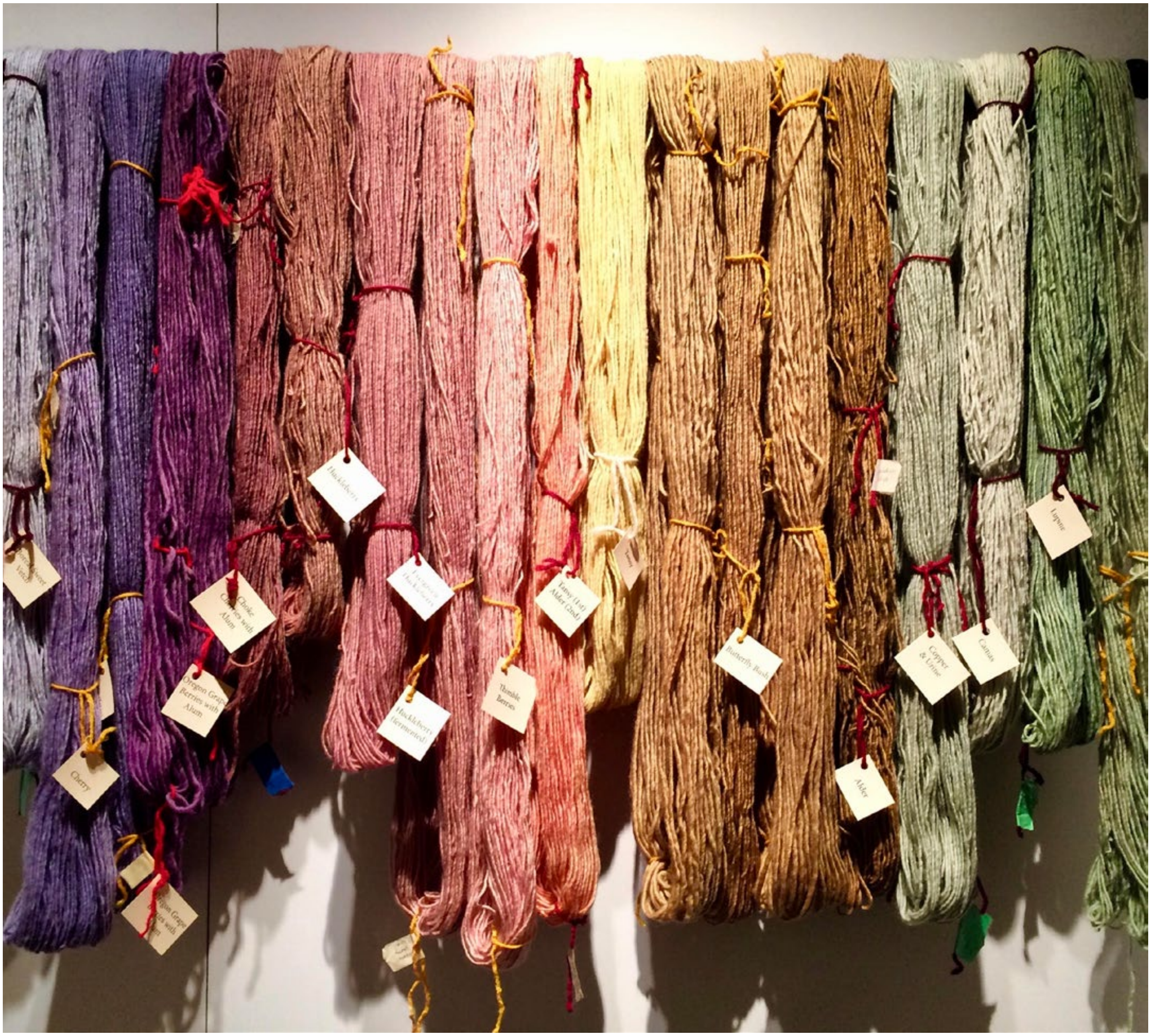


Figure 4. Modern Coast Salish textile created by Coast Salish (Musqueam) weavers Debra & Robyn Sparrow. Made in 1999, this piece is woven with dyed sheep wool and uses traditional Coast Salish geometric motifs. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

Unspun dog fur was used as currency and held monetary value (Stopp 2012). Other fibers, such as fireweed, feathers, or cattails, were sometimes also integrated into strands of Salish wooly dog yarn, which made the wool softer, bulkier, and warmer (Olsen 2009). Although rare, mountain goat wool was often collected from high alpine mountains and then combined with Salish wooly dog fur while spinning the yarn (Hammond-Kaarremaa 2018). In the early twentieth century, a Snuneymuxw man described the exchange of bales of Salish wooly dog fur and mountain goat wool between local Indigenous communities. He witnessed women "taking a little wool away or adding some to a bale until both were happy that it was a fair exchange," revealing



Huckleberry
Choke Cherries with Alum
Oregon Grape Berries with Alum
Cherry
Huckleberry (fermented)
Thimble Berries
Tansy (1st) Alder (2nd)
Butterfly Bush
Alder
Copper & Urine
Camas
Lupine

Figure 5. A collection of naturally dyed sheep yarn displaying a rainbow of colors created from berries, lichen, minerals, and wildflowers. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

that women were highly involved with trade and economic transactions, rather than solely with raising Salish wooly dogs and weaving their fur (Hammond-Kaarremaa 2018: 5).

Likewise, spinning yarn occupied a substantial percentage of women's time. This task, performed with a decorated stone or wooden spindle whorl, was generally undertaken during menstruation, when discomfort and a need to be close to the home were also greater (Gustafson 1980). Once completed, the yarn (whose tones reflected the white, cream, and light- and dark-brown fur of Salish wooly dogs) was sometimes dyed with plants, roots, berries, or fungi to create brilliant blues, greens, reds, yellows, and purples. Dyes were created by combining the plant materials with boiling water, concentrating the concoction, and adding the yarn to steep for hours (Figure 5). Once the yarn was prepared for weaving, blankets, robes, skirts, bags, and other textiles were created on an upright loom.

