

[PODCAST INTRO - includes music from Round Dance (feat. Northern Voice) by Cris Derksen]

Narration (Lindsey Bacigal)

Hey everyone, it's Lindsey and this is the Indigenous Climate Action Pod. I'm so excited for today's episode! We're going to be talking all about hides, tans, and leathers, and we don't mean the vegan kind. We're talking traditional materials and traditional knowledge.

When we think of clothing today, we often think of fast fashion. It's all about cheap materials, fast production, and big profits. Not to mention a track record of human rights abuses.

Creating textiles from traditional materials takes the opposite approach. It's about taking time and building relationships, ultimately making items that are imbued with love and the knowledge of those who have come before us.

Today we're going to talk with three people on the work they do with traditional materials and the relationships they have formed along the way. We're starting our episode with hide tanning.

Hide tanning is a traditional practice that Indigenous Peoples all over the world have been doing for generations. Though you might be able to pick up a book about hide tanning or watch a video about it on YouTube, to really understand how to tan a hide, you have to *do it*. It's a hands-on process that takes many hours over the course of weeks - scraping, softening, and smoking to get it just right.

That's something that Mande McDonald, our first guest, knows all about.

Mande McDonald

Hide tanning is a really full body, sensory experience. Moving the hide around, it takes at least two of me or someone much stronger.

I need help with almost every stage.

Narration

This is Mande, one of the founders of the hide tanning organization called Dene Nahjo. Mande has been helping to lead hide tanning workshops across Canada for years. So before jumping into our interview, we asked her to give us a breakdown of just exactly what goes into tanning a hide.

Mande

First, a hunter will drop off a frozen hide to me, or one of my friends, someone at Dene Nahjo. So we have a frozen, solid, block of moose fur, it looks like. Usually we can put that in a freezer for a little while, but then eventually we need to thaw it out. It usually takes four

or five days for it to really thaw out. And I really think of how the moose stays warm with its thick, thick fur insulating it the whole time.

So then, we pull it apart. I like to put it on the frame right away, and it's heavy, so it usually takes a few people to lift it off the ground. And we have these tools that are fleshers made out of moose leg bone and then we go and punch the flesh off that way while it's on the frame.

When I'm fleshing, I know my shoulder's going to get sore, I'm just remembering my shoulder after fleshing for a couple days.

And then once it's fully dry, that's when we can start scraping it. We have really sharp, sharp, sharp, sharp scrapers and then we go and scrape the hair side down until it's the right thickness.

Each stage is hard, really hard repetitive motions and it's way more fun and easy with a few people.

And then when we will hang up the hide in the smoke. When we start smoking everything starts to smell really smoky, our clothes will smell really smoky. Sometimes, we'll lie in the spruce bows and look up at the hides smoking for a little while.

After a few days in the smoke, we'll dip the hide back in warm water and then wring it out, get the water out, and then while it's drying, we'll be softening it.

I can feel the fluff all over my skin and all over my clothes and there's dried moose fluff all over everything for a little while.

And you know you're getting close and you're almost done, and the final smoke is the funnest part, because you can just sit there by the hide and wait for it to change colour, and then it's done.

Narration

If this sounds tough, that's because it is. But the beauty of hide tanning is that the process is about so much more than making a beautiful textile. Because of the difficulty of hide tanning, it's often done in a communal way. People work side-by-side, building relationships, learning from each other, and perhaps most importantly, passing down traditional knowledge and keeping traditions alive.

So let's jump into the interview to hear more from Mandee about the work that Dene Nahjo is doing, and how it's not only protecting the earth, but revitalizing culture.

Lindsey (Interviewing)

So can you just explain, how did Dene Nahjo come to be?

Mandee

Well, we started Dene Nahjo as a project on MakeWay's shared platform in 2014. I've been the director since 2017 and I'm one of the founding members. So in 2013, a bunch of different people up north were organizing around Idle No More. And you know, a few of us that were organizing ended up meeting after a rally or something like that and decided to just keep meeting, to continue trying to address some of the issues that people were rallying around at that time. So we ended up deciding to try to form a little group and together work on providing or facilitating opportunities for ourselves and Indigenous people in the community to reconnect to land and culture and community.

And we had been tanning hides together a little bit prior to that. And we really wanted to keep tanning hides and learning and try to provide opportunities for other people to learn to tan hides. And so Dene Nahjo organized a little camp that year, and then they organized one almost every year, since then, and sometimes two or three in a year. So that's kind of how it's started,

Lindsey

Yeah, that's great. I'm actually hoping to do my first hide tanning this fall so I'm very excited to hear everything involved. So you kind of mentioned that outside of the hide tanning, that there's more to the camp than just doing the hide tanning, So what kind of other things are going on at a camp while you're doing the hide tanning? What, what sort of other things are people doing?

