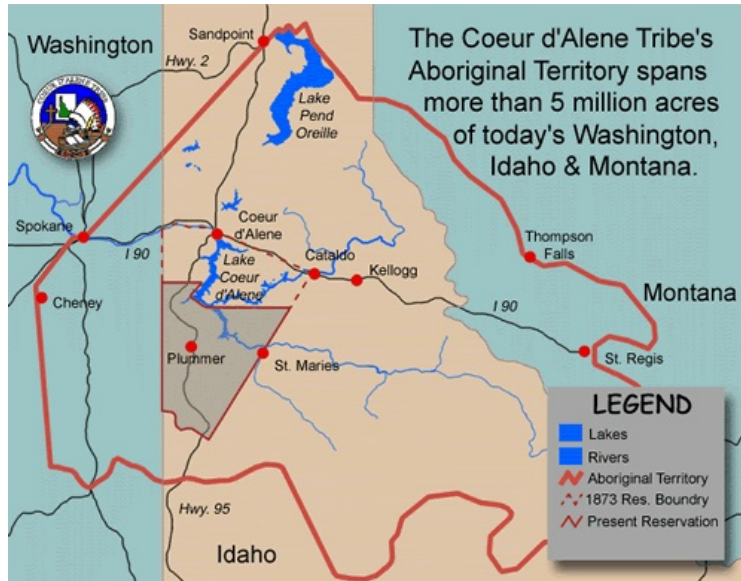


## Schitsu'umsh - Coeur d'Alene Indian Ecology



**The Seasonal Round:** The *Schitsu'umsh*, “the One’s Discovered Here,” or Coeur d’Alene (French for “Heart of an Awl”) Indian landscape was not only a landscape that sustained what was necessary for food, lodging, transportation, tools, and clothing, but it was a landscape *richly endowed* with roots, berries, fish, and game animals. And it was a landscape that offered spiritual guidance and healing powers.

An essential prerequisite for a successful life was having tremendous knowledge about the ecology of the landscape. It was critical to know when and where the various berries and roots be ready, as well as the fish

and game animals, given seasonal changes in the climate. As the huckleberries were to be gathered in the fall, a young man would be sent ahead to search out and bring back to camp a twig from a berrying bush. Upon observing the stage and growth of the berries, the elder grandmother could tell exactly when the berries would be ready for picking, and thus the camp could anticipate when they needed to move and be at the appropriate hill sides.

Mobility and travel within their own landscape was also an essential prerequisite for successful Coeur d’Alene life. Ease of movement was provided over the navigable lakes and rivers which connected the heartland of this area. But to access and benefit from what was provided, Coeur d’Alene families had to be able to freely travel this landscape. Family members had to be able to move about as particular roots or game animals would be available for digging or hunting at specific locations at particular times during the year. The families had to practice a seasonal transhumance pattern, a deliberate, calculated navigation of one’s landscape, as opposed to a “nomadic” wondering over it. The Coeur d’Alene recognized five seasons during the year, *se'tqaps* (spring), *yalstk* (summer), *stsaq* (early fall), *stce'ed* (late fall), and *sitsitk*<sup>w</sup> (winter). During a seasonal round, a family could have up to six to eight separate camping sites and travel up to 300 miles during the year.

I have provided here a generalized outline of the seasonal cycle of berrying, fishing, hunting, and root digging that is reflective of the traditional transhumance pattern. Variations due to changes in the weather, and the annual snow and rainfall would alter this pattern from season to season.

When the *smukwe'shn* (sunflower) blooms in **early spring**, the “fast was over” and root season would begin. This would signal the time to break the winter villages and camps along the shores of Coeur d’Alene and Hayden Lakes, and travel to the root areas. Some of the best root areas were found in the prairie country and the rolling hills west and south of Hangman Creek and Tekoa Mountain. Sixteen types of roots were dug, with camas, cous and bitterroot the most important. A curved digging stick, some three feet in length, called a *pitse'*, was used in

gathering the roots. The *pitse'* was often made from the wood of the serviceberry bush, the tip charred to harden it and the handle made for an elk antler. The roots were often gathered and kept in cedar-bark baskets, made from a single piece of bark folded and sewn up each side with a carrying strap attached.

During the spring and **early summer**, some families would have also traveled to the lakes to fish lake trout and white fish. Fishing was accomplished with either wooden or bone hooks and lines of Indian hemp, or with a three-pronged spear. In addition, nets of Indian hemp twine and fish weirs were extensively used. Although there were no anadromous fish in either Coeur d'Alene or Hayden Lakes, salmon did come up Hangman Creek into Coeur d'Alene country (as the creek drains into to the Spokane River just below the falls). Some families would gather along this creek during the salmon runs. To fish the salmon, fish weirs and spears with detachable, elk-bone harpoons were employed.