Diatomaceous "Clay" & Ancient Tsunami Narratives

In addition to cordoning off dogs on remote islands, water played another important part in the production and preservation of Salish wooly dog textiles. Upon inspecting Coast Salish wool weavings housed within museum collections, Hammond-Kaarremaa (2016) identified a dried white powder that was pounded into the yarn. Resembling a clay-like substance, the powder proved to be not clay at all upon further testing, but rather diatomaceous earth. This organic matter was harvested by Coast Salish women who then processed the material for use in wool weaving. Representing ancient water sources and the organisms that once thrived in these archaic waterways, diatomaceous earth provided women with another link to the maritime past.

What purpose did this mysterious, diatomaceous substance serve? Hammond-Kaarremaa (2016: 144-145) explains that algae skeletons are hollow, making "diatomaceous earth suitable for use in filters, such as those used in swimming pools. They are also safe for filtering drinking water and foodstuffs, such as honey or syrup." When applied to wool, diatomaceous earth allows liquid (such as water, grease, or sweat) to flow through the fiber, rather than allowing the fiber to absorb these liquids. Although diatomaceous earth particles are non-toxic for human consumption (and are often an ingredient in modern cosmetics), the substance kills small insects. The microscopic particles rupture the exoskeletons of insects (including fleas). A natural insecticide, diatomaceous earth was applied to wool as a means of ridding the fiber of pests that may have originated with Salish wooly dogs. It is for this reason that diatomaceous earth is sold today at garden stores, where customers buy the product to control slugs and other bugs in their home gardens.

Franz Boas (1891), James Swan (1870), and Paul Kane (1859) noted that this white powder appeared to "cure" and clean the wool that was then woven into detailed Coast Salish blankets. Amy Cooper, a Sto:lo Elder, recalls that diatomaceous earth served multiple purposes. In addition to cleaning the wool, applying the powder kept the fiber from slipping while it was spun into yarn. She described diatomaceous earth as similar to talcum powder in this way (Wells et al. 1987). Boas (1891) suggested that finished weavings were sometimes doused in diatomaceous earth, meaning that the product would likely be used to quell any outbreaks of lice, moths, or fleas that sometimes appear within household settings.

Historically, tribal informants did not reveal to ethnographers where the substance originated from. A Penelakut man interviewed in the 1930s stated that he knew of a local source, but that he would not divulge it (Hammond-Kaarremaa

2016). This demonstration of ethnographic refusal speaks to how Indigenous individuals attempted to protect natural and cultural resources from the prying eyes of non-native individuals, as well as how women's traditional ecological knowledge was safeguarded by men in the community. Today, diatomaceous earth can be found at a variety of lakes and mountains in Coast Salish territory, in addition to other sites that are not publicly shared by Coast Salish tribal nations.

Interestingly, diatomaceous "clay" is also found in regions that were inundated by tsunamis where flooding created a distinctive diatom (algae) layer seen in soil samples (Hutchinson et al. 2005). Although such sites are no longer underwater today, the layers of diatomaceous mud serve as a visible reminder of tsunami activity. This is one reason why diatomaceous earth is found within mountain ranges or in other high elevation areas. It is no coincidence that Coast Salish women knew where to access this mucky resource. Many Coast Salish tribes in Washington possess oral histories that recall nine recent tsunami events which occurred within a rapid period of 2,500 years. Remembering the massive floods retold by their foremothers, Coast Salish female descendants maintained tangible connections to these monumental water events and these cultural heroines by gathering diatomaceous earth for weaving.

Cultivating Camas & Early Settler Colonial Threats

In addition to Salish wooly dog fiber and diatomaceous earth, Coast Salish women tended to other water-dependent resources that reflected advanced ecological knowledge. Camas cultivation—the act of planting and harvesting a prolific blue flower with an edible bulb—was an activity that fell under female purview and necessitated the use of waterways. This activity began during the pre-colonial era and continued, in decreased fashion, throughout the colonial period. A plant native to North America, camas bulbs resemble potatoes in their taste and consistency. The starchy food source proved to be a pre-colonial staple in Coast Salish diets, with women preparing the root in a variety of ways: roasted in underground ovens, boiled and mashed, or dried and later milled into a flour-like consistency. Women filled prairies full of camas plantings, and they tended to the bulbs year round and ensured that a healthy crop was available in May (Littlefield 1995). Upon finding fields full of blue camas blooms, early explorers in the Pacific Northwest remarked that the dense prairies resembled lakes from a distance (Figure 6).

Women owned these camas "apparitions," with camas prairies passed down through the female line (Elmendorf 1974, Peck 2021). Unless one was a member of a woman's family, or obtained permission from the Coast Salish matriarch, harvesting camas in particular fields was off-limits (Swan 1857, Drucker 1965). In response, Native women used cedar stakes as markers to communicate that their fields were neither haphazard nor "up for grabs" (Turner & Turner 2018). Littlefield (1987) speculates that camas was treated as women's individual property rather than as community or male property.

Without rivers and the Pacific Ocean, camas would not have maintained a stronghold in Coast Salish culture. Indigenous women traded with friends and relatives for new or rare varieties of camas—signaling that the cultivation of this special flower was a selective and nuanced process (Turner & Loewen 1998, Goble & Hirt 1999). With canoes filled to the brim with camas bulbs, women would paddle to distant tribal territories to barter for better bulbs. Sometimes women even planted new camas fields as a means of signaling their rights to a specific plot of land.