Mandee

Okay. Well, what the camps that we do at Dene Nahjo, we hire a cook, so there's a cook or two cooks cooking all the time out in the Bush. There's always tea and coffee, hot tea and coffee on the fire. There's kids running around. We usually hire a bunch of staff, the contract, a bunch of people for the camps. So we will contract local Elders who are master hide tanners.

So they're around watching us, teaching us, telling us what to do. Then there's all the hide tanners, people working on their hides and people teaching each other and learning from each other.

So it's pretty busy.

Lindsey

Nice. Yeah, talking about, you know, interest in hide tanning and things like that. Have you seen that, have there been more people over time that have been interested in learning how to do hide tanning?

Mandee

I think so. It seems that way for sure. Or I don't know if there's way more people that are interested now or if there's always just been a big interest and now it's just kind of more visible. And I think, it does seem, I mean, maybe it's just social media. It seems like a lot of people, a lot more people are on social media, tanning hides and asking about tools and things like that. But, you know, in 2018 we taught an urban hide tanning residency at the Banff Center, which when they approached us about that, I was like, "What really? There's that much interest that the Banff Center wants us to do an urban hide tanning course?"

The application was only posted and open for a month, a really limited amount of time. And there were so many great applications from coast to coast, in the States and Alaska, so there's a lot of interest in and I think that's a good thing.

I think that, you know, there, I think a lot too about textiles and the textile industry and the garment industry and all the chemicals that go into producing different cloth, different fibers, different textiles, and how they're just kind of like the global garment industry or the global textile industry and how, you know, we can make really amazing, soft, warm textiles in Yellowknife, in NWT, from, you know, the moose and the caribou hides that we have access to up there. And the quality's really nice. There's no chemicals except we use soap, but you can do this whole process without even electricity or anything and make these amazing, amazing textiles to make all kinds of clothes and footwear and bags. So I think that's really cool.

Lindsey

And it just, it lasts for so much longer, too. Kind of like what you're saying, I feel like, you know, kind of in Western society, there's very much this, "things should be available really quickly." And then if it breaks down, then I'll, I'll just go get another one, you know. There's very much kind of just this idea of, things can just be replaced super quickly. So yeah. How would you say that what Dene Nahjo does is different from that?

Mandee

Yeah. I mean, I don't know. I think even with, you know, with yes, with the hides, we tan hides and people make things out of it. Footwear, jewelry, clothes, but, everything at the camp, the tools are passed down, intergenerationally. Good tools last forever if we take good care of them. I had to buy all my tools. I didn't inherit any, but you know, other people have these amazing tools from their great granny that they still use on hides today.

The tents, everything has to be really cared for attached so that they have to be dried. They have to be mended. They get burned holes in, they get dirty. If you put it away wet, it will get moldy. Everything has to be taken care of and cleaned and put away. So it's the care for the things, especially when you're out in the Bush and you just flew all your gear in, you have to be so mindful about what you actually need out there and how you're going to take

care of everything that you have for a really long time. They can't just throw things away and buy a new one.

Lindsey

You've spoken about this a little bit, about how hide camps are places for transmission of knowledge and things like that and passing down, teachings and things. For you, why do you think it's important to be able to pass down this kind of knowledge and to share it with people?

Mandee

Yeah, well, knowledge about our cultures and our languages and the land is super important to knowledge that should be passed on within communities and families. I think for us, there's also so much community-based and place-based knowledge, all the types of teachings that will be shared at a camp in Łíídlíí Kúé, for example, will be different from if there's a camp in York Factory First Nation or something like that. The way I see knowledge being shared in a camp. I don't plan it. I don't build it in as the camp director. There's lots of things I do plan, but we don't plan the knowledge sharing. People just come and then they share.

And some of it is the deep, you know, Indigenous worldview, like philosophical stuff. But sometimes it's, oh, here's my technique for getting my ax sharp, you know, also super important knowledge to know when you're in the Bush. So me and my staff just set up the camp, invite people, try to make it safe and nice and fun. And then all of this other amazing stuff just happens in a little universe in the camp.

Lindsey

Yeah, I think you know when we go into a store and purchase all of our items from shelves, suddenly there is that disconnect not only with the land, but with each other, and hide tanning really revitalizes that sense of community in such a strong way.

