



## First Nations Fishing Techniques

Excerpt taken from *Indian Fishing* by Hilary Stewart, published 1977 by Douglas & McIntyre Ltd. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

### Sturgeon Fishing

Probably the largest of the fish caught by the coast Indians was the sturgeon, a long-lived freshwater fish that can grow to about six metres (20 feet), and range in weight up to 812 kilos (1,800 pounds). While the sturgeon inhabits the major rivers of the Northwest Coast, the Coast Salish people were the great pursuers of this fish.

The sturgeon, sluggish in winter, lay in deeper water during this time and was not difficult to locate by probing with a two-pronged harpoon with an extended shaft. In the early summers the sturgeon came in to shallower water to spawn, and from April through summer could be taken in the sloughs by fence weir, set net, trawl net and harpoon. Harpoons, the same ones used for seal and porpoise with a trident butt, were used in the daytime on low tides. At night, on any tide, a fish swimming about 2.4 metres (8 feet) deep could be seen well ahead by its phosphorescence, and be an easy target.

A large sturgeon, struck with a harpoon, would take off into deeper water, speedily towing the canoe behind it. The late Chief August Jack Khahtsahlano (born 1887 in Vancouver) once described how a heavy stone on a cedar bark rope would be dropped from the stern of the canoe to help slow down and steady the erratic craft being powered by a captive sturgeon. When eventually the fish tired and sank to the bottom, the line went vertically down - a signal to the fishermen to bring it to the surface. With sufficient lines embedded in the flesh, the fish was hauled up and clubbed on the side of the head.

In a well practised manoeuvre the canoe was then tipped, the sturgeon rolled in over the gunwale, and the water bailed out. sometimes an outrigger was made to steady the canoe for hauling in large fish. A pole, with a block of wood at one end, was put across the canoe and lashed to the thwart. Another method of getting the catch home was to simply reverse the fish-towing-the-canoe procedure and have the canoe tow the fish.

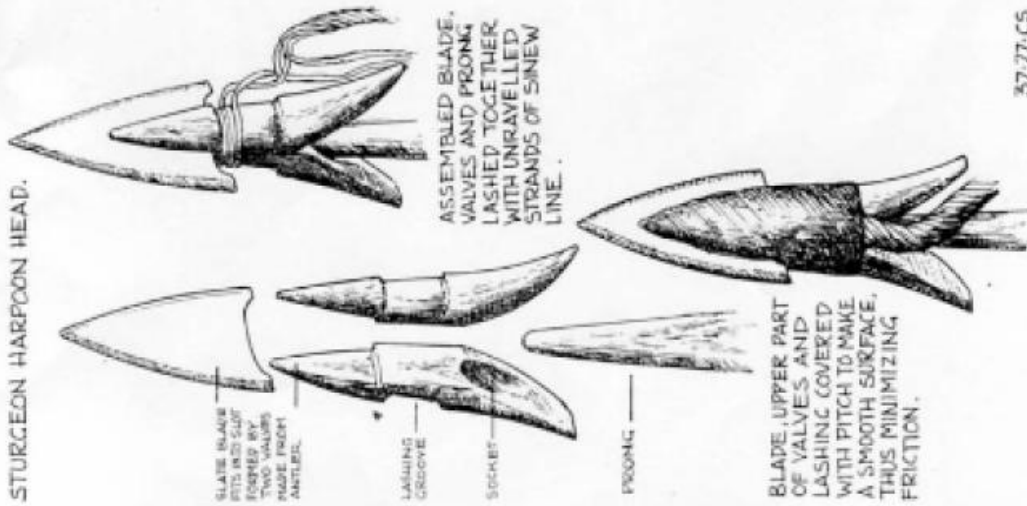
The 1827 journal of fort Langley, on the Fraser River, has a July 21 entry reading:

“We procured a small supply of fresh sturgeon from the Indians today. These fish are as large as those of the Columbia, and are killed in this River with Spears fifty feet in length, having a fork at the end, Barbed occasionally with iron, but oftener with a piece of shell. When the fish is struck, the barbs having a cord, attached to their middle, and held at the end of the Spear, are drawn from their socket and remain in the fish across the wound, til it is drawn up and killed.”

