First Nations people were skilled at finding and making everything they needed to survive within their environment.

An important resource was the caribou, which provided food as well as a remarkable array of materials for tools, clothing and shelter.

By learning about traditional uses of the caribou, we gain insight into a culture that made creative use of every resource at their disposal and wasted nothing.

Today First Nations people are finding new ways to use caribou, creating prized artworks from carved antler, beaded caribou hide and caribou hair tufting.

Everything on that caribou is used. Even the feet was hanging dry. They hang it up, it don’t spoil. Like the moose nose they burn the hair off it. You could hang it and it’ll keep for a long time to come. Then they start to bundle dry meat just like baling fish…

In the fall time there’s lots of fat caribou. Nothing is wasted on that. They make lard out of the fat, and they use all the bone. They pound it up and they make grease out it. That’s something like Crisco. Real high rich fat, grease …

They make clothes with parky skin … They make sleeping robe with skin, and they make Skidoo suit for little kids. They look like Skidoo suit so I call it Skidoo suit, because I had one myself. It was one you don’t need underclothes under. You just slip it on and we go. You never get cold with that one. That’s how caribou is used for many things. You make robe. You make rope with it. You make dog harness, dog collar, so everything there is for everything.

– Annie Henry, 1992

It’s just like a cow I guess, every part of it we try to make use of it. I remember when we were on the mountain, I guess just to do something we sew, you know the cover of the legs, we used to make bags with that, fur bags.

…. You know this caribou leg here, we used to clean it real good and then they cut it right in half. That’s what they used to scrape caribou skin with, I remember that.

– Emma Kay, 1999

Phyllis Vittrewka describing how her mother tanned hides:

She would cut the hair off and then flesh it, take all the fat and other stuff that’s not needed. Then she would … soak it in water [and] caribou brains to make it soft and just over and over again soaking, scraping, soaking, scraping until it gets really soft and pretty well white. Then we go and look for those rotten brown wood and make a smoke house, literally a smoke house, that’s all you get out of it is smoke. You put the skin over, she made the house out of willows, a round house, … she’d sew the skin together an then she would tie it one the side and have the smoke under it to get it brown colour … That’s a lot of work.

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Caribou skin parka.
Royal Ontario Museum, D.A. Cameron Coll.
First Nations people were well adapted to their northern environment. They developed the skills to hunt, fish and gather a variety of foods as well as to make everything they needed to survive. They relied on just four basic materials:

- stone
- wood
- bone, horn and antler
- animal skins, sinews and organs

A single animal, the caribou, provided a remarkable array of materials used to provide tools, clothing, shelter, as well as food. The Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in and other northern First Nations relied on two annual caribou migrations.

**Food**

Immediately after the hunt, women cooked the fresh caribou meat, usually by boiling or roasting. Women singed the caribou head and antler velvet to remove the hair before cooking. The tongue was either cooked separately or as part of the head. Internal organs, such as the heart, kidneys and intestines, were also cleaned and cooked.

Most of the flesh, however, was usually cut into strips and dried. This is an ideal trail food – lightweight, compact, nutritious – and does not easily spoil. The dried meat could be eaten on the move, reconstituted with hot water, or served with caribou grease. Dried meat could also be pounded and mixed with grease and berries to make pemmican.

When the weather became colder, people simply froze the caribou meat. Often sections of frozen caribou were cached until needed by covering them with hides, logs and snow to keep away predators.

The marrow, the fat located inside the bones, was eaten raw or cooked. Caribou bones were boiled to extract the bone grease. This fat could be stored in sacks made from cleaned caribou stomach and bladders. Even the hooves were edible. They were often dried then boiled to make a kind of jelly.

The only part of the animal that First Nations people did not eat was the lungs. Even these were not wasted. A Hän eagle trap, described by Ferdinand Schmitter in 1906, used a caribou lung as bait; otherwise the lungs were fed to the dogs along with other scraps.

After the Klondike gold rush, hunters made a good income selling caribou meat to the people of Dawson.

**Clothing**

Women made clothing using the caribou hides, babiche and sinew. Caribou hides with fur are ideal for winter clothing. The combination of stiff, crimped, hollow guard hairs and woolly underfur provides wind protection and excellent insulation. The caribou hides were treated in four different ways: as rawhide (dried or untanned hide with the hair removed), dried with hair on, tanned with hair on, and tanned hide with the hair removed. The best pelts were collected in fall, as these did not have holes from the parasitic warble fly.

Tanning: Hides could be tanned either with the hair on, for winter clothing and robes, or with the hair removed. First, women cut the hair from the hides then scraped the fat or flesh from the inner surface, being very careful not to make any cuts or holes. Often this work was done using tools made from caribou bone or antler. The scraped hide was then softened in a solution of water mixed with caribou brains. After repeatedly soaking, wringing and stretching the hide to soften it, the skin was smoked over a fire of rotten wood to tan it and give it a rich golden brown colour. The tanned hides were cut and sewn into parkas, shirts, pants, mittens and dresses. These were often decorated with dyed porcupine quills and later, beadwork. Sewing needles and awls were often made from caribou bone.
**Babiche** was made by carefully cutting the rawhide in a spiral to make a long strip. When these strips shrink under tension, they make a very tough cord. Even tougher was the *sinew*, a very strong thread made from the muscle fibres cut from the backbone. Thongs were also cut from the tanned hide and used to make laces, bow strings, dog harnesses and ropes.

