Trade as Relationship Building

Trade is, and was, a very important part of life for Indigenous People. The Coos (***hanis*** and ***miluk***), Lower Umpqua (***quuiich***), and Siuslaw (***sha'yuushtl'a***) people lived in a geographic homeland that was rich in food and water resources. The richness of these resources often led to an abundance of certain foods and goods that these Tribes used for trade. Trade is based on a "swapping" of some items for other items.

Many different items were traded among our People and with People from other Tribes. We gathered to trade in our ancestral homelands, as well as at other trading sites in Oregon. Trading activities allowed for community gatherings, celebrations, and ceremonies. Trade gatherings are opportunities to see old friends, to make new friends, and to share each other's lives and cultures.

Trade is done by exchanging items you have in abundance for those you do not have but want or need. People who lived inland often had Camas to trade. Camas isa starchy root vegetable that is a staple food source. Other traditional trade goods along the Western Coast (Washington, Oregon, and California) included acorns, pounded into flour for bread or eaten as mush; obsidian, which could be sharpened into projectile points; and abalone shells, Olivella shells, and dentalium, which were used for adornments.

The Coos (***hanis*** and ***miluk***), Lower Umpqua (***quuiich***), and Siuslaw (***sha'yuushtl'a***) had an abundance of dried fish, such as salmon, and smoked and dried shellfish, such as mussels or clams. Sea otter furs were useful for arrow holders (quivers), for clothing, and for providing warmth. Tribal members continue to collect and prepare many items for trade today.

It is, and was, important that trade was conducted in a fair and balanced way, guided by the understanding that exchanges should support the well-being of both parties and strengthen relationships. Each person receives something they needed in return for something they could spare, ensuring that no one gained at another's expense. Indigenous traders did not have the same concept of wealth that we have today. There was no point in collecting as much as possible of any one item; abundance was most useful as a means of acquiring what you needed and did not have. Trade needed to be balanced and fair, with all parties pleased with the outcome—everyone who gets what they need in trade for what they have is a "winner."



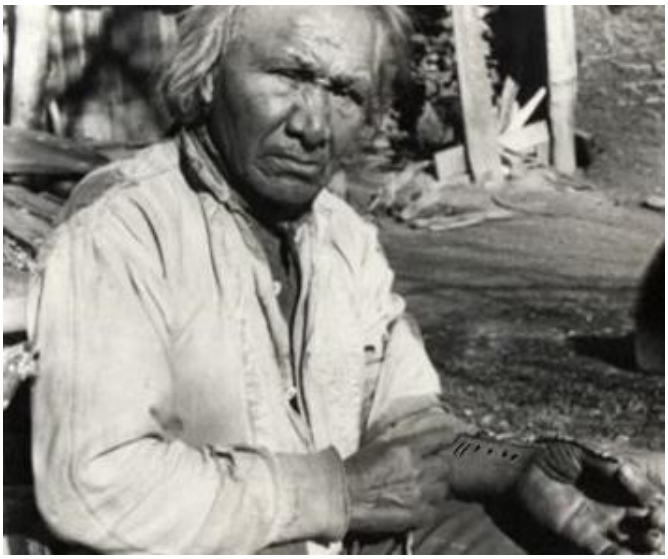
While Indigenous People did not have a standard currency (money), there was one item that had a somewhat standard value: Dentalium shells. The shells were often strung together to form stands of Dentalium. The value of a shell increased with its size. Strands or individual shells could be traded.

A standard measurement for Dentalium was developed, using dots and lines tattooed on the arms and wrists of various people. Lines on the forearm measured single shells, and dots running along the length of the arm measured strands of shells.



Tolowa man measuring shell money, 1923.

Photograph by Edward S. Curtis (Library of Congress



McCann, Hupa, showing forearm tattoos. Photograph by Pliny E. Goddard, 1901 (credit: Hearst Museum, Berkley CA)

Trade may look different today than it did many decades ago, but the practice of trading is still important to tribal life. Trading relies on a value system that crosses monetary and ancestral boundaries. Relationships continue to be built with a focus on trust and fairness.