

Time Frame
6 Class periods

Key Words

Prehistory
Artifacts
Oral Tradition
Evidence

Teacher Pages

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OVERVIEW

American Prehistory has students study the evidence of 8000 years of Native American prehistoric land use practices. By analyzing images of Native American material culture, students will understand how artifacts and architecture reveal environmental attitudes of the culture. Students also will learn about the difficulties historians and other scholars face when attempting to study people who had no written language.



A Potawatomi woman in Kansas strips bark from a living elm tree. First a serrated ring is cut around the tree, then strips are peeled off with the aid of a wedge or ax. Photo courtesy of *Native American Architecture*, Peter Nabokov, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 62.

OBJECTIVES

National Council for History

- The student will understand the patterns of indigenous societies in the Americas before the Columbian voyages. (Era 1, Standard 1)

National Standards for Social Studies

- The student will explain how architecture and artifacts contribute to the development and transmission of culture. (Culture)

LESSON PLAN

Day 1 Set the stage for this activity by leading a group discussion answering the following questions:

- Who were the *first* people to live in North America?
- What types of evidence do we have of their existence?

Distribute the [Essay](#), [Worksheet 1](#), and [Worksheet 2](#). Students should read the essay in order to complete the 2 worksheets. (**Pages 13-21**)

Day 2 Pre-class preparation: Arrange four tables or four clusters of desks within the classroom. Place one 8x12 colored category topic card on or above each table or desk cluster. The category topic cards, each a different color, are entitled: Archaeologists, Anthropologists, Geographers, and Historians. Print each of the category topics on 4x6 unlined note cards. (The total number of 4x6 cards represents the total number of students in your class). The 4x6 note card color for each category topic should match that of the larger 8x12 card. For example, if the 8x12 anthropology topic card is blue, the 4x6 anthropology cards also should be blue.

As students walk into the room at the beginning of class hand them a 4x6 category topic card and ask them to look for the table or desk cluster that matches their card. Distribute [Detecting Prehistory \(Page 22\)](#) and as a class read the first section of the sheet entitled “Background” together. Ask students to complete the section entitled “Before you Begin.” After students have finished this section (10-15 minutes) read the final section of the sheet (“The Case”) together. Distribute [Worksheet 3 \(Page 23\)](#), go through the completed example together, and instruct students to use the reverse side of the worksheet if more room is needed to answer the questions about artifacts 2, 3, and 4. Upon completion of the worksheet each group should make a short presentation to the class explaining more about their designated profession (archaeologist, anthropologist, geographer, or historian) in addition to revealing their answers to the “mysteries” and the reasons for making such inferences. Finally, after all groups have presented their answers to the class “solve the case” by revealing the real identity of the objects. *Optional: Award the group with the most correct answers a prize.*

Day 3 Write the word **evidence** and the corresponding definition on an overhead sheet or on the board: “A thing or things helpful in forming a conclusion or judgment.” As a class compile a quick list of professions that use evidence (based on the definition) on a frequent basis. Take a few moments to discuss how and why the listed jobs use evidence. If no one mentioned historians take this opportunity to ask how and why members of this profession might use evidence. Next, develop a list of the types of evidence a historian could use (artifacts, manuscripts, eyewitnesses, etc). Distribute [Eyewitness Accounts](#) and [Worksheet 4](#). Since this activity targets student understanding of the uses of evidence in supporting a historical argument, students are asked to **prove** a specific statement rather than draw their own conclusions. (**Pages 24-25**)

Day 4 Begin class today by asking your students to brainstorm about the ways a group of people who have no written language could record their beliefs, history, and culture. Explain the significance of **oral tradition** in the lives of prehistoric people and then as a class compose a list of different forms of oral tradition that might have been used by Native Americans (for example, songs, stories, legends). Tell your class that for the next 2 days you will be focusing on legends. Write the word legend and the corresponding definition on the board or an overhead sheet: “a story coming down from the past; especially: one popularly regarded as historical although not verifiable.” Mention that Native Americans used legends for a variety of reasons: to teach lessons, explain the origin of an object or animal, and remind people of the importance of things such as nature. Distribute [The Legend of the Cedar Tree.](#)”

(Page 26) Remind students that although such a story now has been transcribed originally it would have been spoken aloud. Ask for a volunteer or volunteers to read the legend aloud to the class. Divide the class into groups of 3-4 and distribute Worksheet 5. **(Page 27)** When students have completed Part I. of the worksheet review the answers to the questions as a class. Next, allow students time to complete Part II.