Mandee

I'm also a PhD candidate in the faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta. And I write about hide tanning and Indigenous governments. And I write about how I see Indigenous Peoples regenerating Indigenous political thoughts and governance systems through hide tanning. And so I look at it kind of with that lens. And when I think of a camp, I'm not just thinking about the hide tanning techniques. I can't separate the techniques of hide tanning from the whole experience of being in a camp and all the different relationships that are activated in the camp.

And it's so fulfilling. That experience is so fulfilling. And then, you know, those feelings and connection that you have in a camp, carry over into everything else. So for me, if I'm working, I'm the director at Dene Nahjo, I work one or two days a week for the most part

writing grants and things like that. And then, you know, maybe I get to do two to four weeks of hide camps in the spring and summer. And those two to four weeks will carry me for the rest of the year, till the next spring. And what makes that experience, what makes those life experiences so fulfilling is all the people and all the relationships, the hides itself, the moose and the caribou and the food we eat out there and just being together is all a part of the camp.

Lindsey

Yeah, that's amazing. What do you think is the biggest takeaway from doing this work for you personally or anyone who is out on the land hide tanning?

Mandee

Okay. I don't know. I could just go on and on, there's lots to learn about sustainability and reducing waste and you know, place-based options for things. When you're in a camp you're really dependent on what's around you and only that. For me, it's really changing my sort of mindset about what we need to get by day-to-day or, I don't need all this frickin stuff from around the world to live well in a camp. And then so I'm like, then maybe I don't need all that stuff to just live well outside of camp.

And that's, I think one of the really powerful things about going on a hide tanning journey. You don't have to be an expert in every single practice: hide tanning, fishing, netting, hunting, harvest, all these things. You don't need to be an expert and all that stuff to really rewire your brain away from like Western values, capitalism and stuff like that. You can just focus on a practice like hide tanning. And I think that knowledge, experiential knowledge and embodied knowledge you get really is life-changing.

Narration

Indigenous folks have a lot of ingenuity. We're constantly learning and adapting, blending the old and the new, the traditional and the modern.

Our next guest, Samantha, is the perfect person to speak on this:

Samantha Saksagiak

Okay. So I'll introduce myself in my native tongue, Inuktitut. So hi, [Inuktitut introduction]. So I just said, hi, my name is Samantha Saksagiak and I'm from Nain, Labrador and I'm 17 years old.

Narration

From a young age, Samantha has been partaking in Inuit traditional practices, specifically, seal hunting.

Lindsey (Interviewing)

Do you do any hunting yourself?

Samantha

Yeah, I started hunting when I was 13 years old.

My dad - attata - attata is dad. He taught me how to hunt.

Narration

And as a youth of her community, Nain, Labrador, Samantha has grown up learning of the old and new ways of seal hunting.

So we began our interview by having her walk us through those differences.

Samantha

A long time ago, before the Europeans came, how we hunted the seals, we would go out on the ice. The men would go. Only the men would go down the ice.

The women would wait and they would throat sing, which we call katajjaq.

The men, they would leave their tent or their igluit, which is igloo. And they would go out on the ice and they would find a seal hole. So seals make holes where they can come up for air. So once they found a hole, they would wait and wait and wait, and wait...as you waited you would make sure you didn't make any sounds to scare the seal away.

And when the seal came up, that's when they had their harpoon. And then they would stab the seal. And then you would have to use all your strength to haul the seal up, back with you. But now, you can still do it that way. But now we use Skidoo and what we do when we see a seal, we usually go to a walking distance where you can shoot it where it doesn't notice you. Yeah. So we kill them with guns on the ice now instead of using a harpoon.

Narration

Despite the change in mechanics, as we got into the interview, I was curious to know what parts of the hunting practice she felt have stayed the same.

Lindsey (Interviewing)

It's really interesting how hunting practices and things have changed over time for a lot of us. So I know for First Nations, a lot of us put down tobacco or give a prayer of thanks or something when we hunt an animal. Is there anything you do, when you go hunting?

Samantha

When we go hunting today, we don't practice that, but we do respect the animal and we do respect the land and we make sure that every part of the animal does not go to waste.

Lindsey

Yeah. So what kind of things do you make out of seal? So beyond just, you know, clothing and things like that, is there anything else you use the parts of the seal for?

Samantha

We use the seal for, so we still use sealskin to make kayaks, which are the traditional boats we make from sealskin and wood. And we sew that the women, usually there's a guy here in town actually, who makes sealskin kayaks. Yeah, that's really cool. We used to make our homes, our tents in the summertime from seal skins, so tents, and they would keep warm using furs like seal skins for blankets. Now we don't really make tents from seal skins, and we use seal skin for clothing: paulueet, which are mittens, kamiik, which are the boots, and a atigi, which is your pullover coat and for nasat, your hat.

