**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:03): Today on The Women Mind the Water podcast, I'm speaking with Cheryl Massey, a basket maker whose creations are rooted in the natural world of British Columbia. Every basket Cheryl makes is as unique as the color and texture of the plant material she collects. Cheryl's signature basket is made from kelp. The Woman Mind the Water podcast engages artists in conversation about their work and explores their connection with the ocean. Through their stories, Women Mind the Water hopes to inspire and encourage action to protect the ocean and her creatures. I am very happy today to welcome **Cheryl Massey** to the Women Mind the Water Art of the Series podcast.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:44): Cheryl is a Canadian basket maker whose creations are produced with materials that she gathers from nature. Notable among the very basket she leaves are those created from old kelp. Old kelp is unusual because you can grow as much as two feet a day and kelp is an unusual material to work with because it dries and changes as it dries.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (01:08): Welcome, Cheryl. Thank you for joining me on the Women Mind the Water podcast. I'm really looking forward to talking with you about your weaving. Many years ago, when I lived in California, I purchased a small basket made from kelp. I've always wondered about the work that went into making it. Decades later, I still have that kelp basket. It's delicate and brittle yet it retains a magical quality. I think you may be a musician. Not a musician, but a magician, to create such works of art.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (01:40): Cheryl, I'd like to begin by asking you to tell me about how you became a basket maker. Is this something you taught yourself or did you acquire this skill from someone else?

**Cheryl Massey** (01:51): Well, I definitely took a basket weaving workshop to acquire the skill, but when I first had the urge to learn how to weave a basket, I was sitting on a beach on an island out the coast of BC and this strong urge just possessed me. And so I just thought, you know what? Indigenous people, they wove baskets with material that nature provided them. So I just grabbed some grass, started fiddling around with it and made some funny little birds nest. It was so tiny and small and I thought, okay, I definitely need to take a workshop or a class to learn how to weave a basket. And it actually took me a full year to find, well, actually it took me about six months to find a workshop that would appeal to me, that would resonate with me. And it was actually at Hollyhock Holistic Center, which is on Cortes Island, was right across the water from where I sat when I first had that urge.

**Cheryl Massey** (03:04): So the place where I learned how to weave baskets was just right in front of me. It was right there. So I learned from an American woman who had all this natural material. She had spruce fruit, she had Tule rush, she had some kelp, she had, what else? Willow branches. It was amazing. I was just like a kid in the candy shop and I just took all that information and it's like I grabbed the ball and I ran with it. And then it just opened up this whole world of looking around at nature. What can I gather? What can I get? And I started learning and just a lot of trial and error and I just told myself, there's no rules. I'm just going to do whatever I want. I did take some other workshops, one from a Haida weaver, with cedar bark and then another workshop from a very well, highly respected weaver of willow. And I just adapted those techniques and just have used what resonates with me, what really turns me on. And I just go with it.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (04:16): Do the materials you gather dictate what kind of basket you actually end up making?

**Cheryl Massey** (04:22): Well, particularly with kelp. Kelp commands how it wants the result of the finished form. So I had collected this one piece of kelp and kelp has, at the tip of it when it's growing, like here, the bulb, there is the long frond. And usually when I've collected that in the past, it just crumbles and breaks. But this one particular piece of kelp, the blade never broke. It maintained its whole form. And I thought, you're going to be something special one day. So I dried it out, stored it in a box and then, I don't know, maybe about a couple years later, I thought, then I had an insight to make a wall hanging.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (05:14): Yeah I was going to ask that's bull kelp because what we have in Maine does not look anything like that.

**Cheryl Massey** (05:21): Yeah, I think the kelp on the East Coast, I don't think you have the bull kelp that we have here on the West Coast.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (05:27): No, we don't. No.

**Cheryl Massey** (05:28): Yeah. Kelp is in many different forms, many different species, but the kelp that I love to work with is here on the coast of BC, which makes it so abundant. Well, it used to be abundant, not quite so much anymore.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (05:43): So is there a particular time of year that's best for you to gather the kelp?

**Cheryl Massey** (05:47): Yes. Spring and summer because you need the sunshine, the wind, the heat to dry the kelp. I have tried a few times over the past and gathered kelp in the fall and it's just too cold, it's too wet, there's not enough heat. So you're just basically gathering compost for your garden.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (06:08): All right.

**Cheryl Massey** (06:10): Like I say, trial and error.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (06:12): Yeah. Are some beaches better than others for collecting?

**Cheryl Massey** (06:16): Yes, and the best type of beaches for collecting are ones that are rocky and have little round pebbles because when the kelp washes up on a sandy beach, then all the little creatures from the sand start eating the kelp and it rots very quickly. So a beach that has lots of round pebbles or rocks, then when the kelp... So in the springtime we get these storms and the kelp rips off the floor, the ocean floor, and then it washes up on the beach and then it gets all caught in nooks and crannies, logs and rocks, but sometimes it just washes up and it's just easy to collect. And when it's on rocks, then the rocks actually help dry the kelp and then you find a piece like this, when you find the kelp that's already dry, that's turned this beautiful golden color, it's so light. When you gather wet kelp, like kelp that's just freshly washed up the beach, it is so heavy because it has so much water in it.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (07:28): So my mind is blown. I thought you would work with wet kelp.

