

Atlatl

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Can you imagine what it was like to search for food thousands of years ago? You'd have to hunt for it. Hunting has been a primary way of obtaining meat such as deer, rabbit, or raccoon. Now, imagine running after a deer with a knife or spear; the hunt would probably not be as successful. Add a little bit of technology, and humans have the upper hand. An **atlatl** is a spear thrower used to launch a spear farther and faster than the average human arm can throw. There is a spear point at the end, and with the right aim, it becomes a deadly weapon.



The word atlatl is based on Nahuatl (Aztec) origin, but the atlatl has been used all over the world. How do we know about it? A good way to learn about cultures is to interact with current people. The atlatl or similar device is currently used in Australia (woomerias), South America (estolicas), and Africa. Most of the spear and atlatl is made of wood and decomposes over time. However, the spear point was typically made of stone (flint or chert), and points are commonly found on archaeological sites. The hooked end (nock) that connects to the spear would have been made of harder material, such as stone, antler, or hard wood. A weight was typically attached to the middle of the atlatl for balance and to give the thrower more power. The spear is usually 6 feet long.

How does the atlatl work? The thrower holds the atlatl in one hand, places one's fingers (middle, ring, and pinkie) around the atlatl, and places the other two fingers (index and thumb) on the spear (dart) holding it secure. The thrower extends one's arm to fling the spear forward. The spear has fletching on the end to guide the spear as it flies through the air. The spear will go in the direction one is facing, so throwers do not want to point up as what goes up must come down. Throwing the spear requires technique more than strength, and distance is easier to achieve than accuracy. Also, atlatls and spears can be made differently depending on preference, but the spear needs to be a certain length and weight for it to fly correctly. The nock or hook needs to be at a certain angle for the spear to go in the right direction. The fletching on the spear needs to be maintained and redone every now and again.



Throwing a spear with an atlatl is part of experimental archaeology – a way to learn how other cultures lived and how they hunted food to survive. The best way to learn about something is to do it. Some have studied the trajectory, force of impact, distance, and other scientific analyses. This activity is also a good way to learn about safety as a precursor to archery or shooting activities. Firing range rules apply: while holding both the atlatl and spear, the thrower is considered armed. They should not point their weapon towards anyone, and bystanders should not run out into the field unless it is clear. Some states in the US allow hunting licenses that include atlatl, but Indiana does not. Please check your local area for the rules.

Throwing a spear with an atlatl is an inclusive learning experience as most ages can participate, although assistance and supervision is recommended with children. It does not matter if you are left-handed or right-handed, and even those with physical challenges can throw a spear with an atlatl successfully. This activity can be a rewarding experience for everyone.

**Watch the Indiana DNR calendar at <https://events.in.gov/dnr>
for future opportunities to interact with the atlatl.**