And we also use the sealskin oil as a source of heat. So we call that qulliq, which is where you have usually a stone carving and then you get Arctic moss, which you light it with. And that seal skin oil, which is from the fat we put that into the qulliq. And that's what fuels the qulliq for heating, heating your home or for cooking or for light.

Lindsey

Are there any certain ways that you eat the parts of the seal? Do you make, you know, like for the eyeballs, we're going to make this with them or with the intestines we're going to make this, or with this, we're going to make a stew, you know, that kind of a thing.

Samantha

Yeah. So what I was talking about, we don't waste any parts of the seal. So it is a local food here because where we are. So we do eat the eyeballs. Like we eat eyeballs raw, we eat the intestines, we eat the liver, the heart and all the meat.

So the eyeballs will be eaten raw. We don't cook the eyeballs or the intestines. We braid them actually. So we braid the intestines. Yep. And some people eat them raw, but some people that let them dry. So, yep. And my favorite way to have seal is fried and my favorite part to eat of the seal is the heart.

Lindsey

Yeah. Is there anything, yeah. Like right after you hunt a seal, is there anything that you would like eat right away? Like even while you're just, what am I trying to say? Like while you're dressing it.

Samantha

Not me, personally, but my family, they do the liver.

Lindsey

That's what it is, I thought there was something.

Very cool. So if you're going to process a sealskin, if you're going to use one to make stuff with, what do you do for that? When we do a hide tanning, like First Nations, we have the frame and everything, and then you'd have to go through and scrape it and stuff. So what does it look like? Is it a really long process? What do you do for that?

Samantha

It's a long process here, as well. So once you get the seal, you have to cut it and remove the skin from the body. So all the meat is gone. So all you have left is the skin. So now what you do is you want to take the scraper tool and you want to make sure that all the fat is gone from the skin. And so when that's done, you want to clean it in water and then once it's clean, that's when you put it on the frame to stretch and to dry.

So it's a square frame that you make out of wood usually, and then you take nails and string and then you stretch it out until it dries, depending on the weather. And that will take a long time. And then when it's dried, you remove the nails and the string from the skin, so now stretched and ready to use.

Lindsey

Yeah, that's amazing. When you're sewing with seal skin, how is it different from sewing with regular fabric? Is it harder to get a needle through and things like that?

Samantha

For sure. There's natural skin and there's processed seal skin, which goes through a chemical process that makes it softer. So when you use a natural seal skin, you have to soften it up. So it's able to mend and usually to make it softer, you have to bite it, you have to bite it to make it softer.

Lindsey

Beautiful. Do you do any sewing yourself, with seal skin?

Samantha

Yes, my mom, she taught me how to sew from a very young age. Yeah. So I've made a pair of seal skin mitts before and I've made like seal skin figurines, you can call them. Yeah. I did a project for my heritage fair project and what I made was a pair of seal skin mittens and that was my first pair I ever made. And I actually won that and I was really proud of what I made, because that's how we always learned how to survive was sewing. And I still carry on my tradition and my mom, she's a really good sewer, too. She makes seal skin mitts for all my family.

Lindsey

That's awesome. So yeah, kind of what you were saying, carrying on traditions and things, why do you think it's important to use traditional materials like this?

Samantha

I think it's important that you use the old ways, because back in the old days, that's the only thing they knew how to do. That's the knowledge they had and passed down and you don't want to lose that. That's who you are, that's who we used to be. And you want to really make sure that all the knowledge you have, you share it because that's how you carry on the tradition. Then you want to teach your kids. You want to make sure that they know their language and their culture and know that way of life, because that's who we are.

Lindsey

Yeah. I feel like Inuit have the most knowledge of language beyond any other Indigenous folks. I feel like so many Inuit, like all the words that you know how to say and all the things you know how to say are way more than I know how to say in my language. So yeah, that's really cool that I feel like so many Inuit have a way higher level of being able to speak Inuktitut versus other Indigenous folks being able to speak our languages, which is really cool.

Samantha

Yes, but here in my hometown we have around 100 fluent speakers and their population is 1,200. I would like it to be higher, but we have that going here.

Lindsey

Yeah. Especially with you being a youth, I'm wondering what you think about youth being involved in these practices and learning about them. Do you think that's important? What do you think?

