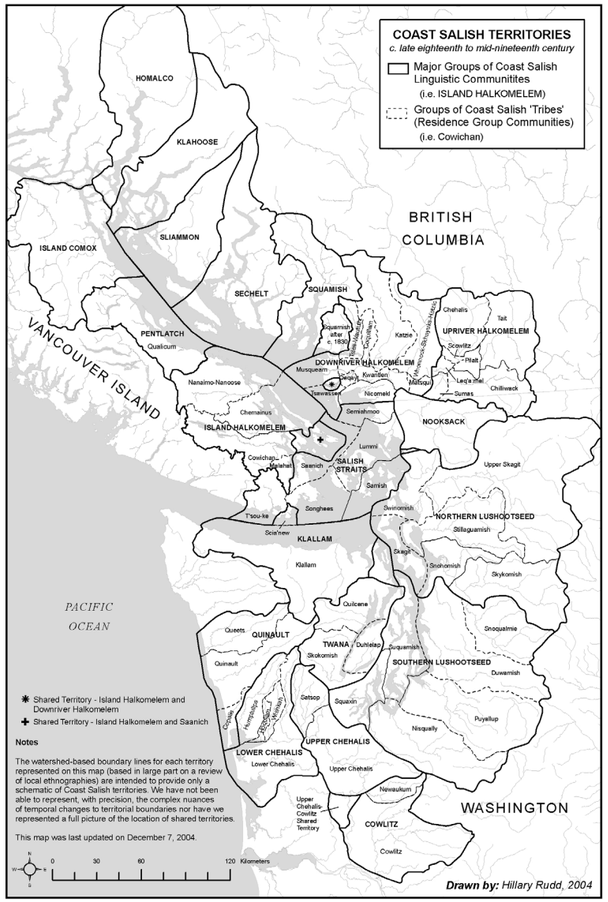
A CUT THROUGH NATURE AND IDENTITY

COAST SALISH PEOPLES, SALMON AND THE U.S. - CANADA BORDER



Coast Salish Territories

This map is part of Prof. Brian Thom's 2009 article: *The paradox of boundaries in Coast Salish territories* (http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1474474008101516). The representation provides an overview of the different groups that are part of the Coast Salish language family. However, as Thom explains, this map shows territorial boundaries that go against the social relationships that these communities have had over time. This is an example of how traditional western cartographic representations might impose colonial understandings of territory onto more fluid and flexible indigenous spaces. The map also fails to acknowledge the complexities and changes of these territories over time.

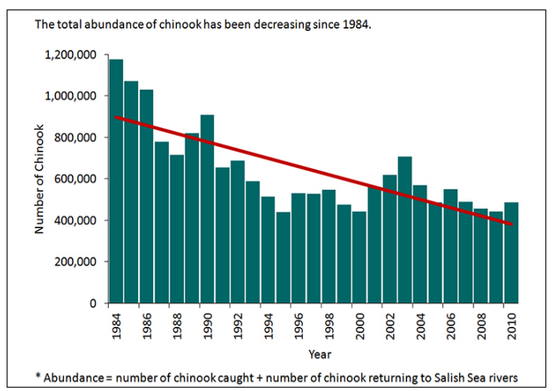
Coast Salish peoples are the original inhabitants of the area surrounding the Salish Sea. From the Strait of Georgia to Puget Sound, the Coast Salish have harvested the marine resources found in the surrounding environment for millennia. Salmon has been especially important to their diet, culture and identity.

For indigenous peoples, human and non-human, animate and inanimate beings are connected to each other through chains of reciprocity and mutual responsibility. Thousands of years of dependence on and co-existence with the salmon, allowed the Coast Salish to craft practices for harvesting sustainably and protecting the salmon's habitat. European settler colonialism, however, altered existing social relations and put environmental pressure on the land and the water leading to an alarming decline in the population of different salmon species that are born and come back to spawn in the tributaries of the Salish Sea.

In 1846, the settler nations of the United States and Canada decided to draw the western portion of their land border along the 49th parallel. The aquatic border was designated in 1872. The border cut through the original Coast Salish territories, dividing communities and imposing the settlers' understandings of land ownership onto the Coast Salish traditional lifestyles. The border has also made it difficult to orchestrate effective environmental protection strategies between the two countries.

The American and Canadian governments have attempted to create international mechanisms to protect transboundary waters and the salmon that travels through them. However, these treaties and commissions fail to recognize previous native territories and rights and exclude indigenous peoples from decision-making.

Salmon do not recognize borders when they swim from the sea, upstream into rivers that flow regardless of what nation claims them. From fresh water to the sea, then back to their birthplace to spawn and die, the life cycle of the salmon symbolizes the interconnectedness of nature. They remind us that we live downstream of one another.



Decline in the population of Chinook salmon in the Salish Sea.
Source: US Environmental Protection Agency https://www.epa.gov/salish-sea/chinook-salmon

Sources:
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As someone who is foreign to both the Coast Salish territories and to the United States and Canada, I want to recognize the limitations of my understanding of indigenous cultures and Coast Salish people's history and identity. The content of this page is subject to change at the request of the members of Coast Salish and other Tribes and First Nations. Please direct any questions, comments or concerns to the Indigenous Borderlands Project via its website: www.border-rites.org.

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