

SPIRIT OF THE TREES

A six-part educational DVD series exploring the link between trees and forests and Native American cultures

The series *Spirit of the Trees* presents six different films featuring 40 North American indigenous tribes and nations. Each film is narrated by a Dakota Sioux, late actor and musician Floyd Red Crow Westerman. The ensemble is a striking portrait of the First Nations people, giving insight into the traditions of their spiritual practices, foods and medicines, art and music, shelter and land management – all inseparably connected to trees, forests and Mother Earth.

The films can be used as a means to study not only specific historical and cultural aspects of Native American society, but also some universal notions such as:

- The concepts of nation, people, culture and tradition – whether Native Americans are able to maintain or regain their traditional ways.
- The concept of ecology and its different meanings: the relationship between organisms and their environment; the relationships between human groups and their physical and social environments; the study of the detrimental effects of modern civilization on the environment, with a view toward prevention or reversal through conservation.

Exploring those themes can efficiently meet the following pedagogical objectives:

- Developing a better understanding of critical notions such as the concepts of nation and people. This helps students develop critical thinking skills to go beyond prejudices and intuitive assumptions, and to replace unconsidered opinion with judgment.

Example of a discussion topic: what defines a culture? For instance, in the films, we learn that weaving baskets is a tradition passed on from generation to generation. The students can share personal examples of family traditions or rituals (celebrations, religious rites, objects, songs, language, recipes, etc.)

- Developing a better sense of long duration and evolution over time. This helps students understand how the past differs from the present, and also how historical knowledge can be used to explore contemporary problems.

Example of a discussion topic: How is Native discourse about preservation of tradition related to ecological themes in general? For example, in the films, we learn that modern forest management can compromise the quality of life on Earth. Preserving traditional management of the forest makes ecological sense.

- Developing a better understanding of the complexities of a problem, and in doing so, helping the students to come up with pertinent questions and plan research.

Example of a discussion topic: How is geography related to the history and identity of peoples? For example, in the films, we learn that Native people feel that the landscape reflects their cultures. Help the students realize that living in an urban environment influences the way they live, the way they eat, the music they listen to, the clothes they wear... in short, their culture.

PEOPLE OF THE CEDAR

“When you look at a totem pole, the figures on the pole remind you of a story. They told you of a man, his clan, his family and of the great things that had happened.”

– David Boxley, Tsimshian Nation of Alaska

People of the Cedar explains how the tribal Nations of Alaska and the Pacific Northwest relate to the forest and how they consider the cedar tree essential to life; it also explains how the Yakima share their concerns and philosophy on sustainable forestry and traditional food and gathering. The film features many traditions that have evolved from community life in the forest: carving, totem making, basket making, weaving, making cedar clothing and gathering.

Discussion Topics

1. How can a tree be at the center of a people's identity?
 - Help the students go beyond their first impression: At first sight, it looks like the cedar tree is only used as raw material to transform into woven baskets, clothes, masks and totems. But is the cedar more than that?
 - Sensible management of the forest is intrinsic to Native culture; the cedar tree represents a vital economic resource for this Tribe. Resource management is therefore a central concern.
 - Native peoples' respect for what nature gives leads them to adopt forest management practices that involve no waste, sharing and respect for the land's capacity to renew. Thus through forest management, the Native peoples relate with the spirit world.

➤ **Related Research/Activities**

What does a dying tree give back to the forest? What creatures depend upon decaying trees for food?

If you were to carve a totem that was emblematic of your life story, what elements would you portray?

The Native peoples claim to treat their forest as a shared resource; can you give other examples of shared resources?

What traditions has your family passed down from generation to generation?

2. How do Native peoples perceive non-native people?

- Why do Native peoples use the expression “dominant society”? What does it refer to?
- Explore the notion of treaty rights.

➤ **Research Topics/Activities**

Do you perceive yourself as being part of a dominant society?

Are treaty rights the same in Canada and the United States?

When Native peoples say that language and religion “were taken from us,” what historical period are they referring to?

What can help two different cultures coexist? Can discussion and collaboration lead to reinforced rights for the minority? And what legal mechanisms will oversee them?

MALAMA 'AINA

“Malama means to cherish, to care and to protect. In Hawaiian we say Malama 'Aina – to protect, love and cherish the land.”

– Haunani-Kay Trask, Ph.D., Director, Center for Hawaiian Studies, University of Hawaii

The film ***Malama 'Aina*** explores the intimate relationship Native Hawaiians have with the land and all living things. Hawaiian botanists, hula dancers, artists, healers, navigators and others describe how they struggle to save their land.

Discussion Topics

1. Why do Native Hawaiians feel that without the land they are nothing?
 - Native Hawaiians believe that they are descendants of the gods, the stars, the ocean and the forest. They feel they are intrinsically part of the environment that created and nurtures them.
 - Study the concept of pantheon (defined as: all the gods of a people).
 - Since Native Hawaiians believe they belong to their environment, they cannot develop this environment without committing to the ideal of Malama 'Aina, there can be no development without impairing the cultural and environmental integrity of Hawaii and its inhabitants.