**Cheryl Massey** (07:32): So many people do. Yeah.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** ([07:35](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=BntEr3s8Ze-QJMkVlb5CM_ibk_U05gHu0ZmOXbU34KY0tZhxxMRPd1-g1dtec0EhS9TwpLXj2ZWRqCSy8XL3lWFlEds&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=455.87)): Because it's so brittle when it's dry.

**Cheryl Massey** (07:38): Yeah. So my mantra is gather, dry, soak, weave, gather, dry soak, weave, gather, dry, soak, weave.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (07:47): All right. So are there particular characteristics of the kelp that you are looking for?

**Cheryl Massey** (07:55): Yes. Well this kelp here still has the air inside it and this type of kelp, if I can find kelp that has the air inside it, this is the holy grail. This right here. Because it doesn't have any holes in it, it hasn't been smashed. Then I can make a kelp basket like this, because the air is part of the form. So I can weave. This is called the coiling technique, very ancient technique and then I can weave a basket and it holds its form because of the air.

**Cheryl Massey** (08:38): Sometimes if I'm weaving this, and so all the kelp when I'm weaving, it's wet, I've soaked it in warm water. So it's just pliable like leather. Then it's perfect and it's unbelievably strong. The indigenous people of this coast, they used to collect the kelp for the long skinny bits and they would tie them together for their halibut line and they would make like 500 meters of halibut line. Incredible. It's so unbelievably strong. But kelp is so much fun, like collecting on the beach, people say, oh, I remember that stuff as a kid, I would swing it around and it's just so much fun. A lot of kids use them for beer bongs. Like they cut the top off and the bottom, pour beer in and chug beer that way.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (09:26): Well, let's get back to basket making. So obviously you collect it, it dries, you soak it and then you work with it, but when the kelp, as you start working with it and weave it together, it will shrink as it dries. So do you have to take that into account when you're weaving?

**Cheryl Massey** (09:49): Yes. These coil baskets, they shrink a little bit, but their form, they don't change that much. However, if I was to make a kelp basket, let me get this one here, excuse me. Well, actually this one, this is a lampshade and when I wove it, its form was different. Kelp takes on its own personality as it dries. It's like, I'm going to look like this, no matter how hard you try and manipulate me. It's just going to do what it wants to do. I try and sort of shape and mold it to what I want it to be, but it's like nice try, but it's just going to take on a life of itself, which is so cool, because sometimes you just don't quite know exactly what you're going to get.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (10:47): Right. Right.

**Cheryl Massey** (10:48): It's always like a little surprise.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (10:51): So what other challenges are there to working with the kelp?

**Cheryl Massey** (10:55): Oh, well it'll break, you'll get a rotten piece. That's why I have to be very selective when I do collect kelp, not to collect kelp that's rotten. And sometimes making this type of basket, you have to be so careful not to poke a hole in the kelp that has the air in it because as soon as you poke a hole you're done.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (11:24): Really?

**Cheryl Massey** (11:25): Yep.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (11:26): So it's like a balloon?

**Cheryl Massey** (11:28): Yeah. So kelp, it's strong, but it's delicate.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** ([11:33](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=6aVzAtuCspqg2BYbjjNO7tjGkO8e4yovr6uslaotvkihi5LbK0POHOgEgBCw47s94CfeSfOB0Ry29_XcgNqxZwMeoag&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=693.54)): Yes.

**Cheryl Massey** (11:34): When someone wants a functional basket, I say then tule rush or cedar bark. Kelp, you can use it as a functional basket, you just have to make sure that... Here I'll show you one other one. Oops. So this one here, it actually belongs to a girlfriend of mine, I'm just keeping up for her, but this one here, so there's no air in any of the kelp. It's been squished flat and it's like beautiful pieces of leather that you're working with. So this is actually quite a functional basket. You can store like wooden spoons in it or anything kind of tall. Maybe if you're serving bread sticks or even like dry flour.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (12:17): Does it have smell to it? Is it salty? Do you smell the ocean? No? Okay.

**Cheryl Massey** (12:22): The only time it smells is when I'm weaving with it, when you get it wet, but it's like most things after time, like anything from nature, the essence, the smell slowly starts to go away and with the kelp and with the cedar, I'll brush a little bit of mineral oil just to bring out the luster, give it a little protection. And maybe once a year I might just give it a little light brushing of mineral oil just to protect it so it doesn't dry out and get too dusty.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (12:54): Okay. So could you describe the process of weaving? Maybe discuss a particular basket you've made and for those who are listening to an audio only podcast version of the podcast, can you describe the basket?

**Cheryl Massey** (13:08): Well, if I was to weave a basket with the plating technique, like this one here, where it's like basically over, under, over, under, I call it the checkerboard weave and I would decide on the pieces of kelp that are already dried and then I would put them in the bathtub of warm water and wait for it to get pliable, to like leather. You can't let it soak too long or else you'll just end up with mush. It'll hydrate itself so much that you have to let it dry out again.