**Shelter**

Winter shelters were made from caribou hides (tanned with the fur on) sewn together and secured over a framework of willow poles. A typical shelter used 10 to 15 hides. In 1898, journalist Tappan Adney travelled with the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in on a hunting trip and told how the women made a large double shelter using 40 hides. Hides dried with fur on were used as sleeping mats, robes and floor mats.

**Tools**

The cleaned caribou bones could be made into many different tools such as fleshers, beamers (a bone drawknife made from a split caribou leg bone and used to scrape hides), knives and blades. Caribou bones were also carved to make needles, awls and fish hooks. Caribou bone or horn was ground flat and sharp on both edges to make hunting knives. Hunters made spears from knives bound to the end of a pole, and arrows from horn or bone points bound into the split shafts with fine sinews. A hammer was made by binding a rounded stone to a stick with babiche.

Rawhide was used to make drum covers, knife cases and buckets. Antlers were carved into a variety of implements including knife handles, spoons, buttons, fish hooks, etc. Babiche was used to make a variety of snares to entrap large and small animals.
Containers

The caribou stomach and bladder were washed then used as storage containers for food and water. The stomach, filled with water heated by hot cooking stones, was also used for a cooking vessel. A variety of bags and packsacks (carried by people and dogs) were made from tanned hide, with or without the fur attached. Babiche was woven to make mesh bags.

Transport

In winter, women towed the group’s belongings by a line fastened to a skin drag or toboggan, sometimes with the aid of dogs. Strips of skin from caribou forelegs were sewn together so that the hair ran in one direction, or sometimes a single caribou skin was wetted and dried to the proper shape. The direction of the hair allowed the hide to slide easily in one direction but kept it from slipping backwards. These simple drags were also used to haul meat from hunting sites.

The elegant snowshoes of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in also used caribou babiche. After the birch frames were shaped by the men, the women webbed the shoes with babiche. As Annie Henry stated at the beginning of this story, babiche was used to make a variety of cords and ropes that were used for dog collars and harnesses. Tanned caribou was also used to make slings or baby belts to carry small children. Often these belts were beautifully decorated with beading or quillwork.

Toys

Children used pieces of leg skin sewn together (see above) as sliding mats. A ball was made from caribou skin sewn stuffed with hair with a marten tail attached and used in a game similar to volleyball.

Caribou Today

Caribou are still an important resource for the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in and other northern First Nations. First Nation people work with biologists and other specialists to ensure the conservation of the great caribou herds. This work meshes the Elders’ traditional knowledge of the range and habits of the caribou with scientific methods such as radio collars.

First Nation artisans and artists are still finding new uses for the caribou. They make carvings from antlers and bone, artworks from caribou hair tufting, and other unique northern arts and crafts.

The Indians made a frame upon which the hide was stretched, the hair removed and then the hide was scraped to the required thickness. After this the tanning material was added and it seemed to me the brain of the animal formed part of the tanning material. Then followed incessant working and bending of the hide. When all was done of the first operation, the leather was worked until it was soft enough to make mittens and all the garments for the whole family. I witnessed a piece of hard dried sinew being bruised with round stones, until it could be torn down the whole length of the sinew to the texture and thickness of thread. With this thread and bone needles I saw the hides tanned by the Indians, cut out and made into moccasins, shirts, trousers, coats, and a wonderful garment worn by the women as an outer garment, in the coldest weather.

– R. J. Bowen (Anglican missionary visiting the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in in 1896)
Ways To Tell The Story

Photos & Graphics

• Find a detailed drawing of a caribou then point to the various parts of the animal and explain how each is used or prepared for cooking, tools and clothing.

• Find a set of photographs showing the stages in tanning a caribou hide. You could also use photographs and illustrations that show caribou meat drying, caribou hide clothing, and other items made from caribou.

• Photographs of caribou on the land. Many people will have no idea what they look like, how tall they stand, or just how many of them still roam the Yukon.

Show and Tell / Props

• Show your audience some items that illustrate the many uses of caribou such as bone and antler tools, clothing made from caribou hide, samples of babiche and dried caribou meat.

• Visit a craft store or gallery with items made from caribou antler, hide or hair. Or, invite artisans who make items using caribou to show their work and perhaps demonstrate their craft.

Note: A particularly helpful resource is the video and teachers’ manual, The Value of Caribou, produced by the Porcupine Caribou Management Board. Although the manual is written for students, many of these suggestions could be adapted for a wider audience.

Further Resources

Oral Histories

Henry, Joe and Annie

Publications

Dobrowolsky, Helene

2000  Tr’öchëk / Klondike City Bibliography. (a compilation of sources relating to the Tr’öchëk / Lousetown / Klondike City settlements and the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, most available from Yukon Archives).

McClellan, Catherine et al
1987  Part of the Land, Part of the Water Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre.

Osgood, Cornelius

Porcupine Caribou Management Board
n.d.  The Porcupine Caribou School Program (set of four videos with accompanying teacher’s manuals), “Unit 2: The Value of Caribou.” [Note: I haven’t seen the videos but the manuals are an excellent resource.]

Schmitter, Ferdinand

Tom, Gertie
“Interior of Indian Skin-house.” From Tappan Adney, *The Klondike Stampede*, 1900.

Dome shelter covered with caribou hide. Tappan Adney, *The Klondike Stampede*, 1900