By **mid-summer** and into the **early fall**, the last of the camas would be dug, and the berry picking would begin. This was the time when families moved into the higher hills and along the mountain creeks to the berry patches. Twenty-two types of berries were gathered, including huckleberries, serviceberries and chokecherries. Some family members would also travel to the Spokane area and fish for salmon along the Spokane River below the falls, as well as trade and recreate with the Spokane and other tribes that frequented the area during the early fall. The Spokane area remains an important social meeting place, as a large intertribal pow wow continues to be held along the banks of the Spokane River toward the end of August each year.

With the coming of **fall**, the water potato was dug at sites around the lakes, signaling the last of the roots to be gathered. Water potatoes grew in the marshy areas along the shores of both Coeur d'Alene and Hayden Lakes, often where creeks and streams entered the lakes. The water potato was unique to the Coeur d'Alene, not utilized by any of their immediate neighbors. The fall would also be an intense time for hunting deer, elk, and bear. One common method of deer hunting entailed the use of dogs or designated men, who acted as "drivers," herding the deer into a water crossing or a lake, where other men waited. From the shore or from canoes, the hunters would spear or shoot arrows into the oncoming animals. In addition to this collective form of hunting, individuals would pursue the deer and elk by use of blinds and individual tracking. During the summer and under the moonlight, hunters would conceal themselves behind small screens of brush or behind trees, located near salt licks or watering places. When the deer came to drink or eat grass, it was easily taken. The Coeur d'Alene were known for their success in hunting deer and elk, having an abundance of deer and elk hides to trade with other tribes. In the 1840s or 50s, Father Point observed a single communal hunt in which 600 deer were killed (1967:178). In the following vignette, Father Joset offers perhaps one of the earliest recorded accounts of a deer hunt, likely occurring prior to 1850 (1838-77:JP 36).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Joset, J.P., born in 1810, served as one of the Priests at the Sacred Heart Mission (while located at Cataldo and later DeSmet) from 1844 until his death in 1900.

### ***The Hunt***

*Round the lake each family had their own exclusive part of the shore, to hunt with dogs in the fall: this was the way it was done: one would wait in his canoe while the other would lead the dogs: when they got the scent they pursued the animal until to escape them [the hunters] or to refresh himself he jumped in the water: the dogs would watch on shore until the canoe man came and killed the deer with his paddle: poor deer he comes to its death in so many ways: even the paddle is the death of many.*

*In a summer day, when the Indians were gone, one of our boys brought in the leg of a deer: what! who killed the deer? (asked Joset) - My Father (the boy responded) - it seems impossible the old man was a cripple who could move about only with crutches. How could your Father do it? He paddled to the lake and waited near a deer trail, under the cover of brushes: when the deer jumped in the water droven by the heat or by muskets, he moved between the animal and the shore behind and killed it with his paddle. . . .*

*One chief was chosen who was thought to possess mysterious power over the deer, whose it was to determine the place for each days work. Early in the morning he went out with a quantity of small rags which he tied them to bushes so as to form part of a line of a large circle. Then from the lodge, he started again to complete the circle with his fellows who were stationed at proper distance from one another. If a deer should pass the line of rags, as soon [as] it smelled them it would turn back and reenter the circle: so there was no escape.<sup>2</sup> (From the letters of Father Joset 1838-77:JP 36 "The Coeur d'Alene").*

**Prayer:** In the acts of gathering camas, hunting deer, and seeking a song, prayers are offered. In the example of the hunting, deer are considered "brothers," who offer themselves up to a hunter and who will "laugh at you if make too much noise." "They are really smart. They know you're there." Before the hunt, prayer is given and a sweat bath might be taken, asking for a good hunt and giving thanks to the deer and the Creator. While hunting in the Minaloosa Valley, a deer will inevitably and voluntarily come out of the trees and offer itself up to the hunter, provided the hunter has hunted with skill and shown respect. "You say a prayer when you . . . kill your hunt, after the hunt's over, and then you continuously pray when you're skinning him out, cutting him up, just show total respect to him."

### ***Deer, Rock and Earth***

*Every time you shoot one of these Animals you give a prayer, you say a prayer for them, and thank the Creator for giving you your brother the Deer or the Elk, and you always leave an offering of tobacco or something. You just scuff the ground and you put the tobacco in the ground and cover it up right where you got your kill. And you respect that animal when you're skinning him, when you're cleaning him out, when you're preparing him to cut him up, you respect him all the way. Even when you eat him, you respect him. It's nothing to play around . . . You be humble about it, because he's giving himself up so you can nourish your body, . . . your*

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<sup>2</sup>This method is also described in great detail in Teit (1985:66).