Day 5 Begin class by allotting time for the groups to finish the preparation of their skits. The remainder of the time should be devoted to the performance of the skits. Encourage the class to ask questions of each group to ensure that all students have thought about the importance of legends and the link between their stories and the environment.

Day 6 Choose from one of three types of activity assessments.

- Application and Integration Exercise (Page 5) ~ Correlated to National Standards for Social Studies **(Teacher Explanation)** If you choose to use this activity there are several possible variations. First, you may want to have students complete the exercise in the same groups formed on Day 2 when they first studied artifacts. If not, the activity also would work fine in random groups you select. Second, Part II of the activity asks students to examine five modern artifacts that you provide. Here are some suggestions: baseball, pad of paper or notebook, CD, soda can, book, hat or shoes, key, computer mouse, cell phone, pet toy, trash bag, or sunglasses. You can either fill boxes with the same 5 objects or supply each group with different artifacts to analyze.
- Test (Page 6) ~ Correlated to National Council for History Standards
- Reflective Exercise (Page 7)

Use the Answer Key to check answers **(Pages 8-12)**

CLASS EXTENSIONS

- Use the 2 links below to locate a Native American tribe in your geographic vicinity. Contact a tribe near your school to discuss the possibility of arranging for a guest speaker to make a presentation to your class that would help them learn more about Native American culture and land use practices (past and present).
http://www.nativeweb.org/resources/us_tribal_websites/us_tribal_pages_bia_not_recognized/
http://www.nativeweb.org/resources/us_tribal_websites/us_tribal_pages_bia_recognized/
- Use the link below to help you locate a nearby museum specializing in or containing extensive exhibits on Native American history. Plan a trip for students to a museum so that they can experience Native American culture in an educationally rich setting. If possible, contact the museum educator of the institution about the possibility of special programming for your students. <http://www.nativeweb.org/resources/museums/>
- Use the link below to find the nearest archaeological park. Since students learned about the importance of archaeology in the study of prehistory, visiting an actual Native American site will help reinforce what they just learned and also will serve as a real world historical connection. <http://www.uark.edu/misc/aras/>

TEAM TEACHING POSSIBILITIES

Technology: Instead of having students complete worksheet 1 on the sheet provided, ask them to design and complete their own table in Microsoft Word or worksheet in Microsoft Excel outlining the significant information contained in the essay.

English: Have students use a library or the internet to find a Native American legend focusing on an aspect of nature. Ask students to compare and contrast the legend they located with the “Legend of the Cedar Tree.”

Math: Have students investigate how prehistoric people used math in their lives. Additionally, ask them to locate a picture and description of a prehistoric artifact that utilized mathematics in some respect.

Science: A) Building upon the information presented in the essay and Worksheet 3, have students investigate the specific methods involved in the use of charcoal deposits, pollen records, carbon dating, and dendrochronology to date prehistoric artifacts. B) Conduct a mock archaeological dig at your school that provides your students with a hands-on approach to learning more about the work of archaeologists.

LINKS

Forest History Society--Bibliographic resources on forestry, conservation and environmental history. <http://www.foresthistory.org>

Native Americans and the Environment—Extensive bibliography of books and journal articles focusing on land use by Native Americans (past and present).
<http://www.indians.org/library/bibs.html>

Illinois State Museum—Information about prehistoric Native American cultures, most specifically in Illinois. http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/nat_amer/pre/index.html

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ASSESSMENT 1: APPLICATION AND INTEGRATION

By now you know that artifacts help those concerned with interpreting the past understand how prehistoric people lived. This activity will give you and your group members a chance to apply what you have learned regarding the tools historians and other social scientists use when trying to piece together the mysteries of the past.

Part I. (Past)

Answer the following questions:

1. Name and describe two artifacts used by prehistoric people living in North America.
2. How were each of the artifacts used by Native Americans?
3. What do each of the artifacts suggest about Native American land practices?
4. What can each artifact reveal about the culture of the people who made and used such objects?

Part II. (Future)

The year is 2500. You and your colleagues have just discovered a box with 5 artifacts dating from the year 2002. Your job is as follows:

1. Identify each artifact (name and physical description).
2. Explain how people living in the United States in the 21st century used each artifact. In other words, why were the objects made? (If an object has more than one use, make sure to list and explain all possibilities).
3. What does each artifact reveal about the culture?
4. What does each artifact suggest about the relationship between 21st century Americans and the environment?

