

Canoe Journeys and Cultural Revival [Abstract]

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For the state of Washington's one-hundredth birthday, in 1989, Native peoples there decided to revive a distinctive mode of transportation—long-distance journeys by canoe—along with an entire culture associated with it. Born as the "Paddle to Seattle," during the past two decades these canoe journeys have become a summertime staple for Native peoples as well as for thousands of non-Indians who follow the "pullers" in Washington, Oregon, and British Columbia. The Tribal Canoe Journey has become a metaphor for community, drawing peoples together over a large area. The annual Canoe Journey also represents a revival of indigenous culture and, to some extent, indigenous languages. The canoe journeys (and the land-based events associated with them) might be compared with powwows in other areas. The carving of canoes has been revived, along with the structures of canoe families that maintain them, along with songs, clothing, and other aspects of traditional culture. The Tribal Canoe Journey is neither a race nor a contest, although it is something of a feat of physical endurance, recalling a time when canoes were one of the central attributes of Coast Salish cultures. Canoes were vital for the gathering of much of people's food, the conduct of social relations, and the waging of war. Like many maritime peoples around the world, seaborne transport framed culture and invoked deep spiritual beliefs in life and death. Canoe culture also teaches respect for ancestors' survival skills to city-bred youth, forging bonds between generations. Young people are learning how to get along with others and how to stay clean and sober during journeys in which they represent their peoples. The young people also learn how to deal with conflicts that arise from living in close quarters and pulling canoes for hours at a time, day after day. The Tribal Canoe Journey thus revives culture while sustaining and improving modern Native life in the Pacific Northwest.

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