*family. . . And you continuously pray, . . . show total respect to him. That was taught to me, that was taught to my grandpa by his dad, now I teach that to my boy, and my boy is three years old, Victor, and I take him hunting with me. So he knows about it; he knows about the prayer, and about the song (sung just after every kill). . . . I was taught that the same Creator that created me created that Deer. So he's my brother, we're related. One species doesn't dominate another; they give each other respect. I was taught to treat all Animals like that. Everything is alive, even a Rock. . . . You can take a Rock and you can heat it and take it into a sweat lodge, and it comes alive, it creates steam, creates heat. Those are our Ancestors in those Rocks. . . . You don't do anything that will hurt the earth, like throwing garbage out on it. Because its like throwing garbage out on your mother, that's Mother Earth. (From an interview on July 2, 1996)*

As with the deer, upon gathering the camas, bitterroot, huckleberry, or water potato, prayer if offered, “thanking the Good Lord and the Great Spirit” and “thanking not only us but the people too.” As a child one elder remembered her family gathering the water potato (circa 1920s and 1930s). A camp of tipis would be set up near Rocky Point, and she would hear the different prayer songs being sung in each lodge in the morning hours before the gathering would begin. Most families would offer a prayer prior to the gathering of any type of root or berry food, asking "permission" to take it, and that there be “good fortune” and “blessings” to come to those who share in the feast. Picking berries by hand and not combing or thrashing them out, has remained consistent over time, and is a way to show “respect” (Teit 1985:55). Prayer was even given to the cedar bark as it was pulled from the tree to be used to make the baskets which holds the huckleberries. As I have observed, when the camas is to be dug, gifts of tobacco or *h'uskh'us* would first be made, and permission asked of the Father to acquire the camas. Other offerings that have been left include “beads” and colored pieces of cloth. I have heard the frequently voiced concern from elders over the fear that a hiker might inadvertently discover one of these offerings left at a berry patch or cedar grove, beads or a basket, for instance, and not understanding its purpose, remove the item. “The offerings are suppose to be left.”

The **fall** would also see some families traveling into the mountains to gather the rest of the berry foods. Huckleberries were gathered in the higher mountain areas up the St. Joe River, on St. Joe Baldy Mountain, and on Mica Peak. While in the high mountain berry camps and along the creeks, medicines, such as *h'uskh'us*, would also be gathered. Soon after the berries had been gathered the families would begin to head for their winter villages and camps.

The **winter** traditionally saw the families congregate together in several large pre-established winter villages, as well as smaller camps along the shores of Coeur d'Alene and Hayden Lakes. These were the sites of the “long communal houses.” The typical Coeur d'Alene lodge, for both summer and winter, was constructed from poles and tule-mats, forming a conical structure. Several layers of tule mats were used during the winter, laid on the conical pole structure. Three poles would be tied to form a tripod, providing the foundation to the remaining poles which rested on them. The lodge was erected over an excavated pit, as deep as a foot and a half. The removed earth was banked up around the base of the lodge. Lodges varied in size from 15 to 30 feet in diameter and could house from one to three related families. The summer lodges

were generally made of a single-layer of tule mats and pitched on the level ground. Lean-to structures, made from tule mats or brush resting on poles, were also used in more temporary camps. The permanent “long communal houses,” which were 15 to 24 feet wide and from 75 to 90 feet long, were actually constructed from a double lean-to structure. The ground would be excavated to a depth of 12 to 30 inches. Generally “six fires” were placed length-wise inside the structure, separating individual families. It was from insides these long houses that much of winter’s village life was conducted. Visitors were housed in them. During the long winter nights, singing and dancing could be heard and seen coming from the long houses. Stick games and other recreational activities, as well as the council meetings of elders and chiefs, and the Jump Dances took place in these “long communal houses.” It was a time for storytelling and sharing of the great oral traditions of the people, of learning, of reflecting, and of “making the world.”

During the **winter**, “ice fishing” on the frozen sections of the lakes, as well as hunting from snowshoes would occur. Communal deer hunting would also continue. With the platform caches of food stored from the summer gathering and hunting, approximately a third of the total Coeur d’Alene diet was based upon the roots and berries, another third from fresh and dried deer and elk meat, and the other third upon the fish acquired from the local rivers and lakes, and from trade.

