

# Fish traps dated to 100 B.C.

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A recent tour through the Tlingit fish traps and petroglyphs at Sandy Beach brought out nearly 50 people interested in uncovering some of the past with a look at the remnants of the ancient culture.

U.S. Forest Service archaeologist Mark McCallum led the tour through the artifacts which include six rock and wooden fish traps and a stone with at least five faces carved into it.

The oldest of the remnants dates back 2,090 years when, archaeologists believe, the tribe of Tlingits built two traps of stone, one on the other side of Sandy Beach. The traps are over thirty feet across and all that is showing, during an average low tide, is a heart-shaped pattern of rocks pointing toward the water with a row of rocks leading the fish into the top of the heart in a V-shape.

Fish that swarm in near the beach at high tide would be funneled into the heart-shaped traps, which might have been three to four feet high, and would be unable to escape with the ebbing tide. The Tlingits probably then speared the trapped fish and brought them up the beach to be cleaned.

Later traps at Sandy Beach began to use wooden stakes as well as the rocks piled up for trap walls. The Tlingits eventually constructed all wooden traps. Wooden stakes preserved by the anaerobic conditions in the fine, wet sand still remain in the heart and V-shaped patterns. The traps were made of hemlock and are so well preserved they have retained a green color and fresh-wood smell. Some of the wooden stakes do wash out of the sand from time to time. Once the stakes have come out of the sand, they turn brown and start to decay and turn to dust within hours.

The traps built after the first two were all near the trap at the northern end of Sandy Beach, probably because swirls and eddies in the tide from this side of the beach might have produced more fish in the traps, McCallum said. Traps were built closer to the water over time to take advantage of fluctuations of low tide levels.

While some of the traps are semicircular shaped, the heart-shaped design was most successful by channeling fish in

two overlapping circles inside the trap. This design made it most difficult for fish to find the exit to the trap, archaeologists speculate.

According to McCallum, this type of trap has only been found in a forty-mile area around Petersburg and nowhere else in the world.

Also at Sandy Beach are several rock carvings or petroglyphs that adorn the large rock at the north end of the beach on the water side. These rock carvings were recently damaged by vandals who scratched over the faces with a sharp object. The damage is less evident due to a mossy covering on the face of the petroglyphs.

The carvings have not been dated but scientists think they are related to the fish traps and reflect Tlingit religious or spiritual beliefs. Six heart-shaped faces cover the rock as well as several other indiscernible carved shapes. Several ideas on the purpose of the carvings include tribal marking of the fish traps for possession or location purposes.

The carvings might also have been a spiritual offering to the fish that returned each year to feed the tribe. McCallum said the carvings can be damaged by charcoal rubbings and tourists should take photographs if they want a souvenir of the carvings.