

SKINS & FURS



Sim'oogit Israel Sgat'iin, Gisk'ansnaat Laxgibuu.

Although bear skin robes similar to this were common, Sim'oogit Sgat'iin was the only Nisga'a with the hereditary right to wear a robe made from the fur of a silver-tipped grizzly.

Royal British Columbia Museum
PN # 11430

Preparing Furs



Royal B.C. Museum
PN #6668

This hunter is wearing a buckskin jacket, leather moccasins, a leather ammunition belt and a fur hat. His jacket is lined with fur.

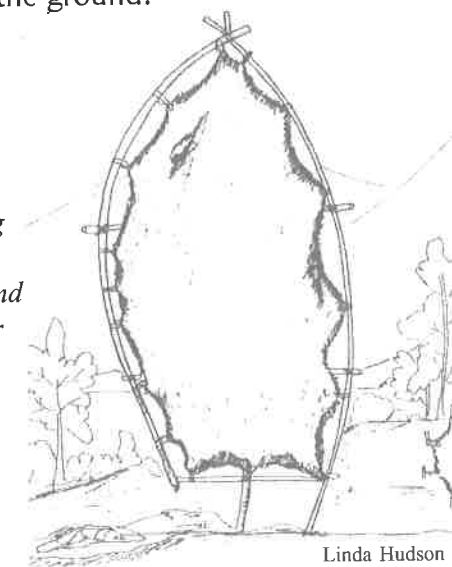
Nisga'a men were the hunters. They hunted and trapped the animals needed for skins. It was the women, though, who made these skins into leathers and furs, and who cut and sewed them into the warm clothes they needed for the long, cold winter.

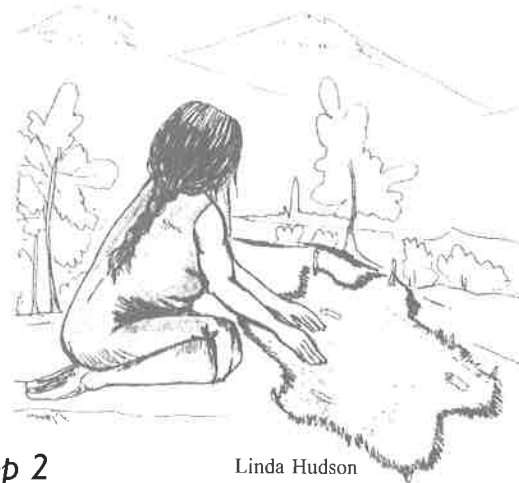
Before a skin can be used to make clothing it needs to be both softened and preserved. The process is called "tanning." When Nisga'a wanted to tan a skin they followed the steps below.

Step 1

1. The animal's brain was taken out of its skull and put in a bowl or other container.¹
2. The skin was stretched on a frame or pegged to the ground.

¹*After sitting for a few days the brain became soft and mushy and was later used in the tanning process.*





A brain solution was rubbed into the flesh side of the skin.

Step 2

Linda Hudson

Remove the fat from the hide

1. When the brain was soft and mushy it was heated and strained. This liquid was then rubbed onto the skin.
2. As the liquid brain cooled it became hard.
3. When the liquid brain had become hard it was scraped off using a stone or shell scraper. The brain helped remove the fat from the hide.

Step 3

Soften and preserve the skin

1. The hide was taken off the frame or pegs and soaked in hemlock bark solution. This process made the hide pliable and helped to preserve it.
2. The skin was put back on the frame.
3. Fat or oolichan grease was rubbed into the skin. The fat and grease made the skin soft and helped to preserve it.
4. Another important step in softening a skin was called Haat'inaas. The skin was placed in the mouth and then bitten. This was most important along any fold or crease in the skin. Saliva in the mouth and the strong pressure of the teeth caused the skin to soften and bend.

Leather that had not been waterproofed, did not stand up very well to the rain. It stretched out of shape, tore easily and when it dried, got stiff.

Step 3

Remove the fur

(If the hair was to be taken off)

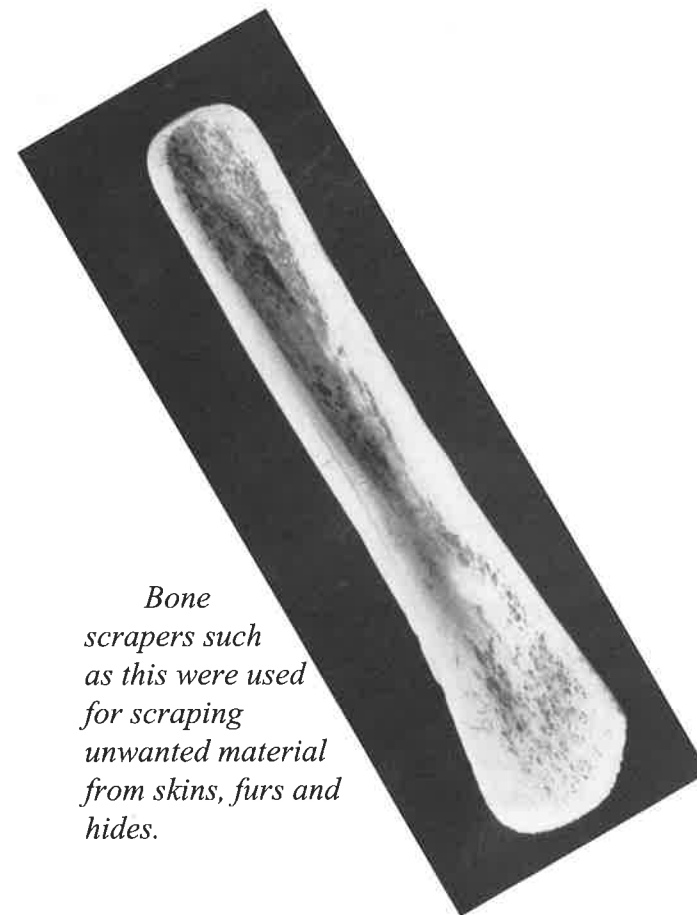
1. The hide was soaked several days in fresh water.
2. Hair was then pulled out by hand.