While estimates vary, the Coeur d’Alene landscape supported a population that most likely numbered upwards toward 5,000 men, women and children.<sup>3</sup> But to provide for the needs of this population, its members needed to fully travel its landscape. In a year’s time, members of a family might have dug camas near Santa, hunted deer in the Minaloosa valley, picked huckleberries on St. Joe Baldy, fished salmon at Spokane Falls, gathered water potato near Harrison, and finally wintered on the shores of Lake Coeur d’Alene near St. Maries. Using sturgeon-nosed, pine-barked canoes on the lakes and rivers, and well-walked trails through the hills and over the mountains, members of a family could have established and used as many as six different camp sites. And those family members would have potentially transversed an estimated 300 miles through the Coeur d’Alene landscape in a single year’s time.

**Home Territories:** Access to the camas, deer, huckleberry and water potato is bound in a **particular land-human relationship**. Each Coeur d’Alene family has its own “**home territory**,” generally an area inclusive of certain deer and elk populations, as well as specific berry and root plants. The social unit designated for such a territory prior to Euro-American contact was probably the “band,” an association of several related extended families. The extended families were autonomous, bilateral kin-based unites. Leadership roles were situational, acquired by the consent of others, and associated with the task at hand, for example, a hunting or gathering leader, a root digging or fish leader, a war leader or political leader. And with the yearly cycle of transhumance, the configuration of the family unites would change, from small extended family units as roots are gathered in the summer to large band units made up of many extended families during the winter stays in the long houses. Men’s and women’s roles were fundamentally equalitarian though distinguished, with the women focused on gathering and child-rearing activities, while the men hunted, fished and provided protection.

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<sup>3</sup>Based upon Teit (1985:3) and collaborated by Sprague (1996:31).

Traditionally, each family and band had continuous access to their territory over the generations, areas where the family had hunted, berried and dug roots “since time immemorial.” The family’s territory itself may not all be a contiguous area, but distinct areas scattered over a wide range of ecological zones – mountains, rivers, lake shore and prairies. One family, for example, hunts deer and elk near Grassy Mountain and in certain areas in the Minaloosa Valley, while they berry and offer prayers in an area along a high mountain creek that flows into Lake Pend Oreille. While there were distinct family hunting or root digging areas, it is also often the case that a number of families would gather together at a camas site, or collectively hunt the deer using the “drive” method. The roots and meat were then distributed among all participating families.

While the “home territory” patterns have continued for many families, the total area within which it is maintained has been significantly reduced. Access to the northern regions in particular, from Liberty Lake east into the Coeur d’Alene River drainage and north into the Coeur d’Alene Mountains, has been curtailed because of historical, legal and environmental processes.

The families’ access to their distinct “home territories” is based on the “readiness” of the plant or animal within the seasonal cycle. Given the changes in residence and subsistence patterns, the Coeur d’Alene of today are no longer reliant on a transhumance pattern for their survival. Nevertheless, the animals and plants remain important, especially as supplemental sources of food and healing medicines, and as spiritual links to the Creator and the Ancestors. The meat is critical for meals served at all Coeur d’Alene wakes and funerals, and community and family gatherings, pow wows and celebrations. And while winter camps are no longer set-up, for many families, venison and elk remain the primary meat sources within their households. As such, the pattern of the seasonal round, while generally observed, is greatly abbreviated. Today a family might spend an extended “weekend camping” at a summer camas or fall huckleberry site, instead of making that site their residence for several weeks. The hunting of deer and elk continues, and while still mostly in the fall and winter, will be done over “a weekend” or “after work.” It is a seasonal round that, nevertheless, will vary from year to year given changes in the weather and rainfall. But it is also a round that will vary for individual families given their current residence relative to the location of their “home territories.” And for many families, such berrying, hunting and root digging continues in their lives, but only as memories of bygone days.

**Partnership:** The relationship of a given family to their “home territory” was and still remains one of what I would term “**partnership**,” rather than one of “ownership.” The territory is in partnership among its kinsmen — Animal and Human relatives. Each enters into kinship and sharing patterns with the other, following the “teachings” set forth by the First Peoples. Among the key teachings are the understanding that the Animal Peoples are your “brothers,” that you are to enter into a relationship with them and with all kinsmen governed by an ethic of sharing and respect. One walks lightly. The Animal Peoples and the landscape offers to their Human kinsmen foods, medicines, *suumesh*. In turn, the Human relatives “respect” their kinsmen, never taking more than they need, offering gifts of tobacco and prayers of thanks, and not abusing the “land and water.” If it had been a tough winter, for example, a family will hold off on the hunt until the deer and elk populations grow stronger. Together, the Animal Peoples

and their associated Human family provide and nurture a “home” for themselves in that territory. Home territories “belong” as much to the Human as they do to the Animal Peoples. The right of access to that “home” is only assured as long as kinship and sharing patterns continue.