➤ **Related Research/Activities**

Find out more about the indigenous Hawaiians spiritual beliefs.

What ancient cultures believed in pantheons? Can you think of a society today that believes in a pantheon?

2. How was the Hawaiians' environment impacted by the arrival of the Europeans? And how can the past and the present coexist?
 - The introduction of cattle in the 18th century destroyed the low lands of the Hawaiian Islands. To such an extent that, at the turn of the 20th century, an emergency was declared: the priority was to plant trees, providing that they would grow fast. In this process, non-native trees were planted.
 - The Tlingets of Alaska gave the Hawaiians three giant Sitka Spruce for a traditional outrigger canoe because they had no trees large enough left on the Islands. Re-establishing native trees in the low lands would permit future generations to carry on traditions.
 - Today, indigenous Hawaiians are committed to restoring and stabilizing the lands that have been abused by developers and to working in collaboration with non-native Hawaiians towards this goal.

➤ **Related Research/Activities**

How many different species of trees and plants native to Hawaii are now extinct?

What do the low lands refer to?

Can you think of other examples of abuses of the land by developers?

The film presents a doctor who has no problem incorporating traditional healing practices and beliefs into his approach. Can you think of an example in your community of a coexistence of different approaches to medicine?

LIVING KNOWLEDGE

“My grandfather used to say to me, ‘We have to take care of this planet like it was a library book. You’ve got to make sure that when you return it to the public library, it’s in the same condition as when you took it out so that someone else has the opportunity to use it.’”

– Thomasina Jordan (1940–1999), Mashpee Wampanoag/Nansemond Cultural Leader

The tribal members from North East America – Mashpee Wampanoags, Nansemonds, Pequots, and Mohawks – were among the first people to greet Europeans. These tribes lived in harmony with the eastern forests, rivers, land and ocean. In the film *Living Knowledge*, we learn how they preserve traditions while embracing today’s lifestyle.

Discussion Topics

1. Is a sense of property the same for Native people and non-native people?
 - Help the students understand why Native people thought the European settlers were “reckless toward the land”: The pioneers began to clear the forest to send lumbers to Europe and opened the land to agriculture, without thinking about how the forest would renew itself.
 - Since Native people did not believe in ownership of the land and thought you should share what was given by the Earth, they were confronted by the fact that Europeans were accustomed to owning things and territories.
 - Help the students explore how prejudice arises from different perceptions and how the value given to goods is often based on rarity: Native people and Europeans traded goods; in the mind of the Europeans, beads and copper cauldrons held little value so they thought the indigenous people were naïve to trade those goods for fur, as fur held great value in Europe. But Native people used the beads for their art and craft – an essential part of their identity – and the cauldrons to bury the bones of the dead or to cook. So for them, it was a fair and useful trade, since fur was abundant.

➤ **Related Research/Activities**

What is wampum?

What would the Native people do with the beads they received from the Europeans?

Are there other European objects that the Native people valued?

Can you give examples of recklessness towards the land in other countries or in your country?

2. What traditional activities did Native people from North East America succeed in maintaining?
 - Fishing and hunting are greatly valued traditions. Without preservation of the forests, the seashores, the rivers and the lakes, those traditional ways may disappear.
 - Today, Native people still use trees as shelters for smoking fish, they use the sap to make maple products, they create medicinal remedies, and also art craft.

➤ **Related Research/Activities**

Observe and list the items you use in your daily life that are made of wood.

Can you think of indigenous products used by non-native people?

CONTINUING TRADITIONS

“Humans have a great potential to be very good for the forest. By using traditional Maidu knowledge, we can help create a healthier forest.”

– Farrell Cunningham, Maidu Nation

In the film *Continuing Traditions*, Native Americans from the Southwest and California explain how they share the spirit of the trees through the voices of their sacred drums and flutes, their looms and weavings, their medicines, stewardship of their lands and cultural interdependence.

Discussion Topics

1. How do Native people perceive their role/presence on Earth?
 - Help the students understand the concept of stewardship: the word comes from the 15th century, and refers to the notion of “careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s car.” This implies duties and obligations for the steward.
 - Traditional dances are celebration of the interconnection between humans and nature; traditional songs are prayers addressed to nature, reflecting how sacred life is. Native people recognize in nature a complex spiritual world.

➤ **Related research/activities**

The Native people perceive themselves as stewards of the land: what does that tell you about their sense of property of the land?

Find other examples of stewardship throughout history.

Can you identify other religious/spiritual rites that reflect one’s beliefs?

2. How different are Native and non-native approaches to the land?
 - How can gathering wood become a spiritual experience? The Native people, as they gather wood, are thankful for what nature offers them. Since they believe that a spirit inhabit all living things, the trees they gather are living spirit that need to be thanked for what they give. The Native people are aware of and understand the bond between humans and nature.
 - The spiritual connection with nature helps Native people to perceive themselves as brothers and sisters under the benevolent care of Mother Earth. They are thus open to collaboration with non-native people to preserve the environment for future generations.
 - Help the students understand the two kinds of forests existing today in North America: the original growth forest that existed in North American before the Europeans arrived and the secondary forests that are the result of new plantations.

