

THE SWEAT LODGE

The sweat lodge ceremony is one of the most common ceremonies practiced by Native American people. Sweats may be conducted as a preliminary to other activities, such as a fast. Sweats may also be done for healing. The purpose behind all of these, however, is simple spiritual cleansing. The lodge is designed to provide a safe, sacred place where the participants can concentrate on the spirits that are invited to the ceremony. These spirits are brought in with the 'grandfathers', which are the stones that are heated in the fire. Splashing water on the grandfathers creates steam, and we then have all four elements present in the lodge: earth below, air around, fire in the grandfathers and water in the steam.



CONSTRUCTING THE LODGE

A private place is preferred for a sweat lodge, to ensure that there will be no interruptions or distractions. A natural area is best, as it enhances the connection between the lodge and the Earth. A positive frame of mind should be maintained at all times while constructing the lodge.



Typical sweat lodge frame

The lodge is constructed of flexible saplings, and is made in a dome shape. For maximum flexibility, collect the saplings right after a good rain. The lodge can be any size, but larger lodges are harder to heat thoroughly - we make ours about 4 meters in diameter, and limit the number of people if required.

The butts of the saplings are embedded in the ground, and bend towards each other from opposite sides of the structure. They are secured by weaving them into the structure, and by braiding the branches at the ends around the sapling opposite. If anything else is required, we use a natural material, such as spruce roots, cotton cloth or sisal twine.

In the center is a pit, into which the grandfathers will be placed by the Firekeeper. The entrance is made facing east, toward the sacred fire. The entire structure is covered with layers of heavy but breathable fabric, like canvas - we use military surplus tents. Be very

thorough in ensuring that no light leaks into the lodge.

THE SACRED FIRE

A few meters to the east, we make the sacred fire in which the grandfathers are heated. We first create a small platform of pieces of firewood, on which the grandfathers are carefully stacked in a pyramidal pile. Kindling and more firewood are then stacked around the grandfathers, building into a tepee shape that is sometimes called the Lodge of the Sacred Fire. An opening is left facing the sweat lodge, and is used for lighting the fire, after which it is quickly closed. By the way, it is not the size of the fire that matters - it is our prayers that heat the grandfathers. From personal experience, we can vouch for that, having seen red-hot grandfathers coming from a smallish fire made with wet wood. By preference, we will use birch and maple for firewood.



The Sacred Fire

The best types of stones for a sweat are igneous. Above all, do *NOT* use sedimentary stones that come from a wet area, as they will explode when heated. In our area, we collect quartzite and basalt cobbles from the sea shore, which are perfect for the task. The stones should be somewhere between eight and fourteen inches in girth; larger ones hold heat longer.

The grandfathers can be re-used, if you desire, but we usually collect new grandfathers for each sweat. When we collect, we make our intentions known, then we pay attention: some stones will volunteer to be taken home, and others will not. Of course, don't forget your offering!

THE CEREMONY

There are many different sweat lodge ceremonies, each with somewhat different proceedings. In many cases the sweat will be done in four rounds, in other cases it is done as a single round. The number of grandfathers varies from one type to the next. In general, however, here's how it happens:

- The lodge is thoroughly smudged before use, and cedar may be placed on the floor. The pit is cleared of any grandfathers from the previous sweat.
- The first grandfather represents the Creator, and is brought into the lodge by itself. The Conductor then enters the lodge to greet and smudge the grandfather.
 - NOTE: once the first grandfather has entered the lodge, a sort of pathway or

umbilical cord exists between the sacred fire and the lodge, along which spirits will enter the lodge; other than the Fire Keeper, nobody should ever cross this line.

- When told, the Fire Keeper then brings in the remaining grandfathers for the round, one at a time, placing them where the Conductor directs. The Conductor again welcomes and smudges each one.
- When all grandfathers have been brought in, the participants may enter the lodge. Generally, men enter first, and move clockwise around the pit to their positions in the north. Women follow, and sit in the south. As each person enters, they say "Msit No'kmaq" or "All my relations."
- When everyone has entered, and the water container has been passed into the lodge, the Conductor will call for the door to be closed. This may be the task of a separate Door Keeper, but generally the Fire Keeper does this.
- Each round of the sweat is dedicated to one of the sacred directions, and the spirits and elements of that direction are honoured in a prayer by the Conductor. Each participant may then be offered a chance to pray or speak as well. The Conductor splashes water on the grandfathers to create steam and fill the lodge with heat; as we sweat, impurities are taken from our bodies. The Conductor is also responsible for controlling the energies within the lodge, and for keeping the participants safe while they are spiritually open and vulnerable. This can take quite a toll on the Conductor.
- When the round is complete, the Conductor will call for the door to open. Participants may be offered a chance to leave the lodge to stretch, and water may be passed around for a drink. Finally, when directed by the Conductor, the Fire Keeper will bring in the next round of grandfathers, and the process is repeated.

Depending on the Conductor, the sweat may or may not be very hot. Since we frequently do sweats for beginners, we tend to keep ours moderate, allowing participants to concentrate on the spirits and the ceremony rather than on breathing and staying conscious. However, sometimes the spirits have other ideas!

We also make it known that anyone can leave the lodge at any time, simply by asking for the door to be opened. Sometimes, people enter the lodge for the wrong reasons, and if the spirits want that person to leave, we will not keep him/her in. In other cases, the person may simply be claustrophobic. However, they can still be part of the sweat lodge by sitting outside the lodge and adding prayers and energy to the circle within.

When the sweat is over, the participants emerge from the sweat lodge spiritually and

physically cleansed. Many feel that they are being reborn as they emerge, since the lodge has a womb-like feeling. Generally everyone gathers for a small feast afterwards, so that the good feelings continue for a time, and a bond can be formed between the participants.