Part III. (Present)

Make a 5-10 minute oral presentation describing the answers your group devised for the questions to Part I. and Part II. Make sure to provide evidence to support your conclusions.

ASSESSMENT 2: TEST

1. How did Native Americans *manage* forestland to better suit their needs?
2. What is the difference between prehistory and history?
3. What are the four periods historians often use to classify prehistoric life in North America? For each of the four periods, list one way that Native Americans made use of forests.
4. Explain why eyewitness accounts of American forests during the 15th and 16th centuries differ so dramatically from those recorded during the 18th century.
5. What is the significance of oral tradition when studying prehistoric people? Provide an example of oral tradition you analyzed in class. What did this piece reveal about how the Cherokee people felt about the environment?
6. Why do historians and other scholars like anthropologists and archaeologists rely so heavily on artifacts when studying the lives of prehistoric Native Americans? (Make sure to define the word *artifact* and provide at least one example of how experts use artifacts to answer questions about the past).
7. Describe the effects of European contact upon Native Americans.

ASSESSMENT 3: IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Write an essay examining prehistoric Native American land use and practices.

Managing the Forest

Use the notes below to help you write a cohesive essay.

Paragraph 1: Take a stance.

Do you believe the prehistoric people living in America consciously impacted their physical surroundings or would you contend that early Native Americans utilized the environment without making any great alterations to the land?

Body: Provide evidence to support your argument.

Describe how artifacts and eyewitness accounts provide insight regarding Native American land practices. Use each of the categories listed below to support your stance taken in Paragraph 1.

1. Fire
2. Descriptions of forests by European explorers
3. Descriptions of Native American land practices by European explorers and settlers
4. Description of American forests by 19th century poets and citizens
5. Native American artifacts (choose one)

Last Paragraph: Conclusion.

Restate your stance. Summarize your proof. State the long-term consequences of your argument on society.

Teacher's Answer Key

Worksheet 1: Keywords and Concepts (Answers read from top to bottom on the table).

Time period: Paleo; Archaic; Woodland; Mississippian

Approximate Dates: 10,000B.C-8,000B.C.
8,000B.C-1,000 B.C
1,000B.C-800A.D
800A.D.-1650A.D.

Characteristics of the Period: ~ Nomadic lifestyle - Clovis point most famous artifact of the period
~ Development of fish-hooks and other stone tools – Climatic changes (warm and dry instead of cold and wet)
~ First pottery – Hunting, Fishing, and Agriculture – Extensive trade
~ Widespread adoption of agriculture – Establishment of permanent villages and architecture.

Native American Forest Use: ~ Hunt big game but use forest to supplement diet – gather plants, fruits, and nuts to eat
~ Continued hunting of big game animals, but also hunting of small game animals – Fishing – Gathering seeds, berries, and nuts from forest to supplement diet
~ Clearing of forests for farming – domestication of plants such as sunflowers and maygrass
~ Extensive clearing of forests for farming through girdling or fire – Use of tree products (bark, wood, branches, and leaves) in architecture

Worksheet 2: Essay Analysis

1. List 3 ways Native Americans used fire as a forest management tool. (More than 3 ways listed in essay, but 3 possible answers are listed below)

- a. **Clearing forests for farmland**
- b. **Improve visibility and facilitate travel**
- c. **Encourage growth of desirable plants such as strawberries**

2. How did European explorers describe the forests of North America? How did poets and other people of the 19th century describe them? Why was there such a difference between the two descriptions?

Typically, European explorers described American forests as “open” and “park-like.” They marveled at how easy it was to travel through wooded land. Poets and others of the 19th century described forests as “dense” and “dark,” noting that the land remained difficult to traverse. Scholars believe the discrepancies between the two descriptions result from the rapid decline of the Native American population following European contact. Reforestation occurred during the two centuries between the eyewitness accounts; without fires and other forms of land management used by Native Americans, forests grew uninhibited.

3. Why do historians face such a challenge when attempting to answer questions surrounding early Native American life?

Historians have to rely upon artifacts to discover the answers to questions pertaining to prehistoric Native American life. Because the earliest inhabitants of the Americas had no written language, the only remaining evidence of their existence and cultural products are artifacts such as tools, weapons, and pottery.

