

The State Committee for Research honors Alaska's

Northern Innovators



Traditional Halibut Hook

Used by Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian Alaskans

For centuries, Southeast Alaska Natives have hauled in halibut with a traditional wood hook that is also a work of art and an ingenious conservation tool.

The traditional wood Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian Halibut Hook is a sophisticated and innovative piece of technology unlike any other fish hook. Many lines of evidence indicate that the traditional two-piece wooden hook, or náxw, was used by the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

Revealing a deep understanding of the natural world and of halibut biology, the masterful hook combines numerous elements working in sync. Its effectiveness has been compared to the circle hook (a recent invention), but unlike circle hooks which cannot discriminate for the size of fish caught, the Tlingit halibut hook targets medium size halibut. This precision contributes to the conservation of the species, specifically to reproduction, by sparing small fish and the larger egg-producing females.

Many of these hooks are also stunning works of functional art and expressions of cultural heritage; intricately carved and detailed with animal and spirit

shapes and designs intended to entice the fish. Eye-catching examples are found in major museums including New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Portland Art Museum. Today's Alaska Native artists continue to create beautiful halibut hooks intended for sale and display.

The ingenious design of the hook reflects the innovative subsistence-related thinking of ancient Native Alaskans, and remains impressive and effective. It is made from two pieces of wood. The pieces are lashed together to form a V shape. The upper arm is carved from a light wood like yellow cedar. It floats above the lower arm that is carved from a heavier wood like yew or alder. When fishing, the upper arm is level while the lower arm is positioned at an angle facing towards the bottom. A barb is attached to the upper arm, and bait is wrapped around the arm.

An image of an animal or spirit being is typically carved on the lower arm of the hook. When floating in correct position, the carving faces downward in the halibut's direct line of sight. It is crucial that the halibut sees the carving, as this spiritual element and expression of beauty and respect helps to motivate the fish to bite the hook.

If the halibut is small, it will not be able to take the hook into its mouth beyond the barb and thus will not be caught. If the halibut is very large, the entire hook will enter its mouth and the barb will not be in position to penetrate the mouth as it is expelled. The traditional hook usually catches halibut between 20 and 100 pounds in weight, although occasionally larger fish are caught. Males, which are rarely above 50 pounds, grow to maturity faster than females and can contribute to reproduction while still small. In contrast, females may grow to 500-600 pounds and can produce several million eggs. By avoiding the largest halibut, the traditional hook ensures these females are available to produce the greatest number of eggs. This design ensures that the smallest and largest fish are left in the ocean to reproduce, and contributes to the conservation of the halibut for future generations.

The halibut hook, which remains artistically and environmentally relevant after centuries of use, is the embodiment of Alaska Native ingenuity.

Sealaska Heritage Institute accepts this honor on behalf of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people.