Samantha

I totally think that it's very important that you have the knowledge to go out on the land, know where the seals are to go seal hunting, know how to hunt them, know the best places to go, how to use the seal, learn how to cook the seal, and how to respect the seal. Yeah, I think the whole process is something all the youth should know.

And seal hunting is a way to bond with your family. Like when my dad, when he taught me how to hunt, I got to build a special bond with him because he's teaching me and now I am learning and something you feel proud of when you're doing it. And when you do get a catch, my first catch I gave it to my ataatsiaq and anaanatsiaq, which is my grandparents. So that's a really special part of it, too.

Lindsey

That's beautiful.

Looking to the future, is there anything you would like to see more youth involved in? What would you like to see in the future for Indigenous youth?

Samantha

So something I have already seen is a program we had here called, "Going Off and Growing Strong," which is where vulnerable youth have mental health conditions or poor self-esteem, they would go out on the land and they would go hunting as their output as their way to escape and get culturally stronger. That program isn't offered here anymore. And I would love to see that happen again, where youth can go down the land and go hunting and breathe and learn the land and just enjoy. I would also like to see more Elders involved where they teach the younger people their stories, tell them how it used to be, when they were growing up.

Lindsey

That's really beautiful. Storytelling is so important. What gives you hope or what would you like to see in the future?

Samantha

What gives me hope is when I see Inuit, in general, just trying to learn because we lost a lot of our culture through the Residential Schools. And I love it when I hear people speaking Inuktitut. I love it when I hear them say today, I got my first partridge or my first seal or today in school, I learned about this. I learned my history and I love it when they get to connect with who they are. And that gives me a lot of hope when I see Indigenous People doing good.

Narration

From Inuit traditions on the ice to hide camps in the Northwest Territories, we now travel to Ontario to speak with artist and scientist, Amber Sandy.

Amber Sandy

Anii. Amber ndiznakas makwa nindoodem Neyaashiinigiing naadongiba. Hello, my name is Amber Sandy. I am Anishinaabe from Neyaashiinigiing, also known as Cape Croker or the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation, which is located on the beautiful Bruce Peninsula in southern Ontario. I am Bear Clan. I'm an artist, a scientist, hide tanner, a harvester.

Narration

Amber's work as an artist takes many forms, specifically, she creates and works with animal hides and fish leather, so I was incredibly excited to have her be a part of this episode. She approaches her work with an endless amount of curiosity, and as you'll hear in the interview has gained so much from working with so many mentors.

So let's jump in.

Lindsey (Interviewing)

Can you just give us a little bit of an explanation as to some of the artwork you do?

Amber

I'm a bead worker and I've been working with beads and beading almost my whole life. I grew up doing artistic things and always made little pieces of jewelry and always been a little hustler, you know, having a little booth at a craft sale selling stuff, or you know, selling stuff at garage sales, that kind of thing.

So I'm a bead worker, I work with leather, I love sewing and in the past few years I've been learning how to tan hides and that's been a really, really awesome journey. I really, really enjoy the process of taking and working with something that's often discarded, especially in our modern age. Something like fish skin, for example, is such an easy way to work with something that is typically thrown in the garbage or composted and make a really beautiful piece of material with. And anybody can do it. You can do it in a tiny little kitchen. You can do it in a big space. You can pretty much do it anywhere. It's like a really great way to introduce people to hands-on work that way. So that's really where I'm working right now. And what I'm most passionate about. Even beadwork has kind of gone to the wayside a little bit because I've been working with hides.

Lindsey

That's great.

Narration (Lindsey)

I'm sure like many of you listening, when Amber first mentioned working with fish leather, I knew what the final product looked like, but had no idea how it got there. So I asked Amber to break it down for us. And what she said is that the process of creating leather is essentially summed up in four stages.

Stage 1 is fleshing.

Amber

The process is basically taking the skin and fleshing it.

So taking off any of the meat and the fat from the skin and then taking all of the scales off of it.

Narration

Amber actually has a story on her instagram where you can follow her doing this - Basically she holds down the skin and *really* scrapes it to remove the fat, but when she flips the skin to remove the scales, you can see she's a lot more gentle.

Amber

In that part, you have to be really careful because part of the beautiful thing about fish skin is the textured scale pocket pattern that you get on the outside of the leather when you're finished tanning it. So when you're taking the scales out, some of them like here in Northern Ontario, we have a lot of pickerel or walleye and their scales are really deeply embedded in. So you have to be gentle with your tools that you're using so that you're not ripping a hole in the scale pocket and that the scale pocket stays intact to help give you that really nice pattern.