The historical record reveals that Coast Salish female interviewees lamented settlers' attempts to prohibit Native women from accessing camas prairies. Fences and barriers were erected to keep women from frequenting camas crops, many of which were located on estuaries. This theft of property and privatization of land and water rights threatened Coast Salish livelihood, which depended heavily upon camas. Coast Salish

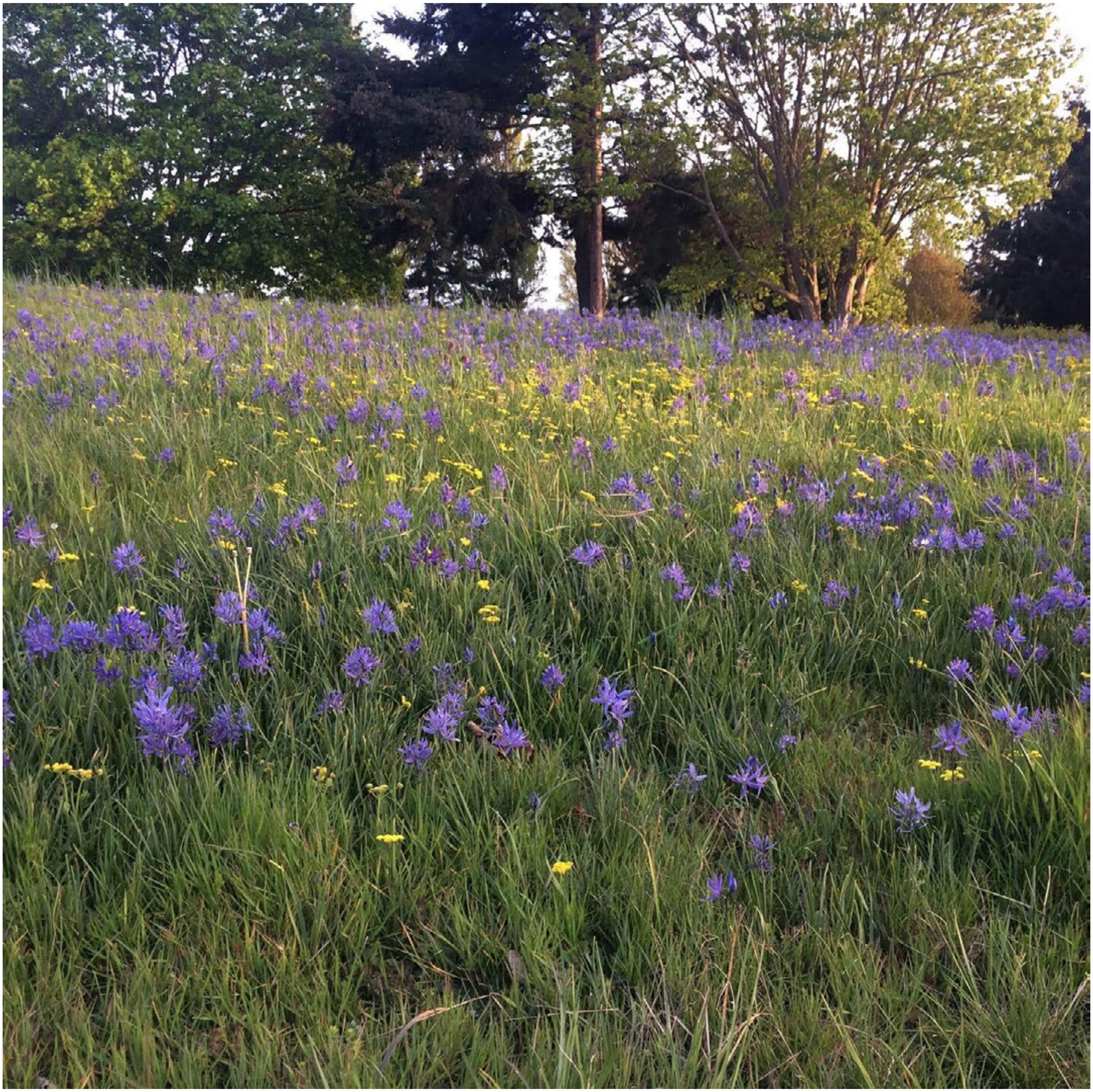


Figure 6. The camas prairie in bloom at Port Townsend, Washington, in Coast Salish (S'Klallam) territory. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

women could no longer freely canoe up and down rivers to reach their camas plots, which were now deemed the property of non-native landowners. This led to an extreme camas shortage and, in some cases, severe hunger amongst nineteenth-century Coast Salish families. By limiting women's movements—as well as their culinary and economic opportunities—European settlers ensured that the oppression of Native women was tied to the conquering and taming of the local landscape. Livestock further decimated these root crops and discouraged women from returning to their fields where they could be charged with trespassing.

Valuing Women's Water Expertise in New Settler Economies

As settler colonial arrival increased and denial of Indigenous sovereignty grew stronger, Native women strategized creative ways to maintain their economic independence and water ties. By 1855, Coast Salish women in British Columbia began working in the mining and coal industry run by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). Because of their ancestral knowledge of maritime environments, women secured specialized employment that allowed them to maintain relationships with important waterways. In addition to employing Coast Salish women to clean and salt salmon at trading posts, the HBC relied upon women to transport coal (dug by men) in woven baskets and canoes. Women generally earned more than men for their labor and were also hired to gather shells for the production of lime used for construction projects. Coast Salish women also washed and performed household chores during this time. Because no running or piped water systems existed yet, Native women were highly sought after for this job because they knew where freshwater springs were located. Water was then carted back to HBC settlements to be used for cooking and cleaning (Littlefield 1995). Processing fish, weaving and canoeing, collecting shellfish, and identifying potable water sources were all duties that Coast Salish women were familiar with (Norton 1985). These jobs—although occurring in a settler colonial setting—granted Coast Salish women some semblance of autonomy, preserved women's ecological knowledge, and gave women the opportunity to revisit significant cultural sites.

In the 1860s, the HBC's mining interests in Nanaimo, British Columbia, were transferred to the Vancouver Coal Mining & Land Company. As a result, Coast Salish women were excluded from mining work and became segregated from their male relatives. This pattern carried over to mills, which soon became dominated by men, although there exist accounts of Coast Salish women who participated in logging (Roy & Taylor 2012). Unlike mining and milling, fish and shellfish canneries welcomed female labor, including processing salmon, sewing broken nets, digging for clams, and paddling small vessels (Littlefield 1995). Women and young children bound for canneries traveled long distances for work (Williams 2005). This freedom mirrored Coast Salish women's trade and travel routes during the pre-colonial era, but because salmon and clam canning took place during the summertime, Native women were granted less time to harvest their own foods (Turner & Turner 2018). While canneries fostered a physical link between Indigenous women and the maritime environment, these processing plants also functioned to sever women from traditional harvesting grounds. Some canneries were located on former village sites where Coast Salish women had formerly lived and worked for thousands of years (Figure 7). These places undoubtedly represented a bittersweet "homecoming" for such women who now found themselves employed on their ancestral lands.

