

Medicinal Plants

Students will be introduced to the use of native plants by Paiute Indians for medical purposes, learn the role of medicinal plants in the healing process and the role of shamans, and have the opportunity to compare traditional Paiute medicine with western medicine.



Grade Level :

Upper Elementary—Middle School

Objectives:

- Student will be able define a what a medicinal plant is
- Students will be able to describe the role of shaman in Northern Paiute society
- Students will be able to compare and contrast the approach to healing as practiced traditionally by Paiute Indians with the approach of western medicine today

Materials:

- Books on native plants of the Great Basin Desert/ Nevada
- Books on Northern Paiute Indians
- Internet and other research tools

Time Considerations

1-2 hours

Related Activities:

Animal Myths, Emigrant Historical Journals

Nevada Department of Education Standards

- **Environmental Sciences Content Standard 16.0: Natural Resources**—Students demonstrate and understand that natural resources include renewable and non-renewable materials and energy. All organisms, including human, use resources to maintain and improve their existence, and the use of resources can have positive and negative consequences.
- **History Content Standard 5.0: 1200-1750:** Students understand the impact of the interaction of peoples, cultures and ideas from 1200 to 1750.

Excellence in Environmental Education Guidelines

- **Strand 2.2-The Living Environment (A, C, D):** Learners understand basic similarities and differences among a wide variety of living organisms. They understand the concept of habitat, the basic ways in which organisms are related to their environment and other organisms and know that living things need some source of energy to live and grow.
- **Strand 2.3—Humans and Their Societies (A, B):** Learners understand that people act as individuals and as group members and that groups can influence individual action; experiences and places may be interpreted differently by people with different cultural backgrounds, at different times, or with other frames of reference.

Background

Northern Paiutes believed that power could reside in any natural object. Anyone could seek power for hunting or gambling purposes, but only a shaman could acquire power in enough strength to call upon it to do good, and on occasion, to do harm. A shaman, or medicine man, is called *paugant* in Paiute, meaning “one who has sacred power.” Shamans acquired their power through dreams. Their power usually

came to them in the form of an animal, rock or spirit. This power source would also tell the individual in the dream what paraphernalia would be required for healing. Common forms of paraphernalia include eagle tail feathers and down, tobacco, a rattle of a deer’s dew claws, and sometimes a stone. A shaman would apprentice with an older and more experienced shaman to learn more about the craft.

A shamanistic curing would nor-

mally last for two days. The shaman went to the patient's house at night with an interpreter (a person who would translate the language, songs, and activities of the shaman to those present for the cure) and, on occasion, a woman dancer. The patient was arranged with his or her head to the south and a wand with an eagle feather attached was placed beyond the head. The shaman called upon his power through song and attempted to determine the cause of the illness. Possible causes included soul loss, breaking a taboo, dreaming, or sorcery. If the loss of one's soul is suspected, the shaman's soul attempted to recover the soul before it wandered too far and entered the afterworld. If the shaman was successful, then the person would be cured. Prescriptions of food, herbal medicines, or specific activities were given to the patient. The curing normally lasted from dusk to dawn, with a meal break around midnight. If the patient did not get better, a second night of curing would be



quired. The family could also call in another shaman if the patient was not recovering. If the shaman was successful, the family would pay him or her in beads or hides. If a shaman lost a number of patients, it was thought that he or she had lost his or her power. If sorcery is suspected, the shaman might be killed by the group.

Preparations

Begin the lesson by asking students to name a medicine that we use today. Follow-up with the question, "Where does that medicine come from?" Lead students

to the conclusion that the medicine we use today comes from chemicals that are found in nature, usually from plants or animals. Most of the medicines that we buy in the store are created by scientists in laboratories, and the medicines are usually based on chemicals found in nature. What would people have done before there were drug stores and pharmacies? Tell students that before there were drug stores and pharmacies, peo-



ple would have also found their medicine from nature, usually in the form of plants. Define the term medicinal plant (A medicinal plant is any plant used by humans during recorded history to alleviate a health problem).

Doing the Activity

The Northern Paiute Indians, the native people of the Great Basin Desert, used a variety of plants for medicinal purposes. The plants, however, were only one part of the healing process. If a person became ill, first he or she was treated with medicinal plants. Every person learned about curative plants from his parents and elders. If the illness did not go away, however, then a shaman would be called to intervene. In such a case, diagnosis was the most difficult task. But the shamans did not ask "What disease is it?" They asked, "Who has caused it?" This question could only be answered by a person attuned to

the spirit world, since the physical disease was only a symptom of an underlying spiritual conflict. Nevertheless, the treatment was often physical, since body and spirit were not separate things. To better understand medicinal plants in Northern Paiute culture, first you must understand their beliefs. Talk to students about the beliefs of the Northern Paiute Indians (see background information above) and the role medicinal plants played in the curing ritual.

Ask students how this approach to medicine is different from our approach today. What differences are there between the shamans' healing "tools" and those used by doctors today? Make a list describing approaches today vs. Northern Paiute approaches to healing. Have students work individually and then discuss in one big group. Ask, what, if any, beliefs do both cultures share? You should emphasize that while both groups share a common knowledge of using herbs as remedies, they differ greatly on the cause of serious illnesses.

Assign each student a plant used by Northern Paiutes for medicinal purposes to research. Students should explore where the plant grows, what time of the year the plant could be harvested, how the plant was used (as a tea or decoction, chewed, etc.), what part of the plant was used, what ailment the plant cured or relieved,



, etc. This information could be written in a paper or conveyed to the class in the form of a class presentation. If possible, interview a Paiute elder and incorporate his or her views about and/or experience with medicinal plants.

Conclude the lesson by reviewing what medicinal plants are and their role in the healing process. Review the role of the shaman in Northern Paiute society and discuss the differences and similarities between the traditional approach of the Northern Paiute Indians and those of western medicine today.

Evaluation—

Formally assess students by the quality of their research on a medicinal plant and by the quality of their paper/presentation. Informally assess students' knowledge by their contributions to group discussion and their ability to answer questions.

Extension Activities—

Have students write a paragraph about or draw a picture and explain what they think they're animal, rock or spirit would be and why.



Vocabulary

Paiutes: an American Indian tribe originally spread throughout a vast region of the Western United States, including the Great Basin Desert.

Shaman: a priest or priestess who may use natural but unknown means of curing the sick, divining the hidden, and controlling events

Medicinal Plant: any plant used by humans during recorded history to alleviate a health problem

Sources—

Handbook of North American Indians, volume 11 *Great Basin*, edited by Warren L. D'Azevedo