Narration

Once finished with the scraping, we move on to stage 2 - washing.

Amber

Once that's done, you have to wash it. So you're basically, that whole process is almost taking all of the fats as much as you can out of the skin. And then you wash it in like dish soap to take even more of those fats out.

Narration

And now we get into the most laborious part of the process, which is stage 3 - the tanning.

Amber

There's different ways that you can tan a fish skin. So two of the ways that I do it are bark tanning using a really strong tannin to tan a fish skin, which gives it a really beautiful color. It helps to bulk up the skin and make it thick, or oil tanning.

Narration

Tannins make the skins more flexible and prevent them from disintegrating by stabilizing their proteins. Basically, they prepare the skin for its end usage.

Amber

So you may tan a fish skin for about five to six days before it's fully tanned. And in that process the fish gets thicker as those tannins are binding with the collagen fibers in the skin.

Narration

Essentially, you just become a stirring machine - constantly stirring the skins in the tannin until it's ready to go.

Which brings us to stage 4.

Amber

From there you go into the softening stage. So if I was doing a bark tanned skin after about five days of constantly making a new tea every day, stirring it lots and like caring for it over that time. You take it out of its tea solution when it's fully tanned and you reintroduce oil back into it, so it can be any kind of oil. And then you just work it and you soften it much like you would with any other animal hide. You have really sort of like break in the skin so that you have a nice, soft, usable material that a needle will pass through easily if you're going to sew with it and that kind of thing.

Narration

And that's how fish leather is made. But one of the questions that kept popping up in my head was, where is she getting all of these fish skins from and how did she learn this traditional practice?

Let's jump back into the interview to find out.

Lindsey (Interviewing)

For doing the fish tanning, specifically, do you work with fish that have already been caught? Do you go out specifically looking for fish that will be used for tanning?

Amber

A little bit of both. When I first started working on fish skins I was living in downtown Toronto and I really wanted to continue tanning hides throughout the winter. But in Toronto our winter's very mild, so wet and just like not a good time to be outside working on hides.

So I asked a local sushi restaurant that I used to go to regularly, if they would start saving me their salmon skins. And they were happy to. Cause they just throw them in the compost at the end of the day. And they had so many of them. So I would go there like once a week and pick up a big bag of frozen salmon skins that they would save for me and work on them that way. So that's where I've gotten a lot of them.

Now that I live up North and I'm closer to family and other people who harvest, there's quite a few people who save their skins for me. So people are going out, you know, walleye fishing, so as they're cleaning them, they'll just save all the skins and put them on the side. So that's where I'm most often getting my skins now.

Lindsey

That's so cool. I love the relationship aspect of that. Yeah, of people being like, "well, got to save them for Amber." That's great. And especially with the local restaurant, that's such a cool thing and something that would be thrown away otherwise.

Do you ever dye your skins at all?

Amber

Yeah, that's something I've been experimenting with. It's all kind of like a giant science experiment, which is also why I love fish skin tanning. I taught myself how to do this and it was through a lot of trial-and-error and looking up videos and finding out what other people were doing and through that I've found some ways that you can use natural dyes to dye fish skins. I've tried it a little bit but it's certainly not something I'm super confident in yet. There's some amazing teachers out there, like Janie Chang, she's one of my teachers and mentors. And she is now offering natural dye courses around fish skins and it's really cool to see that happen.

Lindsey

Very cool. And you also mentioned having a mentor, have you had multiple, you know, mentors along the way like learning these different forms of art and craft?

Amber

Absolutely. Mentors are so crucial when it comes to, especially traditional practices and for me, it's really, as much as I've wanted to learn these things, I couldn't really just go off on my own and do them. I had to learn with other people.

When I first started learning about harvesting animals and going out hunting for deer or moose, I really wanted to be able to use as much of the animal as possible. So tanning hides was always something I was super interested in, and I work in science. And so knowing the process of like brain tanning a hide, I saw there's so much incredible knowledge and science in that work that I was like, how can I, you know, bring this to my job, even. And it wasn't until I met my first hide tanning mentor, Brenda Lee at a, like by fluke, at a bead symposium in Toronto, she was teaching a workshop on quillwork.

And she had provided all the participants a little piece of home tan hide that she tanned herself. And she told us that. And at the end of the workshop, I went up to her. I was like,

"can I help you tan your hides this year?" And she graciously accepted and I spent a good part of the summer that year driving up to work with her. She was like four and a half hours away from me at that point, but I would drive up there and work with her for multiple days and just help her on her hides. So for me, those relationships are really, really important. And they're also important to honor in the way that you talk, you name those people and you share that information. Because those teachers to me, are everything. I'll always have ongoing relationships with them.

