

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The Cultural Diversity Series is for the preservation of Indigenous and traditional cultures and the ageless wisdom held dear by their people.

# Whale Hunting Our Makah Right!

By Neuee Vitalis and Edith Hottowe,  
members of the Makah tribe

The practice of whale hunting is essential to our people.

According to Makah legend, the Whale was brought by the Thunderbird, a mythical creature to feed our people because they were starving.

Every year in Mid-August, we hold a *potlatch* (special gathering) to recognize and honor the treaty that was signed by Governor Isaac Stevens and the Pacific Northwest Indian tribes in 1855. Our legal right to hunt whales was part of that agreement. Exercising that right is a celebration of our culture and protecting it is imperative. Our ancestors reserved those rights so that the future generations would also depend upon the sea for food as they did.

Since the 1920's, we had stopped whaling. We knew we were going to again

someday. We resumed the practice in May with a tribal whale hunt that was open to the public. This month, a Makah family will be chosen and given the privilege by the Whaling Commission in our community.

To hunt is a personal choice and a serious one.

The whalers undergo vigorous training that takes many days. Part of it involves fasting, praying and bathing themselves for the occasion. Traditionally, they bathe in streams and whip themselves with nettle or hemlock to remove any human smells that the whale may pick up. It is customary to use the most efficient means of catching the whales.

During the last hunt, a small 30 ton grey whale came up to the surface and stayed there for the whalers to catch. We believed that it was done out of self-sacrifice, knowing that we would honor it. Once the whale was caught, it took the women 5 days to render the oil, cut up the meat and prepare it for 5,000 guests. The villagers of long ago would welcome the whale as a guest and divided it up among themselves. They ate the skin and blubber, used the blubber oil as a dip for dried fish, used the sinews to make rope, fashioned the intestines into bags to store oil, and shaped the bones into tools. The tribal



A Traditional Makah Whaler in 1915.  
Photo courtesy of Edward S. Curtis and the Portland Art Museum.

whale hunt and potlatch that followed was a celebration of life changes. It unified the communities of native people and kept our cultural ties strong. There were many that took great pride in being there. It brought about a great resurgence of feelings of what it was like for our ancestors. We value that. They left us with such a legacy that we want

to do the best we can to preserve it.

Makahs have always been a sovereign people with a right to our own destiny through self-government and self-determination. We will always hold fast and strong to that because as our people have said, "this is what you must do."

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## The Makah Treaty

The following article is an excerpt taken from the treaty between the federal government and the Makah tribe in 1855.

**ARTICLE 3.** The right of taking fish at all usual and accustomed grounds and stations is secured to said Indians in common with all citizens of the Territory, and of erecting temporary houses for the purpose of curing the same; together with the privilege of hunting, gathering roots and berries, and pasturing their horses on all open and unclaimed lands. *Provided, however,* That they shall not take shell-fish from any beds staked or cultivated by citizens; and provided, also, that they shall alter all stallions not intended for breeding, and keep up and confine the stallions themselves.

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