Hop Fields as Sites of Female Resistance

Occurring concurrently with cannery labor, hop fields formed in the Pacific Northwest throughout the 1860s–1880s. Owned mainly by white farmers and businessmen who would sell the hops to brewers for the burgeoning beer industry, some hop fields were owned and operated by interracial couples. These partnerships usually included a white husband and Coast Salish wife, with Coast Salish wives supplying labor for the fields through their Indigenous marriage and trade networks. Because Coast Salish women maintained active ties to family members that extended throughout British Columbia and beyond, women invited their distant relatives to work for their family's hop fields (Littlefield 1995). For many Indigenous women, hop-picking was a welcome reprieve because of the opportunity to travel far from the watchful eyes of Indian agents and missionaries located on reservations.

Some hop farmers and investors chose former camas prairies for their hop fields (Raibmon 2006). Prairies did not contain large cedar trees that needed to be cleared; they were often level plots of land, and prairie soil was naturally high quality and well drained. When women relocated

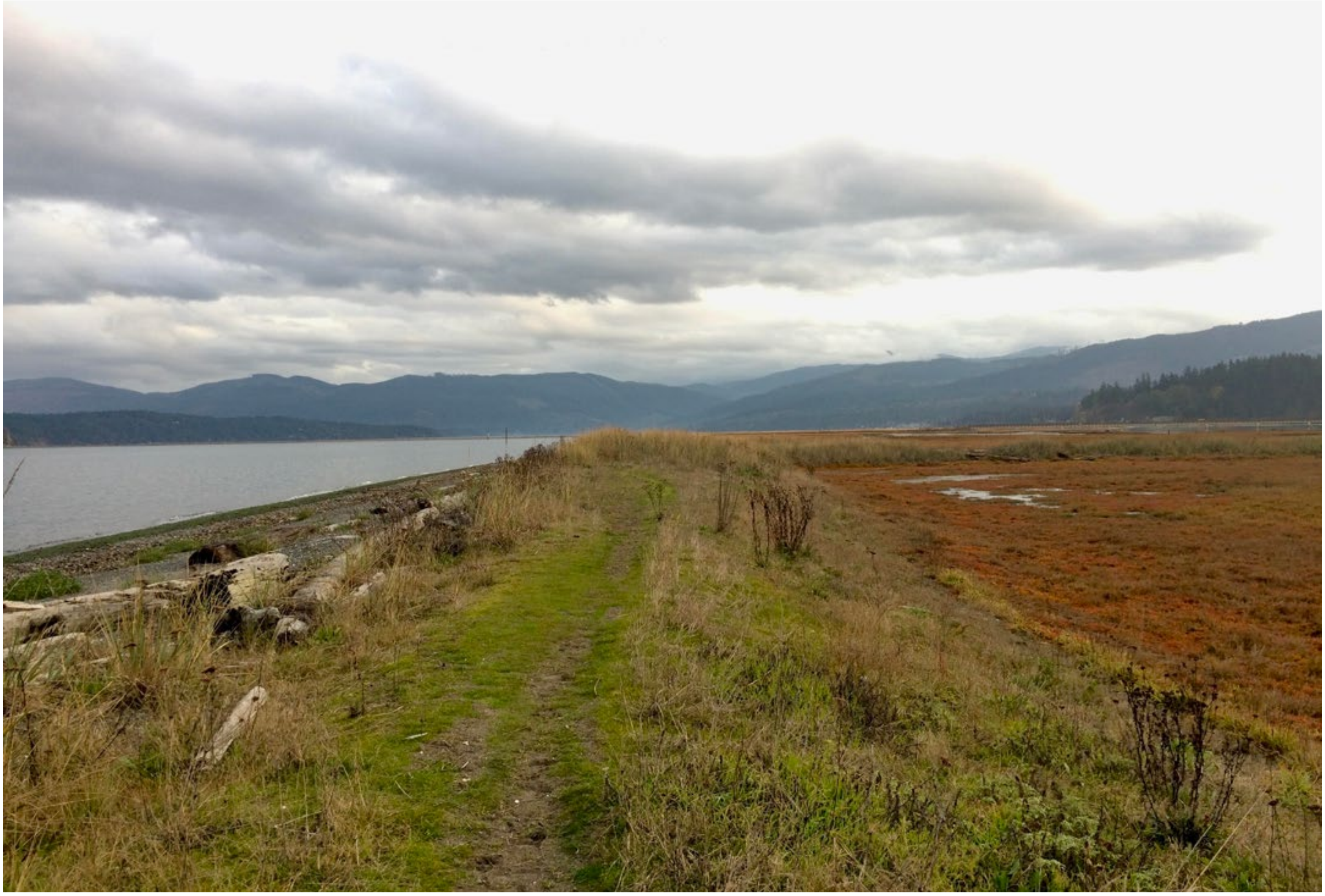


Figure 7. Washington Harbor where the S'Klallam village of Sxʷčkʷíyəŋ was once located. Housing 10 longhouses, the village was forced to disband in the 1880s when a clam cannery was founded at the same site. S'Klallam men and women worked for the cannery until the 1960s when it closed. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

to work at hop fields, they were revisiting the prairies that they and their female ancestors had formerly owned and tilled. Perhaps symbolizing a somber memory, working in hop fields brought Coast Salish women back to their homelands and allowed them to earn money while doing so.

Although agriculture (such as hop picking) might have been viewed as hard labor suited for masculine hands in European settings, Coast Salish women were preferred as hop-picking employees even if they were elderly or had newborn children in tow. Employers noted that Coast Salish women were faster and more competent workers than men. This can be attributed to women's familiarity with prairies and local growing conditions, the sense of camaraderie and support that likely existed in a majority female workplace, and the important role that female wage earning played in Coast Salish society.