In winter, a simple way to remove hair from a skin was to first dip it into water. When the water froze it was much easier to pull out the hair.



The hair was scraped off the hide.

Linda Hudson



Bone scrapers such as this were used for scraping unwanted material from skins, furs and hides.

Royal B.C. Museum
PN #1686



Canadian Museum of Civilization
PN #72-9910

This warrior's ceremonial helmet, made from the paws of a bear, is crowned with a regal twist of ermine.

A Blanket of Flesh

Nisga'a believed the biggest difference between humans and animals was in the way they looked. They believed that the flesh or meat of an animal was like a cloak or robe that could be taken off and put on. When this "cloak" was removed the soul of that animal was like the soul of a person. If you saw an animal without its cloak it would look just like a person.

Nisga'a believed that both the animal world and the spirit world were as important as their own. They paid a lot of attention to the needs of the animals and spirits. They believed that if the spirit of an animal or plant wanted to, it could give its body (its cloak) to a human. For this reason, it was good to always show respect and kindness to everything in nature.

When an animal suddenly appears on his path, a Nisga'a will say that the animal is "gwin jakws" - inviting to be killed

Hunters and the hunted

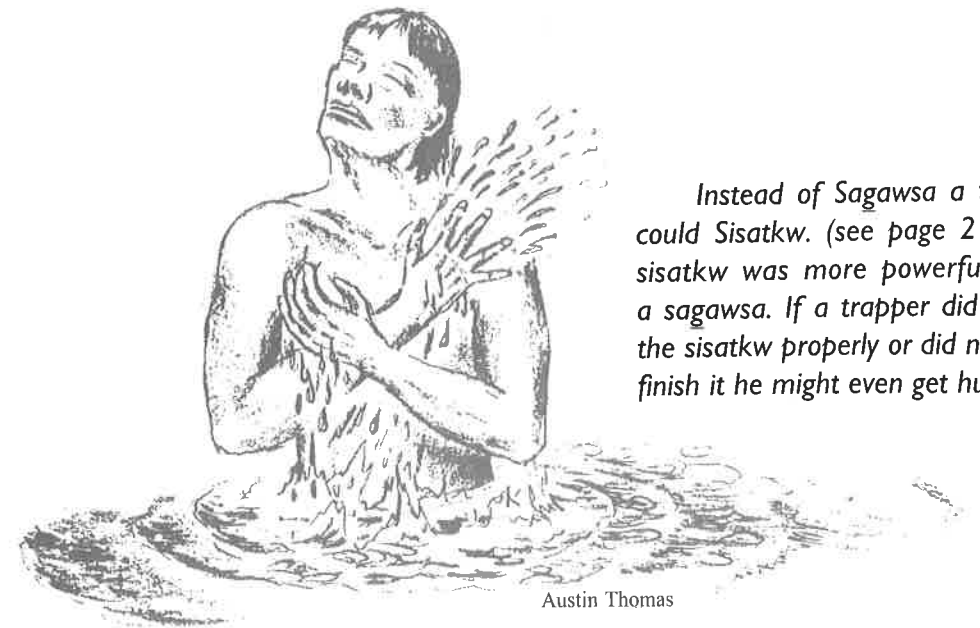
Nisga'a believe that in order for a hunter to be successful he must respect the animals he is hunting. They believe that a hunter who offends an animal will not be able to kill it. There are a number of ways that a hunter can make himself more successful.

Before leaving on a hunting or trapping trip a hunter needed to "sagawsa". To sagawsa he had to take a cold bath every morning for a week. He had to get up early because in order for the sagawsa to work he had to get down to the creek without anyone seeing him.

He slowly walked into the water until it came up to his head, then slowly walked back out until it came to his waist. He rubbed himself with wa'ums then crouched down until he was under the water again.

He had to rub himself with more wa'ums after each bath. He also drank wa'ums*. The wa'ums cleansed his body inside and out. It also disguised his human scent with that of the wa'ums.

* Wa'ums is a plant used to make medicine. For more information about wa'ums see pp. 218 and 219.



Instead of Sagawsa a trapper could Sisatkw. (see page 218) A sisatkw was more powerful than a sagawsa. If a trapper did not do the sisatkw properly or did not finish it he might even get hurt.

Austin Thomas