4. How did Native Americans utilize forest resources in their architecture?

During the Mississippian Period of American prehistory, Native Americans established permanent villages and built sturdy structures. Native Americans used bark, wood, branches, and even leaves when constructing homes and other buildings. Eyewitness accounts provide descriptions of how Native Americans gathered poles of wood to build tepees and wigwams. The style of architecture used by Native Americans differed from region to region because of the various types of trees and vegetation throughout the United States.

5. Explain why a disruption in the social structure and everyday practices of many Native American tribes occurred soon after contact with Europeans.

Decimated by sickness and death resulting from exposure to European diseases and war, Native American tribes struggled to survive. Because of the drastic reduction in their population the customs and everyday practices of Native Americans (forest management, for instance) collapsed.

6. What are two pieces of evidence historians can use to support the claim that prehistoric people living in North America did have a substantial impact on the environment?

- a. **Archaeological evidence like charcoal deposits and pollen records**
- b. **Eyewitness accounts**

7. How could the debate about the population density of the Americas before European contact affect the conclusions scholars draw about the impact Native Americans had on the environment? (Answers will vary, but the following is an acceptable response).

If scholars prove that many millions of Native Americans lived in the Americas (as opposed to only a few million) this would help strengthen the argument that the prehistoric people did have a substantial impact on the environment. In short, the larger the population, the greater the potential influence Native Americans had on the land.

Worksheet 3: The Case of the Mystery Artifacts

Answers will vary but below are examples of some acceptable responses.

Artifact 2: What is it? **Mortar and Pestle**; What was it used for? **To grind seeds, nuts, tree roots, etc.;** What role did it play in the culture? **Shows that people prepared food before eating, implying that the people were resourceful. The crafting of tools to better prepare food for consumption indicates the important role food played in culture.** Relationship between object and environment? **The mortar and pestle allowed people to take advantage of the natural food products of the environment such as seeds, nuts, and tree roots.**

Artifact 3: What is it? **Pottery jar**; What was it used for? **Since agriculture was becoming widespread during the period, it probably was used to store food;** What role did it play in culture? **The invention of pottery during this period shows that people had the time to make these objects and also indicates a level of ingenuity to be able to craft such items;** Relationship between object and environment? **If the object was in fact used to store food this indicates that people of the period were able to utilize their physical surroundings so well that they could set aside food and plan ahead rather than searching for food each day.**

Artifact 4: What is it? **Hoe or spade**; What was it used for? **To dig holes in the ground to plant crops;** What role did it play in the culture? **People of the Mississippian period crafted the hoe or spade to make farming more efficient and productive. The introduction of this tool therefore, suggests that farming played a vital role in their culture.** Relationship between object and environment? **People crafted hoes or spades so that they could make better use of the environment. Hoes and spades increased productivity, allowing for the planting of extensive fields of crops such as corn, which in turn led to more food for a greater number of people.**

Worksheet 4: Debating History

Evidence for Eyewitness 1: **In order for the Native Americans to have such vast fields of crops they probably had to clear trees, bushes, and other foliage.**

Evidence for Eyewitness 2: **This account doesn't imply the clearing of the forestland like the first account, but instead directly states that the Native Americans purposely altered their surroundings so that they could make room for farming.**

Evidence for Eyewitness 3: **Since the speaker seems surprised at the lack of undergrowth present in the forest you can conclude that forests, if left to progress naturally, are not normally so open. This suggests, as the speaker implies ("but as if laid out by hand") that someone (probably the original inhabitants-Native Americans) altered the forest so that it would be easier to navigate.**

Evidence for Eyewitness 4: **The account describes the "custom" of setting fires to the land. The word custom is important because it indicates that rather than being accidental fires, people (in this case Morton was referring to Native Americans) deliberately used this as a tool to make forests more open and therefore easier to pass.**

Evidence for Eyewitness 5: **On the surface this account seems to undermine the argument that Native Americans intentionally altered their surroundings. However, the date of this statement (1796) as opposed to all of the other accounts (16th and 17th centuries) suggests something different. This statement could serve as proof that the forests at this time are thick and difficult to pass because Native Americans, decimated by European disease and war, no longer are intentionally setting fires or clearing away trees.**

Part II – Summary

Answers will vary but below is an example of an acceptable response.

