There were many tribes within the Northwest Coastal region. Chinooks, Makahs, and Kwakiutl were among the more populated tribes. Unlike other tribal regions, the Northwest Coast never developed democracy (all citizens have equal say). Instead, the wealthy people ruled the clan. The wealthier a man became the more power he held in his clan. They earned great respect by giving things away. If someone gave a gift to another, that person is expected to give three gifts back. Generosity was part of their everyday life. The wealthiest clan had the most power in the region.

The Native Americans in the Northwest Coast had many resources for survival. They were fortunate for mild winters and summers. It was often cool and damp which helped all living plants grow. They had rivers, lakes and coastal waters to keep themselves and the animals they hunted hydrated and healthy. There were countless forests for the animals to habitat. With this area rich in natural resources, it made it easy for the Native Americans to be hunters, gatherers, and fishermen. They didn’t have a need for agriculture (farming) since food was already plentiful.

Northwest Coast was well known for this abundance of food. Animals roamed and built their own homes throughout the Northwest Coast. They often migrated in the forests and by the waterways. Some common animals hunted in these forests were rabbit, deer and elk. They retrieved much of their food in the nearby waters. Salmon, seal, and whales were some of their
fishing favorites and they used harpoon-type spears to catch them. **Whale,** their main source of food, was the most difficult to catch but was worth the effort. Sometimes it would take days to catch a whale. It would provide them with food, rope, containers, and they would even use the blubber in the whale for oil and to drizzle on food. Northwest Coast people would travel by canoes made out of cedar wood called “dugouts” to fish for seafood. These Native Americans traveled by foot to gather foods in the wild. There were different kinds of berries found on bushes and shrimp, eggs, and oysters found in the waters. They created their own baskets for gathering the food. Sometimes a family design would be woven onto the basket.

Since Northwest Coast people did not have to go far for food, their homes were sturdy and made for permanent residence. Most of them lived in long rectangular buildings called **longhouses.** They were made from huge cedar planks. The enormous cedar trees would be cut down and then split with beaver teeth and stone axes. One opening served as a door to the home and one opening at the top to allow the smoke to escape. Longhouses were so large, that several families lived in one of them.

Like all Native tribes, the Northwest Coast people had many beliefs and customs. They had a medicine man called “**shaman.**” He was known to control the spiritual forces and would use magic to help cure the sick. They also would construct **totem poles.** Each animal or symbol carved on the pole had meaning and was created to represent something in the creator’s life. Only the creator of the pole was permitted to tell his story and sometimes he chose to keep it a secret. Since there was no written language back then, this was an important artifact that helped us learn about their culture. When they were ready to raise and honor the totem pole, they often held a **potlatch.** A potlatch is a party that would last for days with a magnificent feast and guests would sometimes get up to 20 presents. It was a way to show off their wealth. **Do you wish you could go to a potlatch?**

**There is so much more to learn about the Northwest Coast people! Conduct your own research to discover more interesting facts!**