Sinker Stone, Columbia River

By Unknown

This sinker stone was once used by Indian fishers on the Columbia River. Native Americans have fished the waters of the Columbia River for at least 10,000 years. However, beginning around 1800 B.C.E., when ocean levels finally stabilized after thousands of years of post-ice-age warming, anadramous fish populations—fish that migrate from fresh water, to the ocean, and back to fresh water during their life cycles—increased and became more predictably available for fishers to harvest in large amounts. Native communities of the Columbia River took advantage of the improved conditions for procuring salmon, sturgeon, lamprey, and euchelon (now commonly called smelt) by continually developing and refining fishing strategies and tools. Native fishers used a variety of resources, including wood, stone, bone, antler, hide, tendon, and plant fibers to create spears, weirs, traps, nets, poles, hooks, clubs, weights, and drying racks.

Sometimes, fishers fastened perforated stones to the bottom of fishing nets extending into the river from shore. The nets were suspended from wooden floats to keep them taut in the force of the river’s current. These early gill nets ensnared fish by allowing them to swim part way through, then forcing them to back out of the net to escape. Once fish backed their gills into the nets, they became trapped by the net until they were removed by the waiting fisherman. Sinker stones in the Columbia River fishery were also used as anchors for boats and traps and as dragging-weights used to wear down sturgeon caught on hook and line.

**Further Reading:** Stewart, Hilary. *Indian Fishing: Early Methods on the Northwest Coast*. Seattle, Wash., 1977.


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