And I try to really do my best to honor them. That's really important to me and relationships like that have to be reciprocal too. I get so much out of my relationships from my mentors that I'm always so grateful for. And I always want to strive to do the same, whether it's just calling and visiting or, you know, when I would show up to Brenda's house, I would bring a bunch of groceries and I would cook food the whole time, too, you know, and we'd eat really good meals and just stuff like that, like things that are very meaningful and building our relationships.

It's easy in this age to look up videos online and much like I did with fish skin tanning, I had already had a basis knowledge of tanning hides. And I knew that people tan fish skin. So it was like, oh, how can I teach myself this? But through finding somebody like Janie Chang, who is such a wonderful teacher, and for her, it's like being able to share and learn and grow her own ancestral knowledge. So it's, for me, it's always really important to seek that out. Sometimes when you want to learn things too, it takes time for those relationships to come to you. And it can be difficult. I'm an impatient person to a degree because I'm like, when I want to do something, I want to do it.

And I'm very headstrong, but I think when it comes to learning traditional skills, it's so important to be open to that timeline. And to know that when things are right, you'll meet the right person and the right thing will come along. And so it hasn't been until the past, like basically in my thirties that I've had the opportunity to do this. And I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that I wasn't ready. Like as much as I might've wanted to learn those things, I wasn't ready to dedicate the time and energy into building those crafts and building those relationships and maintaining them really well. So that's an important piece too.

Lindsey

Yeah. I love that relational aspect of any traditional crafts. All of it is so relational. How, or I guess, why, why do you think it's important to use things like traditional materials in your work?

Amber

Well I think there's lots of reasons why. For me, it's building a relationship with the environment around me too, and it's being aware of what I'm using. So, you know, we talk a lot about vegan leather and stuff like that. And I just can't help, but to think of how many

people don't think of that, it's just plastic, you know, and as something that's not going to go back to the land and decompose and be a part of this life cycle, the way that it's meant to be. So for me, I want my work to have a lifespan and to be a part of that environment and to know that I'm creating it with my hands and I'm learning along the way.

And that I'm able to share that with other people is really important. And one of the things that I really learned a lot about in one of my early jobs was a really cool project where I got to work with a group of Indigenous seniors and Elders and bring them together with different museum collections around Ontario and then in the States. And I learned a lot about our material collections and objects that are in these spaces and how much care goes into these items. So for us, it's like we might have a beautiful birchbark basket that is stunning. It's an art piece. It took somebody so long to make. It's not meant to just sit on a shelf, collecting dust and it will age and it will wither and it will crack. And it will split over time if it does that. Those items are meant to be touched and used.

And like the more you take a piece of birch bark and you hold it and those oils from your hand are getting on it, it's helping to soften it and the moisture in it and keep it alive. The more you use a birchbark bucket to collect sap or water, the more it's hydrating it and keeping it alive, the more like owning, having a birch bark canoe, you have to have that in the water part of dunking it in the water is care for it. So I think about that a lot, too. And I think about all those objects that we have in museums that aren't cared for in those ways and how much we see, you know, the degradation of them. And so I want my art to be, I want to create art that takes me time and is methodical. And I can put a lot of my artistic practice into it, but I also want it to be a usable hands-on engaging thing.

Lindsey

Yeah. I really love that.

Yeah. I was even thinking in terms of sustainability, something like resin crafting during the pandemic, exploded and, you know, that's something that's very much, it's just going to be around forever, like in a landfill and like thrift stores. Can you speak a little bit more to sustainability in your work and why it's important?

Amber

Yeah. I've been thinking about this a lot lately, but how every single action that we take has this ripple effect in the environment around us. And I certainly, since living out in the Bush and just being out here and everything I do having an impact on what's around me, I can't help, but to see that all the time.

I think modern day, we strive to create things that will last, you know. So it's like a piece of resin, like this resin thing is gonna last forever, but our sustainable objects, like leather or birchbark can last forever. They can last for a very long time if they're given the right care and protocol.

And I guess it's more of a relationship thing too, thinking about that the objects that you care for, you're also in a reciprocal relationship with, because that birchbark basket that you have to handle and use does so much for you by being there, by being a piece of art that you admire, or by holding your medicines or whatever it is that you do with it.

It's all about reciprocity and that's a big thing for me.

Lindsey

That's great. Yeah. You've mentioned doing, you know, hide tanning camps. So can you talk a little bit about why you think things like hide tanning camps and land-based education are important?