Additionally, Coast Salish women employed traditional methods to gather hops, which led to the appearance of increased productivity, and in turn, higher wages. Their secret? Women used their own woven baskets while hop picking. The soft, pliable bottom of a basket—rather than a hard, wooden box that a hop farm provided—kept hops from being compressed when additional hops were added to the basket. Because wages were earned by the number of containers a woman filled per day, using a soft, lightweight basket led to a quicker fill because the fresh hops were kept from being flattened (Raibmon 2006). Non-native hop farmers, unversed in Coast Salish basketry, did not realize that this sleight of hand had taken place. Thus, the fine handiwork that produced basketry complemented women's work in the hop fields.

The Role of Maritime Travel in Weaving & Basketry

While spending the summers picking hops, women traveled to nearby cities (such as Seattle) to sell fish and shellfish to non-native customers. Such trips were relatively short, but not without careful planning. Temporary shelters were needed for these jaunts, especially because Pacific Northwest cities and towns often banned Indigenous individuals from inhabiting urban areas. Women would camp along local beaches and wetlands outside of city limits while traveling, sleeping beneath the cover of tule mats that were well suited to the women's on-the-move lifestyles (Figure 8). Ever resourceful, Coast Salish women harvested the stalks of tule reeds which conveniently grew in freshwater ponds and lakes (Figures 9-10). The long reeds were then stripped and sewed together to create large, flat mats (Tepper 2008). When draped over wooden frames or branches, tule mats could be used as waterproof tents or room dividers, with mats providing shade, insulation, and doubling as makeshift mattress pads.

Maritime campsites granted women the opportunity to gather other roots and grasses in "watery places," including tidal flats, cranberry bogs, marshes, and eelgrass beds (Turner et al. 2003). These materials were important to the survival of Coast Salish basketry, a utilitarian art form that women continued to rely upon (Williams 2005). Although baskets were tools used in the hop fields, the woven containers were dual purpose. Intricate baskets accompanied their Coast Salish makers to urban markets where women would sell the decorated vessels to tourists (Figures 11–12) (Raibmon 2006). Amounting to about a dollar per day, hop picking was not a lucrative business. Selling baskets to unsuspecting non-indigenous customers, on the other hand, allowed Coast Salish women to determine the price of their wares. Knowing that customers would pay high prices for their basketry, Coast Salish women took advantage of urban passersby and their naive fascination with Indigenous culture.

If not for access to waterways and knowledge of how to handle canoes, as well as participation in hop picking on former camas prairies, Coast Salish basketry may not have emerged in cosmopolitan settings. As Raibmon (2006: 26) argues, "participation in wage labor did not entail an end to…resource harvesting that had defined these communities for countless generations, nor did Indigenous workers simply participate in parallel but unconnected economies." Rather, women adapted to their sometimes dire circumstances and called upon ancestral customs to endure a rapidly changing world. Coast Salish women covertly altered traditional patterns of femininity and financial freedom while earning wages in settler society. Much of their success relied upon creatively retaining access to waterways. Doing so increased female mobility, facilitated trade and economic opportunities, and encouraged women's continued access to private property (in the form of crops and natural resources that were then transformed into material wealth, such as baskets).

Figure 8. Point Hudson, a well-known camping spot for Indigenous individuals who were traveling to hop fields in search of work. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

