One headdress in the Alaska State Museum made of white dentalium shells and glass beads was worn by a Tlingit woman named Jiyal.áxch. Dentalium shells are white tiny tusk-like shells found along the coast of North America from Southeast Alaska to California. Dentalia can be seen on very old and new Native regalia on the coast and inland through the Great Plains, Canada, and Alaska. Long ago dentalia was harvested from the ocean floor in 50 to 60 feet of water using long poles.

A fitted hat with long flowing tassels down the back, covered with stringed shells and/or beads makes a regal headress. During ceremonies headdresses like these have been worn by Tlingit, Unangan (Aleut) and Alutiiq women and girls along Alaska’s coast for hundreds of years.

Dentalium live in sandy soil on the ocean floor. There are many kinds of dentalia but the largest in North America are found off the west coast of Vancouver Island. These large shells were once used as a form of money.

Dentalia A Bright Idea!

You could make this headdress using chenille stems, pony beads, and macaroni.

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