**Traditional Economy**

Traditional B.C. First Nations economy was based on trade. Each geographic area had its own resources. Some of these resources were necessary for survival and some were [**utilitarian goods**](http://bclearningnetwork.com/LOR/media/fns12/COURSE_8730771_M/my_files/module1/section3/lesson1/topic1.html) or **“items of provision**”. Some resources were traded because they were considered items of status or wealth and not because they were items of necessity—these were called [**status goods**](http://bclearningnetwork.com/LOR/media/fns12/COURSE_8730771_M/my_files/module1/section3/lesson1/topic1.html) or “items of prestige”.

Examples of status goods include [**oolichan grease**](http://bclearningnetwork.com/LOR/media/fns12/COURSE_8730771_M/my_files/module1/section3/lesson1/topic1.html), [**coppers**](http://bclearningnetwork.com/LOR/media/fns12/COURSE_8730771_M/my_files/module1/section3/lesson1/topic1.html), and [**dentalium**](http://bclearningnetwork.com/LOR/media/fns12/COURSE_8730771_M/my_files/module1/section3/lesson1/topic1.html). These materials were considered [**mediums of exchange**](http://bclearningnetwork.com/LOR/media/fns12/COURSE_8730771_M/my_files/module1/section3/lesson1/topic1.html). Most B.C. First Nations groups travelled in seasonal patterns (or rounds) to collect resources and to trade surplus resources to other groups for resources unavailable to them in their areas. Consider, for example, the unique resources that were available only on the coast or only in the interior of B.C. A number of different resources were viewed as status goods as they were used specifically to show the wealth of the individual or group in possession of them. A common trait that all status goods have in common is that they are rare and difficult to find or harvest, which contributes to their value.

[**Dentalium**](http://bclearningnetwork.com/LOR/media/fns12/COURSE_8730771_M/my_files/module1/section3/lesson1/topic1.html) is a small tusk-like shell to which the Nuu-chah-nulth and the Kwakwaka'wakw had access; it is found in deep sub-tidal waters off the west coast of Vancouver Island. First Nations people had developed a complex and technologically sophisticated method to harvest the shells of these elusive snails. The shell was used for decoration as a whole shell or as smaller beads. (Refer to page 50 in your *B.C. First Nations Studies* textbook to see the use of dentalium shells on a button blanket.) An individual who possessed dentalium demonstrated great wealth. The trade economy established by the B.C. First Nations groups was one of necessity as well as one of establishing recognition of wealth.

Nuu-chah-nulth peoples were the primary harvesters of dentalium shells. Among the Coastal groups, the shells were valued for both trade and adornment. Young Nuu-chah-nulth girls of high status wore elaborate dentalia jewelry. When the jewelry was removed, a potlatch was held to celebrate and the girl would be considered eligible for marriage.

Athabaskan peoples of Alaska and subarctic Canada incorporate dentalium into jewelry with glass beads. Along with iron, these items were regarded as prestige trade goods in the 19th century

Shells which had been gathered on the shores of Vancouver Island were first traded to the Canadian Plateau between 1000 and 1 BCE. During the 1st century CE, the shell was a common trade item in the Plateau. Some very elite women from Plateau tribes wore dentalium shells through pierced noses. Elaborate bridal headdresses from the 19th and early 20th centuries, features dentalium shells strung on hide with Chinese brass coins and glass beads. Nlaka'pamux (ng-khla-kap-muh) peoples have included dentalium shells in their relatives' burials. The shells are sometimes given away at memorial services.