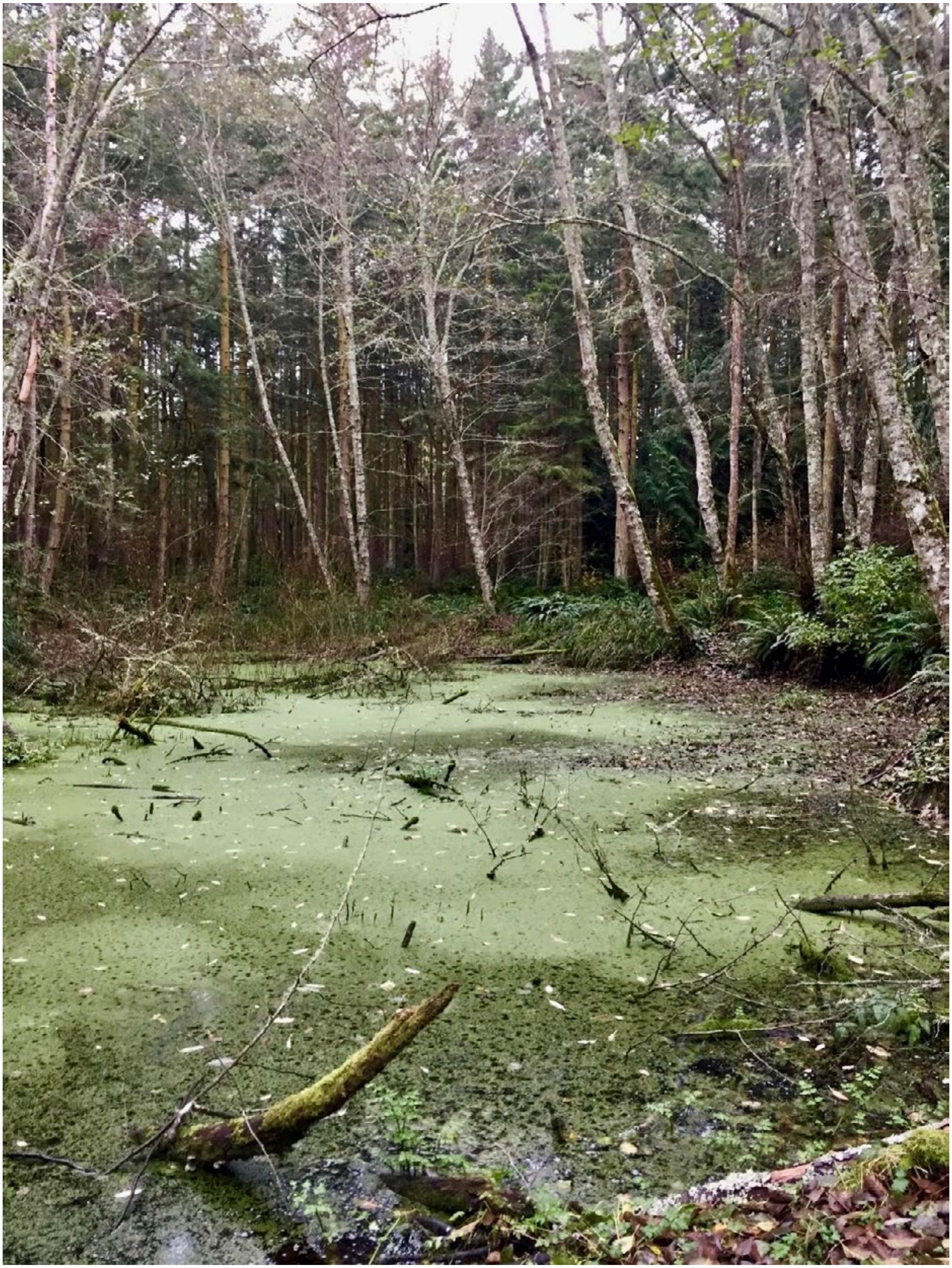


Figure 9. Ivy Street Wetland on the Olympic Peninsula's Quimper Wildlife Corridor. This pond is representative of other marshy areas where Coast Salish women harvested reeds and grasses. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

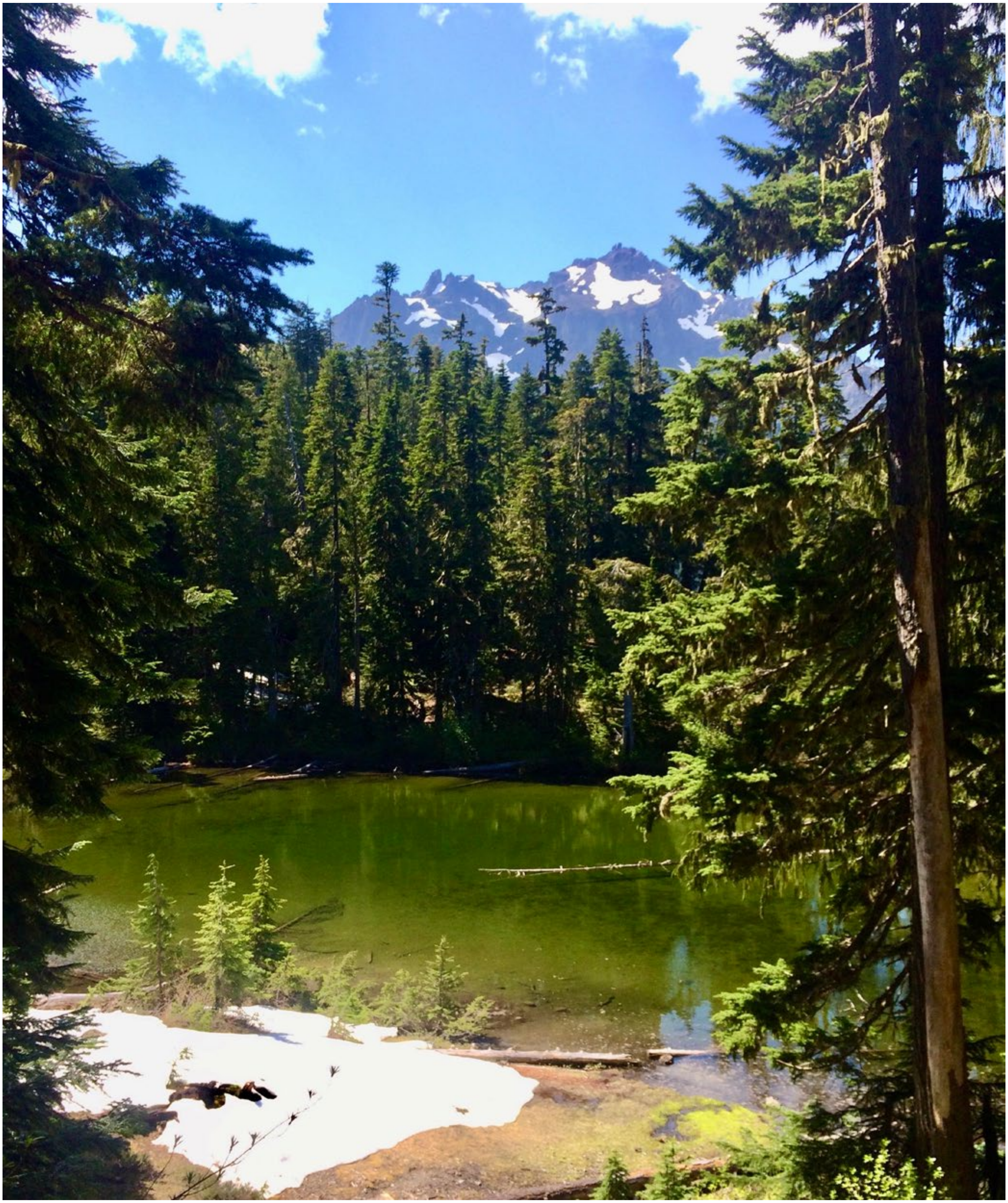


Figure 10. Harrison Lake, an alpine lake located within Washington's Buckhorn Wilderness. Alpine lakes created excellent growing conditions for tule reeds. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

