

People of the Red Willow River

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Summary

Students learn a tribal homeland location before the reservation and explore the characteristics of the wood of a willow tree.

Grade level

First

Time required

60 minutes

Materials

Willow branches (10 - 20 per student 16-20" in length)

String (10 pieces 12" long for each student)

Fish weirs or [pictures of fish weirs](#)

[Pictures of fish](#)

[Pictures of red osier dogwood and willow trees](#)

[Historic picture of spear fishing](#)

Goal

By completing this lesson, students will

- 1) explore the characteristics of willow wood by weaving it into a fish weir,
- 2) learn the descriptive characteristics of tribal names and
- 3) develop inquiry process skills.

Science standards addressed

National Science Standards

- Properties of objects and materials
- Abilities of technological design
- Understandings about science and technology
- Science and technology in local challenges
- Evidence, models and explanation
- Abilities necessary to do scientific inquiry

American Indian Science Standards

- The innate properties of objects and materials that were (and are) recognized by traditional Native American cultures in the manufacture and use of specific tools and material objects that capitalize upon those properties

- Problem solving skills demonstrated by historical American Indians in the development and improvement of tools and technologies, such as in pottery technology

Teacher tips

Gather willow branches and string the day before class. Keep the willow branches in water so that they do not become dried out.

Borrow a fish weir from one of the Culture Committees or the Peoples Center, or print out pictures of fish traps from the artifact file included with this lesson. Display pictures of red osier dogwood and willow trees and weir included with this lesson.

Background information

In the 1700's, prior to the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, the Salish were living in the Bitterroot Valley. The Bitterroot River was called the "Waters of the Red Osier Dogwood". This dogwood, although not a true willow, was commonly referred to as "red willow". The Salish living in the Bitterroot Valley were referred to as the "People of the Red Willow River". All three tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation, Salish, Pend d'Oreille and Kootenai, fished the rivers and lakes of the Northwest. An efficient fishing tool the tribes used is called a fish weir or fish trap. The fish weir was made from willow branches tied together with sinew. Sinew is an extremely strong string made from animal tendon. The weir works by placing it camouflaged in the water in a position to allow a fish to swim into the weir. The shape of the weir prevents the fish from swimming back out.

Procedure

Engagement

- 1) Hold up a picture of a fish and ask students if they have ever been fishing. Ask students what tools people use to catch fish. Engage students in a discussion about tools that the tribes might have used to catch fish long ago. Have students list the materials that they could have used to make the fishing tools with.
- 2) Pass the fish weir or pictures of weirs among student groups. Instruct groups to examine it closely to see how it is made and what materials are used. Ask groups to predict what it is used for.
- 3) Ask groups to share their predictions, then tell them what the tool is if necessary.

Exploration

Give each student a bundle of willow branches and several cut lengths of string. Allow them to experiment in making a fish weir.

Explanation

- 1) Have students share their fish weir with the class and explain how it works. Then describe how the fish weir you showed them works.
- 2) Ask students to describe the materials used to make the weir, and if they know of any tree with those types of branches.

- 3) Show students the tree pictures and talk about the characteristics of the wood. Let them know that the Salish Tribe used to be called “People of the Red Willow River”, because they lived by the Bitterroot River where red osier dogwood, commonly called red willow, grew abundantly. Ask students what other things they think could be made from willows.

Elaboration

Show students the historic photo of spear fishing. Ask students what type of wood they think the spears were made from. Ask students if they think they would be made from willow. Why or why not?

Evaluation

Have students draw what they think the steps of making a fish weir are. Ask them to label their drawings with the names and qualities of the materials used to make the weir (e.g., flexible, strong, lightweight, etc.).