**Cheryl Massey** (13:45): So once I have the kelp nice and pliable, and then I will choose my pieces, I'll have a pattern. So I'll cut them to like some long pieces, some short pieces and then I also will need some long skinny pieces of kelp. I call these my weavers and then I will-

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (14:08): Sorry, motorcycle.

**Cheryl Massey** (14:10): And then I will have a form in my mind as to what I want it to look like and then I will start with the base, the bottom, and then the sides go up and I weave kelp around as the sides go up. And then I finish it with a border. And then with kelp, let's say with a tall one like this, then for it to dry, I would have to turn it upside down and I usually will stuff it with newspapers and then probably put like maybe a wine bottle or some type of jar so then as it dries, then the form, it won't collapse.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (14:52): So are you telling me that the entire basket, like the one behind you is made from kelp? Even the pieces that you use to thread it together are strips of kelp?

**Cheryl Massey** (15:02): It's a hundred percent kelp.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (15:05): You are a magician. There's no question about it.

**Cheryl Massey** (15:09): Yeah. So right here, come here. So this is long skinny pieces of kelp, and you can see here, so this is a small piece of kelp. Like, you know, when I get the big ones, like one time I found a piece of kelp that still had the air inside it and it had from the bulb to the hold fast, and I measured it on our lawn, it was 75 feet long.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (15:44): Wow.

**Cheryl Massey** (15:45): It was a beauty. It was like fantastic. And I wove that into a coiled kelp basket and it was one piece. I think I might have sent you the photo of it. It was like this big, it was magnificent. I've never, ever found a piece of kelp like that before and I've had people say I want a basket like that. I have this one artist who saw that basket and he emailed me years ago and was like, I want a basket like that. I go, well buddy, that was a very unique piece of kelp. I don't know. I'll keep my eyes peeled and I'll see what I can do, but I haven't found a piece of kelp like that since, mind you the kelp collecting has gotten to be less and less over the past few years due to, I think it's climate change and also just the disruption of nature.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (16:45): So what is the source of your inspiration for your creations?

**Cheryl Massey** (16:50): Oh, so I was asked to weave a wedding shawl for a friend of mine who was going to be an ordained priest for a wedding. And he asked me to weave a shawl like how priest wear and he wanted it to be woven out of cedar, kelp, whatever. And so I thought about it and I took a few days and when I was actually on my standup paddle board, lying on it, just floating, not doing anything and just like, ugh, so relaxed. And then the idea to weave it, the shawl, came to me. I wasn't thinking about it, I just let whatever happened happen and the idea came to me and it was brilliant. And then I was like, let's go, let's get this baby done.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (17:42): So you're really in touch with your environment? So let's get back just to something you were saying that it's been harder to find kelp. Is it in abundance and in size? Have the beaches changed?

**Cheryl Massey** (17:59): Well, what has happened over the decades, the kelp beds have been disappearing over across all from California, all the way up to BC and Alaska. And the disruption... What happened a long time ago was the otters got hunted to close to extinction and the otters eat the urchins. And then there's an abundance of urchins and then the urchins would eat the kelp. So mother nature got disrupted. And then now we have global warming, the oceans are warming up.

**Cheryl Massey** (18:34): So I've noticed over the past 10 years, when I would go to the West Coast of Vancouver Island to one of my favorite places to collect kelp, it's like, hmm, not quite so much kelp anymore. Sometimes I would get nothing and it's most disappointing. There is still kelp out there. I just need to go further. I need to go to explore other nooks and crannies.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (18:59): So I wonder if you might suggest some things that people can do to make a positive difference when it comes to the ocean?

**Cheryl Massey** (19:07): Oh, well being on the ocean and going to all these different beaches or areas that are nooks and crannies. We, my husband and I, are constantly picking up garbage. Constantly. And it's a spit in the bucket, but just pick up garbage wherever you are and also what we want to do is lobby for places where you can leave styrofoam. Like huge pieces of styrofoam. It's such a problem. And also lobby the manufacturers of this material, plastic and styrofoam are just choking our oceans and just become more aware and active and know that what we do to our oceans, we do to ourselves.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (19:55): Thank you so much for being on the Women Mind the Water podcast. I'm really glad to have had a chance to talk with someone who is as inspired as you are by the ocean and creates such a unique and natural tribute to it. Thank you, Cheryl.

**Cheryl Massey** (20:14): Oh, well thank you so much for this opportunity.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (20:16): I'd like to remind listeners that I've been speaking with **Cheryl Massey** for the Women Mind the Water podcast series. This series can be viewed on womenmindthewater.com. An audio version of this podcast is available on the Women Mind the Water website, on iTunes and also on Spotify, Stitcher and Google podcast. Women Mind the Water is grateful to Jane Rice for the song, Women of Water. All rights for the Women Mind the Water name and logo belong to Pam Ferris-Olson. This is Pam Ferris-Olson.