Amber

Yeah. Hide camps are really important. When I was learning with Brenda, it was so nice to be in a space with a teacher and a mentor and be learning. And it was hard. Like it was really, really hard work. I can remember the first day she had me string up this deer hide in a frame and she gave me the tools, showed me what I had to do. And then she's like, "okay, I'm going to go inside" and left me to it. I was out there scraping and scraping, and I'm using my arms in a way that I've never used my arms before. And it's hard. Like it's physically such hard work and I just broke down crying, going, like, "what did I think I could do this for?"

Like, "this is way too difficult. What was I thinking?" You know? And just like being able to work through those emotions. And that process was really important to me. If there's one gift that I could say hide tanning has given to me, it's being able to express my emotions more. I've always been like a really closed off kind of person where I don't share a lot of my emotional side with people unless they're super close with me. But hide tanning has just forced me to be more vulnerable and emotional and just embrace that. And that's been a really beautiful part of it. I've seen that come through, especially at hide camps because you're in a space surrounded by people who are learning, who want to be there and who are hands-on with this animal and doing this hard work with you.

So it's like, it's a very powerful space. And it creates a connection that you really can't replicate any other way because you're just doing this physical work. And then there's a whole other layer of reclamation that comes through with hide tanning because this knowledge, at least for me, my community in southern Ontario, nobody has been practicing hide tanning for a long time. And now we're seeing more people my age pick it up and relearning it. But we don't have Elders in our community that are teaching us this knowledge. So for us, we're learning from people from other territories and we're relearning those teachings and we're relearning those stories and we're putting those pieces back together. And reclaiming something that was taken away from you and your family and community can be so difficult.

And hide camps are really nice because we have a group of people there supporting one another. You know, you get to eat meals with these people. You get to share that time. You have to face it. You're not just by yourself, holding in those emotions, you're with other people. And for new hide tanners, I think it's really important. Oftentimes I get messages from people who are like, "I want to tan hides and I have one and I'm going to work on it." Like, you know, I'm so happy for people wanting to pick it up and learn it, but I also know how heavy that can be and how important it is to have support with you while you're taking up that space and picking up those tools for the first time.

Lindsey

Yeah. I feel like I've heard that from a lot of folks that do hide tanning camps. Just how beautiful of a place, you know, those can be and how they can be so incredibly emotional. And it's creating spaces for people where, you know, they can feel safe and loved and be able to feel connected to histories that have been taken away from us. So beautiful. In terms of your art, your work, is there anything that you hope that people take away from your art?

Amber

I think the one thing that I really want to encourage people to do is, if you are interested in learning about birchbark, if you're interested in learning about hide tanning, if there's something you really want to learn, you should strive to learn it. And even if it takes a couple of years, like you don't know, it might take five years to find a mentor who's going to teach, you can learn that one day and don't be discouraged. I really have so much love for my mentors who are really open with their knowledge in terms of sharing it with people who genuinely want to learn.

And they know that that knowledge is not going to be misused, but that knowledge needs to be back in the hands of our people. And because we've experienced so much loss, it's really sometimes difficult to reconnect these things. And I'm the prime example of that. I grew up off reserve. I've lived in Toronto for 15 years of my life. I was deeply involved in the urban community, as much as I could, but I didn't have mentors. I didn't have access to going hunting with my dad growing up. I didn't have access to the Bush. So all of the things I've learned I've had to really seek out on my own and make an effort to be there, to do that. In my off time, in my down time, in building those relationships and if you're wanting to do this stuff, you've got to start there. Start building those relationships, start dedicating that time and things will come as they're supposed to come.

And when you do have that knowledge, be just as generous as you hoped somebody would be for you with it, because, you know, we all need the opportunity to relearn these things and pick it back up. And it's so important that we share with other people in a good way.

Narration

These traditional practices often hold so many beautiful memories. Our associate producer, Morningstar, once told me a story about a hide camp where the women all stood in a circle holding onto the hide and bounced a baby on it to soften it, laughing the whole time.

That's what we get with traditional textiles. We get the stories behind them, and the love and laughter that goes into making them. They're more than just pieces of fabric; they're an embodiment of Indigenous traditions that have been carried on for generations.

We hope you've enjoyed learning all about hides, tans, and leathers today. Thank you to our interviewees: Mande, Samantha, and Amber.

And for all of our listeners, thank you again for tuning in. Please share and give us a rating. You can also follow ICA on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook for more content on Indigenous knowledge and rights. Until next time.