

## Sxwalu (Reefnet) Fishing

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The southern tip of Vancouver Island, where Victoria is today, was home to six family owned territories, the Cheko'nein, the Chika'wuch, the Swenghwung, the Xwsepsum, the Hwyyuwmilth, and the Teechamitsa. These families all spoke Lekwungen, a dialect of the North Straits language. Other dialects include Saanich (SENĆOTEN), T'sou-ke (Sooke), Semiahmoo from the mainland (around White Rock), and Klallam from across the strait in Port Angeles, Washington.



[wdfw.wa.gov/fish/regs/commregs/reefnet.htm](http://wdfw.wa.gov/fish/regs/commregs/reefnet.htm)

The Xwsepsum had at least four main villages in their territory: S-hwaymalhulh, where the naval dockyard is on Duntze Head; Xwsepsum, where the parliament buildings stand; Sxwsepsum, where the Old Craigflower school is at Maple point; and Qallu, where the Esquimalt reserve is in Plumber Bay.

Xwsepsum was rich in natural resources, which they shared with their Songhees and Klallam neighbours.

The Q'umasung (Gorge) water-way is a deep inlet that ends at Pulkwats'ung (Craigflower) Creek. As the ocean tides rise and fall, Q'umasung brings all kinds of sea-life deep inland. There were herring that came up, and Coho salmon spawned in Pulkwats'ung.

Other than Pulkwats'ung there was only one river in the Lekwungen territories that had salmon. That was a small creek behind Lhungale'chin, across from Qallu in the Esquimalt harbour, in Teechamitsa territory. The Saanich were the same in this way. They also had only one salmon river: Suluqw'tulh (Goldstream). The T'souke also had few salmon rivers.

But for every problem there is a solution. Though the salmon didn't come inland, they did pass by, coming down the western shore of the island and around the southern point (Haro Strait) on their way to the Fraser and other major rivers on the main land. So the Straits people here developed a technology that is unique among all the Coast Salish: the reefnet.

There are places where the salmon come close to shore, where it is shallow enough to drop an anchor. The T'souke, and later the Klallam, had several reefnet sites along the coast, especially around Chowits'en (Becher) Bay. There was one site in Xwsepsum territory, called Mukwuks (off Macaulay Point). The other Songhees would travel up to Henry and Tl'ches (Discovery) Islands where they had their reefnet sites.

When the salmon head into the strait, they pass the T'souke and Klallam sites first. When the Xwsepsum and Songhees received word that their northern neighbours were fishing, they gathered their nets and headed for their canoes.

Reefnets are a complex kind of net that anchored in four places to the sea floor and was suspended between two canoes. The net itself was shaped like a big scoop with its mouth pointing into the current. It was between 20 and 30 feet wide.

Traditionally, the net was made from the fibers of stinging nettle plants (t'thuxt'thux), dyed dark, and with seaweed tied to it for camouflage. When the fish swam into the net, the men in the canoes would pull it shut and work together to bring in the catch.

The following excerpt comes from Wayne Suttles (1974: pages 170-171) and describes how the fish were caught. This story comes from Julius Charles, a Semiahmoo Elder. Like the Lekwungen and Saanich dialects, Semiahmoo is also a North Straits language.

At Point Roberts before the fish arrives, the Semiahmoo ritualist, *Xtuchtun*, chanted the names of all the locations from Becher Bay through the islands and up the main shore to Point Roberts and finishing with all the locations along the reef there. It was something like a song with words like spell-words. It was to direct the fish ("like talking over the radio"). If it was not the year for the humpback to come he told him to stay home and mend his canoe; if it was the year for humpback to come he reminded him that his canoe was mended.

Out on the reefnet the captain, wearing his headdress, his face painted with red ocher [*tumulh*], stood in the stern of the offshore canoe and watched for the fish. The watchman in the bow of the inshore canoe watched for the fish. The watchman in the bow of the inshore canoe watched from a sitting position. The rest of the men lay low toward the bows and remained quiet. No one spoke.

When the captain saw the fish jumping ahead of the net, he and other watchman sang "*haya sheilh techulhs-hw sheilh*," "thank you, elder brother; come, elder brother." When the captain saw the fish swimming toward the net he said "*lengulh, lengulh, lengulh, lengulh*," "look, look, look, look!" As the fish crossed the forward edge of the net, he moved his hand up and down to startle them

into it, then, “*shumut, shumut, shumut!*”, “lift, lift, lift, lift!” All pulled at the net side lines [sqw’e’lhu] or at lines attached to the net weight. At the command “*nulhusutt!*” “release it!” the men at the breast lines [hwq’oo’ichun] pulled the pins and allowed the two canoes to come together. The fishermen pulled the net into the inshore canoe and took the fish into the offshore canoe. As they lifted the net they “saluted” the fish, “*he’e’e’e’e’e’, he’e’e’e’e’e’*,”

Suttles goes on to explain that the Saanich, Lummi and Lekwungen Elders he spoke with all gave similar descriptions of the commands, songs, and practices of the fishing process.

Reefnets are still being used in some places to this day<sup>1</sup>. However, it is an ancient practice, so old the knowledge of how to do it is rooted in myth.

According to Julius Charles, Xe’els the Transformer showed the first people how to make the reefnet, including what to say, how to salute, and so forth. According to ...David Latess [from Brentwood Bay], the commands used by his group were in a “strange tongue” and were given [to] the first reef-netters by the fish-spirit “Skanaylets,” who taught the use of the reefnet.

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<sup>1</sup> see [wdfw.wa.gov/fish/regs/commregs/reefnet.htm](http://wdfw.wa.gov/fish/regs/commregs/reefnet.htm) and [http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/programs/ark\\_product\\_detail/reefnet\\_salmon\\_fishing\\_method/](http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/programs/ark_product_detail/reefnet_salmon_fishing_method/) for articles on Lummi reefnet fisheries)