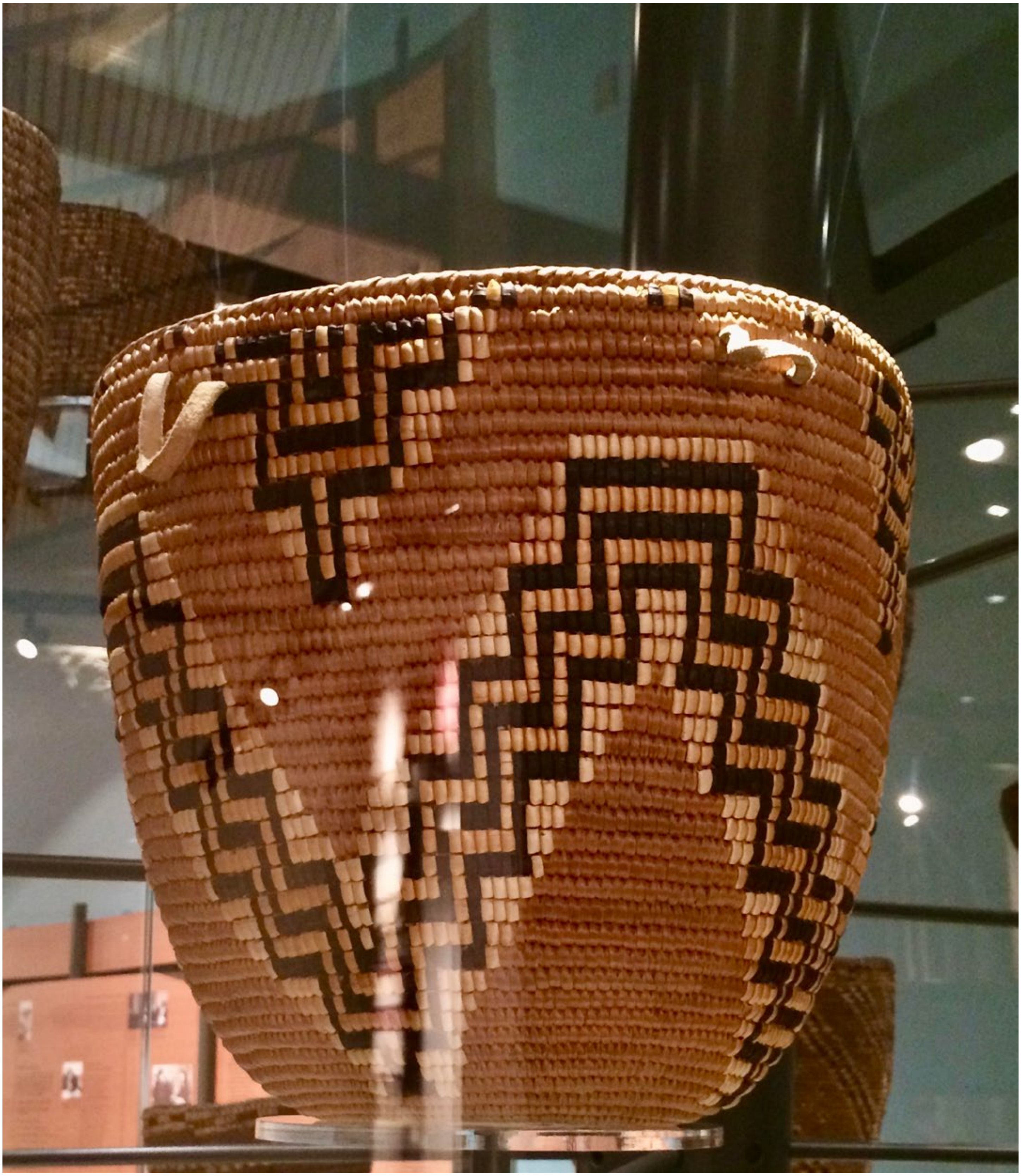


Figure 11. A berry basket woven by Coast Salish (Suquamish) weaver Lucy Riddle. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