➤ **Related Research/Activities**

Native people compare the Earth to a mother; in your opinion, how relevant is that comparison?

Do you believe that non-native peoples have a distant relationship to the environment?

Is it better to stop exploiting the forest or to discover ways to live in harmony with it through land management?

CIRCLE OF LIFE

"I know in my heart that biodiversity is as important as cultural diversity. No one else has the experience of living sustainably in North America besides us Native people."

– Winona LaDuke, White Earth Objibwe.

In the film *Circle of Life*, Midwest and Woodland Tribes like the Yankton Sioux, Menominee and Objibwe share their perspectives on why cultural diversity and biodiversity are naturally interconnected. Through years of dedication and listening to their elders, the Menominee have created one of the most outstanding examples of sustainable forestry in the world. In this film, we also learn how healthy spiritual traditions are tied to trees and forests.

Discussion Topics

1. How are biodiversity and cultural diversity related?
 - Help the students explore the sustainable lifestyle concept: to take what is needed only and replace what was taken. Native people lead a sustainable lifestyle; this is part of their cultural identity. They depend on nature, particularly trees, so they need to preserve it.
 - Help the students understand the links between the development of rituals or cultural traits in a society according to the presence of specific plants and trees, for example, smoking tobacco and eating maple syrup in Native society or drinking tea in Chinese society.
- **Related Research/Activities**
 - Can you think of plants or trees that are used in sacred or pagan rituals? (The Christmas tree, a branch of holly, the lotus flower, etc.)*
 - Identify the emblematic flowers or plants of different countries in the world.*
 - Do you believe that to preserve biodiversity is as important as to preserve culture diversity?*
2. How is the forest alive for the Native people?
 - Help the students understand the sense of continuity in Native people's religious beliefs: Humans come from the forest and return to it once dead, so ancestors walk in the forest where they used to live, where their descendants are now following in their footsteps. To preserve the forest is to honour and preserve this presence of the ancestors.
 - Native people consider trees a sacred entity given by nature and inhabited by spirits. This makes them care for the trees so the next generations will also benefit from their presence.
- **Related Research/Activities**
 - Where do you go to feel the presence of your ancestors or to pay respect?*
 - Native people cut the trees at a rate and in a manner that keeps the forest sustainable. Is this how forest resources are exploited in North America?*
 - Can you think of other societies that use purification rituals like sweat lodge ceremonies?*

NATURAL HARMONY

“But all the years we have faced the storm and rain
Stood above the flood as in stature we gained.”
– Moses Jumper Jr., poet, Seminole Nation

In the film *Natural Harmony*, we learn how the Seminole cultural, religious and economical activities are dependant on a healthy Everglades ecosystem. The tribe’s identity is so closely linked to the land that tribal members believe that if the land dies, so will they.

Discussion Topics

1. How did the land help the Seminoles fight assimilation and cultural annihilation?
 - In the 19th century the U.S. government conquered Florida, which belonged to Spain. But the Native people of Florida never surrendered. A few hundreds of them hid in the swamps and Everglades of South Florida until the 1930s.
 - Help the students understand how isolation helped the Seminoles resist assimilation, religious conversion and cultural annihilation. They managed to live off the land, maintaining minimal contact with the outside world. Traditional ways such as hunting, trapping, fishing and trading goods with non-native people remained their way of surviving economically.
 - In the 20th century, modern developers and politicians created a “drain-the-Everglades” policy, forever altering the land where the Seminoles lived. In the 1920s, the tribe’s economy collapsed as the land no longer offered salvation.

➤ **Related Research/Activities**

In the film, a Seminole wears a T-shirt with the message: Unconquered Seminoles. What does that refer to?

The Seminole tribe never signed a peace treaty with the U.S. government. Are there any other examples of Native tribes whose rights are not regulated by a treaty? What rights and duties do treaties establish?

Can modern development of land be harmful to a given ecosystem?

2. How did the Seminoles try to restore what they call ‘natural harmony’?
 - In the 1930s, the government created Indian reservation lands for the Seminoles. A generation of new Seminole leaders emerged, the children of the last generation who used to hide in the swamps, and began to meet regularly beneath a huge oak tree on Hollywood reservation. That oak tree still stands today.
 - In 1957, the U.S. federal government finally recognized the Seminole Tribe who forged a constitution and established a government. This gave them the means to pursue harmonious land management and maintain traditional ways.
 - One of the remaining traditions is the role of medicine women in the lives of the Seminoles. They employ roots, herbs, plants and tree bark to create medicinal remedies and treat a variety of disorders.

➤ **Related Research/Activities**

Can you think of any medicinal remedies derived from plants or trees? Does your local pharmacy carry some of those remedies?