

Create a Model Birch Basket

Traditional Technology: Birch Baskets

"Once you take the bark from a tree, you don't pick the same bark again... They roll it up and keep it in a cool place until they're ready to use it. And then when you're ready to use it...you hold it near the heat. And that heat softens up the bark so that it can fold and bend without cracking."

-Elder Eliza Jones, from a discussion at the Smithsonian, 2004

Indigenous people in Alaska have a long tradition of making baskets. They use baskets for many purposes including collecting berries, storing food, carrying water and cooking. The materials to make baskets depend on resources available in each area. In Interior Alaska, baskets are often made of birch bark.

Right: Hän women with birchbark baskets, ca 1900. Image: UAF Archives, Charles Bunnell Collection, 1958-1026-01543.

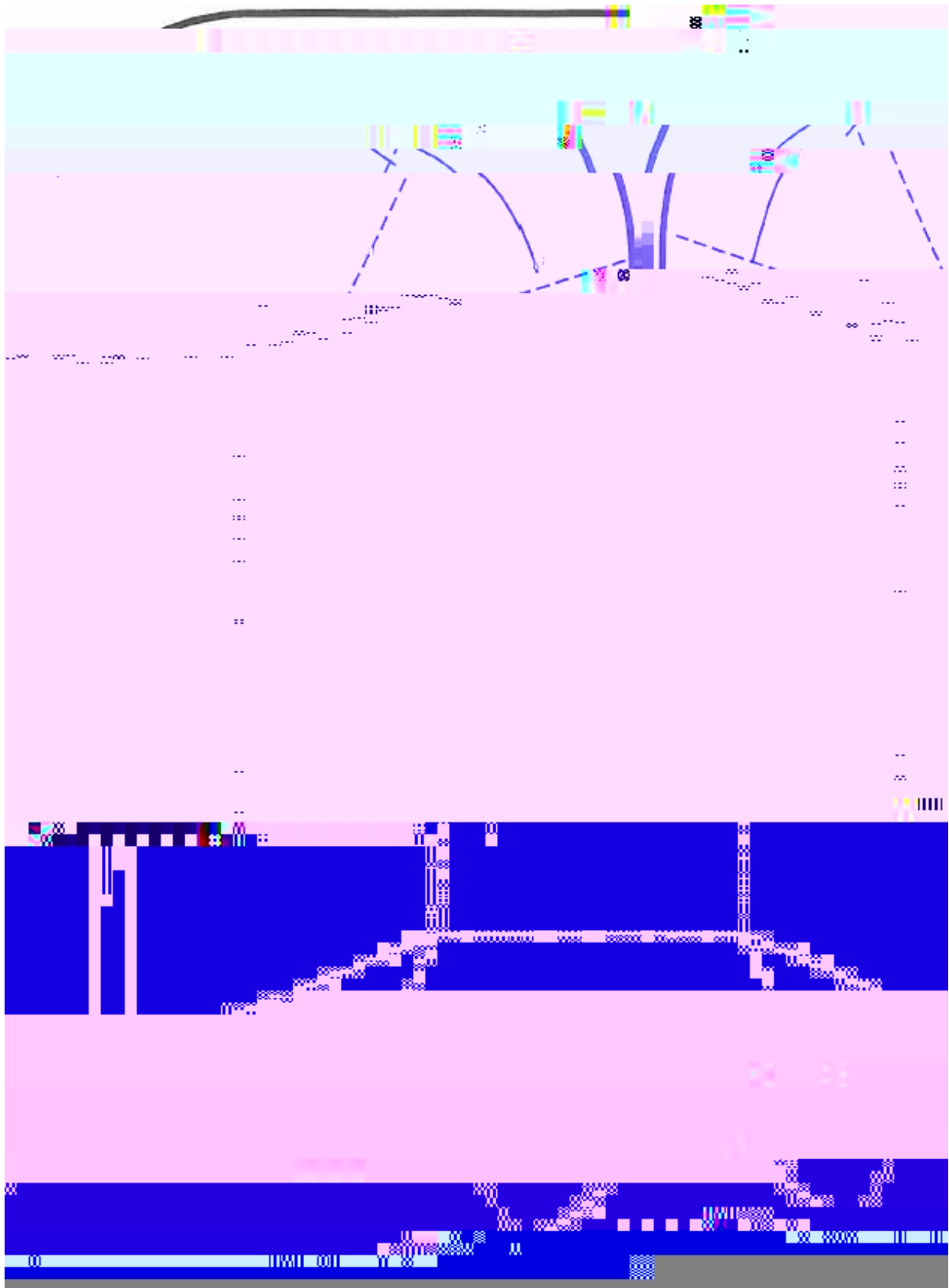


Athabascan woman stitching a birch bark basket. Image: Alaska State Library, ASL-P306-1930

Dené (Athabascan) basket makers are aware of birch bark's ability to hold water. They collect birch bark in the spring or early summer, taking only the outer layer so that the tree will survive. The bark is cut, warmed to make it flexible, folded into shape, and stitched together with split pieces of root from spruce or willow trees. Baskets are made in a variety of shapes and sizes for different purposes.

Today, many people make birch bark baskets to sell or give as gifts. Learning about resources available in the local environment, how and when to harvest,

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