

Coast Salish

PEOPLE

WRITTEN BY:

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Coast Salish, Salish-speaking North American Indians of the Northwest Coast, living around what are now the [Strait of Georgia](#), [Puget Sound](#), southern [Vancouver Island](#), much of the Olympic Peninsula, and most of western [Washington](#) state. One Salishan group, the [Tillamook](#), lived south of the [Columbia River](#) in [Oregon](#). The [Bella Coola](#), a group living farther to the north in [British Columbia](#), probably migrated from the main body of Coast [Salish](#). The Coast Salish probably migrated to the coast from the interior, where other Salish-speakers lived. They were culturally similar to the [Chinook](#).

Like other [Northwest Coast Indians](#) before colonial contact, the Coast Salish lived principally on fish, although some groups living along the upper rivers relied more heavily on hunting. They built permanent winter houses of wood and used mat lodges for temporary camps.

Traditionally, the tribe's basic social unit was the local group consisting of close relatives. Each [extended family](#) usually lived in one large house, and groups of houses formed a winter village; people dispersed during the summer for fishing, hunting, and berrying.

One of the most important Coast Salish events was the ceremonial distribution of gifts in the [potlatch](#); potlatches enabled the host or sponsor to acquire or maintain [prestige](#). Elaborate ceremonies held during the winter included dances inspired by spirits in dreams or trances. Many other forms of [performance art](#) were treated as property to which individuals or groups acquired [exclusive](#) rights by inheritance, marriage, or purchase.

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Early 21st-century population estimates indicated more than 25,000 Coast Salish descendants in [Canada](#) and the [United States](#).

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