On August 2 the fort traded “Two hundredweight of sturgeon” and at a later date “Bought a sturgeon from the Cowichans - weight 400 lbs. the guts out.”

Another eye witness to sturgeon fishing was Sir Arthur Birch, colonial Secretary at Government House in New Westminster. In a letter to his brother John, dated 7 May 1864, he writes: “I have got a very nice little Wooden Office & my room is charming now though I fear very cold in the winter. It is close onto the Fraser & the balcony & veranda over hand the water. All the Indians now fishing and it is great fun to watch them spearing Sturgeon which here run to the enormous size of 500 & 600 lbs. The Indians drift down with the stream perhaps 30 canoes abreast with their long poles with spear attached kept within about a foot of the bottom of the River. When they feel a fish lying they raise the spear and thrust it at the fish seldom missing. The barb of the spear immediately disconnects from the pole but remains attached to a rope & you see sometimes 2 or 3 canoes being carried off at the same time down river at any pace by these huge fish.”

STURGEON HARPOON HEAD.

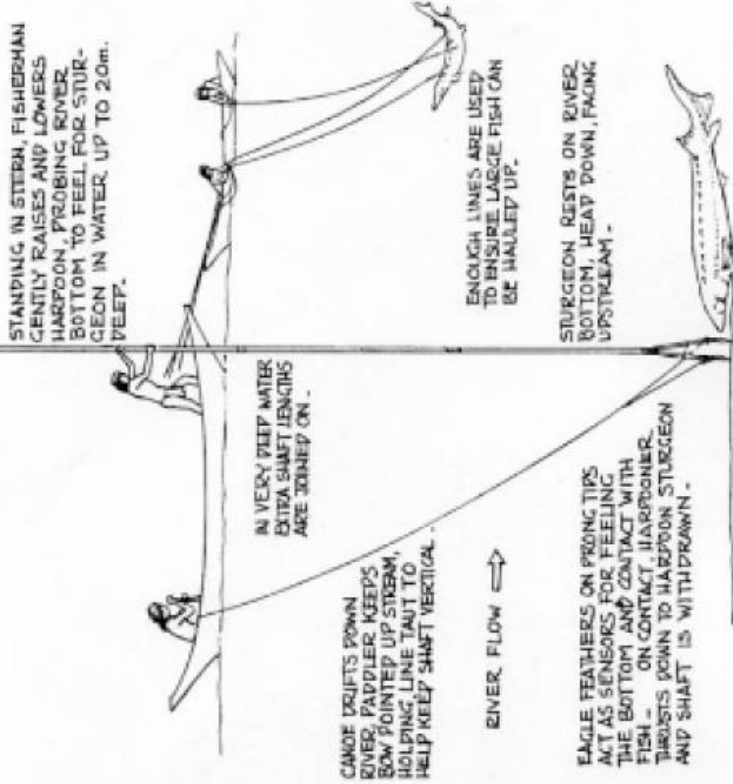


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STURGEON HARPOON

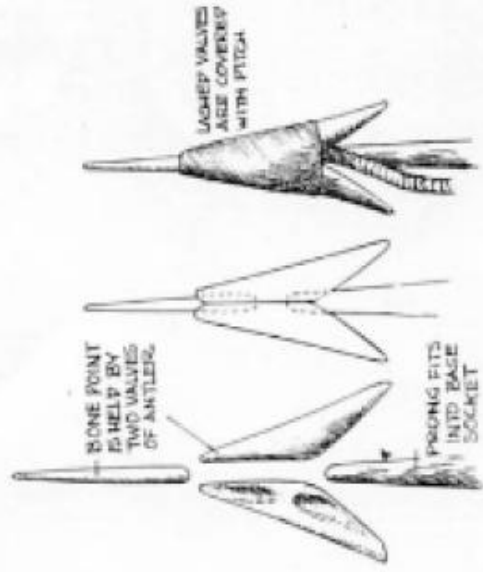


HARPOONING STURGEON



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SALMON HARPOON 27-C5



TO STEADY CANOE WHILE HAULING IN LARGE STURGEON, OUTRIGGER IS MADE BY PUTTING POLE WITH BLOCK OF WOOD ACROSS CANOE, LASHED TO THWART. 75-C5