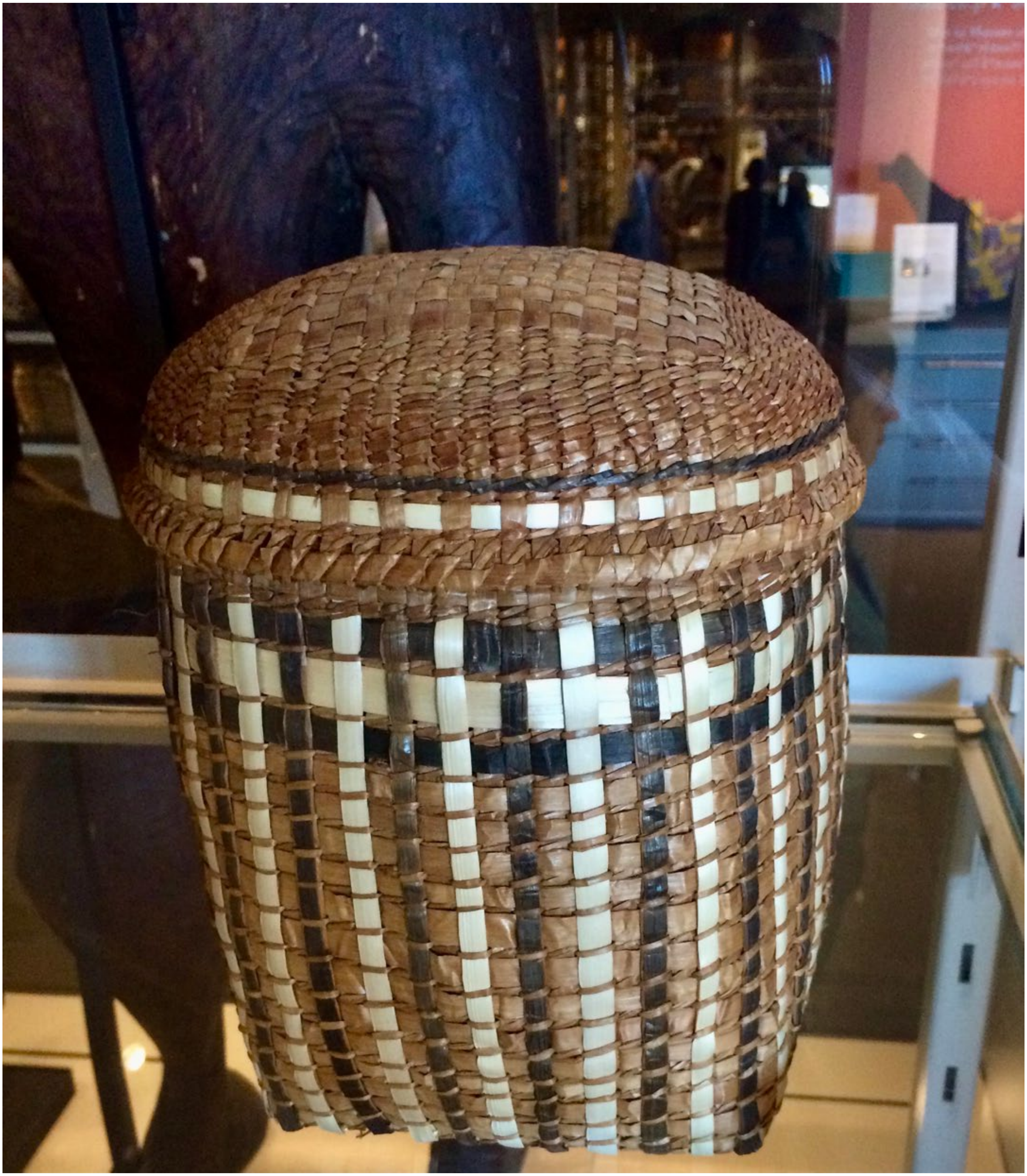


Figure 12. Basket woven by Rena Point Bolton (born 1927), a renowned Coast Salish (Sto:lo) weaver. Image courtesy of Alexandra Peck.

Recent Federal Attempts to Disenfranchise Coast Salish Women

Employment opportunities for Coast Salish women in industry gradually decreased with the rise of missionaries and influx of non-native laborers. Troubled that Native women were leaving reservations to pursue formal employment, the Canadian Superintendent of Indian Education claimed that federal policies were necessary to limit female travel and deter the "'temptations' of an independent life" (Littlefield 1995: 182). These beliefs were based on Victorian definitions of femininity as domestic or docile rather than Coast Salish notions of womanhood as public, mobile, and self-sufficient.

In response, Canada passed the Indian Act in 1876. The legislation defined who legally qualified as "Indian" in Canada and has been derided for its unjust treatment of Indigenous women (Mitchell 1979). Until the act was amended in 1985, Native women (and their children) were stripped of their status if they married a non-native man or if they moved off reservation lands (Coates 1999, Lawrence 2003). Reservation lands often consisted of poor-quality soil, were frequently flooded, were inundated with pollutants, and existed in isolated regions. These regions were not conducive to healthy lifestyles or acceptable water quality standards for harvesting and growing food. In addition, attendance at and relocation to residential schools was required under the Indian Act, with Indigenous ceremonies and gatherings (such as potlatches) also banned.

By confining women to reservations or demanding that they relocate to boarding schools, the Indian Act further limited Coast Salish female travel and economic opportunity while simultaneously demanding that women assimilate to non-native ideals of femininity and domesticity. As in the past, Coast Salish women's connections to water and land were increasingly restricted by the settler colonial gaze. By threatening women with dissolution of their Indigenous status and characterizing their identity as dependent upon marriage to a Native man, the Indian Act targeted Coast Salish women and made them extremely susceptible to cultural and familial disconnection (Lawrence 2003, Barker 2006). Native men did not face the same regulations and were instead free to marry and relocate without concerns about their (or their children's) status. The discriminatory act refused to recognize the amount of societal power that Coast Salish women had previously wielded as well as Coast Salish lineage patterns of children gaining property and ancestral rights from either parent (rather than solely through patrilineal descent) (Duff 1964, Suttles 1990).

Conclusion

The Indian Act represented female disenfranchisement. Without Indigenous status, Coast Salish women lost treaty rights, could not participate in tribal community events, would not inherit property from their family, and were even denied burial at reservation cemeteries. Unlike previously when Coast Salish women creatively utilized trade networks, wage labor, or traditional basketry to combat the new settler colonial obstacles presented to them, the Indian Act was not so easily subverted. Sensing that Coast Salish women were too independent, this federal legislation limited women's access to traditional waterways and economic opportunities. No longer was Coast Salish femininity dependent upon maritime navigation, nor was one's social status defined by intertribal familial ties, weaving skills, or property rights to camas prairies. Instead, non-native society categorized Coast Salish women by immobility, domesticity, and a monocultural (rather than multicultural) existence.

Historically, Coast Salish female identity depended upon water. Waterways provided women with countless economic opportunities, fostered family ties, created plentiful food sources, and encouraged female autonomy. Although Indigenous access to waterways and natural materials were threatened by settler colonial encroachment, Coast Salish women were ever resilient and resourceful while maintaining their independence. This was largely accomplished by altering the ways in which women accessed and utilized water sources. When settler colonial land claims and Victorian notions of femininity kept women from raising Salish wooly dogs, gathering diatomaceous clay, and cultivating camas, women turned to canning operations, hop picking, and tourist basketry as a means of maintaining connections to tidal flats, former prairies, and estuaries. Whereas women's access to water was limited and redefined during and after the initial colonial period, Indigenous entrepreneurship and adaptability persevered. These characteristics were reminiscent of pre-colonial Coast Salish society, and, like the waterways that Coast Salish women were so well acquainted with, were subject to the ebb and flow of cultural change. In addition to being the economic and social backbones of pre-colonial Coast Salish communities, colonial-era Coast Salish matriarchs redefined their roles as agents of change in the face of hardship. In doing so, they ensured that water continued to hold an important place in the Coast Salish world, albeit in slightly different ways.

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About the Author

Dr. Alexandra M. Peck is an anthropologist, art historian, and material culture specialist interested in how individuals and communities attribute meaning to objects, as well as how cultural encounters influence art production and land use. She seeks to dispel monolithic and romanticized notions of Indigeneity by raising awareness of the plurality of Native perspectives and highlighting stories that are complicated and even seemingly contradictory. A majority of her work takes place in Coast Salish territory (western Washington and southwestern British Columbia). Awarded her Ph.D. from Brown University in 2021, she is currently Visiting Scholar of Indigenous Studies (Mellon Environmental Stewardship, Place, & Community Initiative) in the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. She will soon serve as Audain Chair in Historical Indigenous Arts at the University of British Columbia's Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory.