

Riches from the Land and Sea

The Ts'msyen and other First Nations of the coast have always been blessed with a wealth of resources from the land and sea to meet their daily needs and much more.

The seasons shaped people's lives as they moved about the land and harvested what they needed. Each season brings its special bounty of plants and animals, but the return of the salmon in summer and fall was the foundation of the food supply for the coming year. Salmon was the staple food source, as it was plentiful and people were able to work together to catch, smoke and dry large amounts of it. Families or House Groups moved to salmon camps, utilising the resource year after year for untold generations.

But the Ts'msyen diet wasn't restricted to salmon. It included a rich variety of fish and shellfish from the sea, as well as tasty and nutritious oolichan and seaweed. People hunted deer, bear and mountain goat from the land, and gathered dozens of types of berries, roots and medicinal plants.

Even in winter, fresh food was available for those living on the coast, such as winter spring salmon, clams and cockles, snapper and cod. Often, however, winter brought severe weather conditions, with hurricane force southeaster storms or freezing north winds. The people depended

on the dried salmon and other food stores to survive until spring.

The land offered another gift for the Ts'msyen: the amazing and endlessly useful cedar tree. The Ts'msyen developed sophisticated technologies to make use of every part of this versatile tree. It provided transportation, housing, clothing, utensils, ceremonial regalia, tools and more.

Many generations of Ts'msyen have developed a vast knowledge of the ways of their lands and seas. As well as understanding when and where to harvest resources, this knowledge goes much deeper. It is an understanding of how plants and animals interact in the environment, and how to read the signs of nature to make important decisions for harvesting and survival. Today this understanding is called Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

Ts'msyen society was well organized to use the land respectfully, to conserve the resources and to share and trade them with others. The Ts'msyen were independent and self-sustaining people.

The Ts'msyen have never considered themselves separate from the land and its resources. Their lives in the past were lived in harmony with the land, and the riches of the land were treated with respect. Ts'msyen beliefs and cultural practices all point to this deep and lasting relationship with the land.



Medicinal Plants

Dozens of plants that grow on the Northwest Coast were used by the Ts'msyen and their neighbours, the Gitksan, Nisga'a, Haida and Haisla. Most were used for food and also for medicine. Here are just a few of the plants that can be used to make medicine.



Nancy J. Turner photo

***Huulens* (poison root, false hellebore)**

This is a powerful and dangerous plant which should only be used by those with a complete understanding of its properties. It has spiritual as well as medicinal uses. In the past it was used for purification. The medicine can be used externally for sore joints. When there is sickness in a house *huulens* may be kept on or near the stove in the kitchen to help avoid further contagion.



Nancy J. Turner photo

***K'wila'max* (Hudson's Bay tea or Labrador tea)**

This evergreen plant grows waist high and is found on muskeg. It has narrow, dark green leaves lined underneath with rust-coloured woolly hairs. It is found across northern Canada.

It is picked in the spring, summer and fall, but mostly in the summer. Tea can be made with the fresh leaves, or they can be dried. When they are dried they turn brown. They are stored in a cool dry place for the winter.

Hudson's Bay tea was used as a beverage and also as a medicine. It is said to be useful for coughs, colds and sore throats. The tea is brewed by putting a small handful of leaves in a pot of boiling water, then simmering for about half an hour. Some people mix in licorice fern root.



Nancy J. Turner photo

Luii, luwi, luuyi (red alder)

This tree provides an important wood for fuel in smokehouses because it doesn't have much pitch. It can also be used as medicine. The wood is chopped into small pieces and soaked in water to brew a drink that was traditionally used by people with stomach problems and also for sore eyes. It can be used fresh, or the inner bark can be dried.

Alder can also be used as a dye. Depending on the way it is prepared, it produces colours ranging from almost black to dark brown to a bright orange-red. Many things were dyed with alder, including cedar bark, fishing nets and lines, wood, mountain goat wool and hair. It could also be used for tattooing.



FNES photo

Maadzu'ka'am, ts'ik'a'am (licorice fern root)

This is a small fern with long roots that grows in moss and on moist rocks and tree trunks. The root tastes like licorice, hence its name. It is made into medicine for coughs and whooping cough. Roots are harvested from early spring until late fall by pulling the fern out of the ground with its roots. To make the medicine, the roots are pounded and boiled in water, then stored in a cool place.



Nancy J. Turner photo

Sahakwdak (western yew)

Long before western science learned of the cancer-healing properties of the yew tree, First Nations people made medicine from this small but strong evergreen. It is relatively rare, and one of the slowest growing trees in the world, so its wood was valuable and often traded with interior people where it doesn't grow.

Sahakwdak comes from the Sm'algyax word for bow—*hakwdak*—so you know it was prized for making bows. In fact, in many other languages around the world, the name of the tree is the word for bow, including the Latin name *Taxus*. The compound found in yew bark which is used in some modern cancer drugs is called taxol after the Latin name.



FNES photo

Steti (stinging nettle)

This plant is used around the world as a fibre and as a tea. Some First Nations people used the young shoots as a vegetable; it has a taste similar to spinach. Nettle stems can be processed to yield a very strong fibre. It has been used for centuries to make rope, clothing and nets. Some Ts'msyen people also used the roots to make a medicine. The roots are boiled until it looks like tea. It was used to help children with measles. Others used the leaves for a medicinal tea.



Nancy J. Turner photo

Wooms (Devil's club)

This is one of the most important plants to the First Nations of the coast. It is used not only for medicine, but for ceremonial and supernatural uses. However, teas made from devil's club are very potent and should be treated with great respect. It should not be used by anyone without complete knowledge and experience.

Devil's club is a low sprawling shrub with prickly spines on the veins of the broad leaves and along the greyish-brown woody stems. It is found in the woods, often along stream banks. It is a member of the ginseng family.

Ts'msyen people harvest devil's club in the spring and early summer. Only the prickly, woody stems are cut down and brought home. The medicine is prepared by first shaving off the prickly outer bark. Thin shavings of the greenish inner bark are then soaked in water for six to eight hours. The bark is removed and the water is strained into jars.

There are a number of uses for devil's club medicine. It can be used as a hair shampoo to prevent lice and dandruff. In the past men would rub the bark on their bodies to camouflage their smell and ensure good luck before a hunting or fishing trip, and fishing nets are sometimes still washed with it. It can be used as an emetic and purifier, or as a medicine to cure many illness.