Eyewitness accounts suggest that the prehistoric people living in North America purposely altered their physical surroundings to better suit their needs. For example, in order to plant crops such as pumpkins, corn, and squash to feed themselves, Native Americans had to clear away trees. Moreover, Native Americans used tools like fire to not only clear space for fields, but to get rid of the underbrush present in forests which made travel so difficult. Finally, the fact that forests looked so different during the early years of European contact (open and clear) as opposed to centuries later (thick and dense) demonstrates that Native American land practices and usage most likely were responsible for the drastic change. In short, the evidence presented in the eyewitness accounts seems to prove the theory that Native Americans intentionally changed the environment in an attempt to better suit their own needs.

Worksheet 5: Understanding a Legend

1. What happened to the Earth and the Cherokee people when the Creator ended the night?

The forests grew so thick that they became difficult to pass and weeds grew in abundance among the crops. The Cherokee people suffered from the intense heat as a result of the lack of night, had difficulty sleeping, and became so ill-tempered that they frequently squabbled.

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2. What happened to the Earth and the Cherokee people when the Creator ended the day?
Because there was no sun the crops of the Cherokee died and hunting became very difficult without any light by which to see. People had to spend time cutting trees for firewood because of the cold temperatures and ultimately many people died from either starvation or the cold.

3. How did the Creator express his sorrow and regret about the death of the Cherokee people?
In addition to restoring the balance between the day and night the Creator placed the spirits of the people who recently died in a newly created tree – a-tsi-na tlu-gv, or cedar.

4. What tradition is linked to the cedar tree today?
Many people believe the wood of the cedar tree can ward off evil spirits.

Answers for “Beneath the Surface” may vary but below are examples of some acceptable responses.

5. Why do you think the Cherokee wanted the Creator to change their environment?
Without thinking of the consequences the Cherokee people probably believed that altering the environment would improve the quality of their lives. For example, because the sun helped their crops to grow and kept them warm they most likely assumed that increasing the amount of daylight would make them happier and more prosperous.

6. What is one lesson the legend attempts to teach?
The legend teaches that although changes to the environment might seem wise, in reality it might be better to learn how to cope with the physical features and climate of a particular area.

7. Do you believe the legend more closely resembles the image of Native Americans as forest managers or as “ecologically invisible” inhabitants of the land? Give evidence to support your answer.
This legend closely resembles the image of Native Americans as forest managers. The legend tries to teach the people not to alter the environment. One can only assume that if such a legend was necessary, many Native Americans must have been making changes to their physical surroundings, which therefore supports their image as forest managers.

8. Based on the legend, what conclusions can you draw about how the Cherokee people felt about the environment?
The legend suggests that the Cherokee people had a close relationship with their environment. The legend states that people planted crops, used wood for fires, and hunted, thereby indicating that the Cherokee relied upon their surroundings for survival. Finally, the fact that the Creator chose to place the spirits of those who died during the ordeal within a tree reveals the significant role both trees and the environment as a whole played in the lives of the Cherokee.

Assessment 1: Test

1. How did Native Americans *manage* forestland to better suit their needs?

Native Americans managed their surroundings in many ways. They used fire and other tools to clear away trees so that they could plant crops. Native Americans made forests easier to traverse by burning forestland to eliminate weeds and underbrush. The “cleansing” of the forest not only made travel easier, but it encouraged the growth of desirable plants such as strawberries and blackberries and attracted game animals like deer and elk – thereby making hunting more productive.

2. What is the difference between prehistory and history?

Prehistory is the time period where no written records existed and history is the time period that followed where written documentation exists.

3. What are the four periods historians often use to classify prehistoric life in North America? For each of the four periods list one way that Native Americans made use of forests.

Paleo – Hunted animals and used forest to supplement diet; Archaic - Gathered seeds, berries, and nuts from forest; Woodland – Cleared forests for farming; Mississippian – Used products from trees in architecture

4. Explain why eyewitness accounts of American forests during the 15th and 16th centuries differ so dramatically from those recorded during the 18th century.

Most likely the difference resonates from the drastic decrease in Native American population following European contact. Greatly affected by European disease and war, Native American tribes had difficulty sustaining their customs and rituals, such as the periodic burning of forests. As a result, the once open forests of the eastern coast slowly became dense and difficult to traverse. Hence, the land described by people of the 19th century was the result of over two centuries of reforestation.

5. What is the significance of oral tradition when studying prehistoric people? Provide an example of oral tradition you analyzed in class. What did this piece reveal about how the Cherokee people felt about the environment?

Although oral tradition is important for all time periods and people it is especially significant in the study of prehistoric times because of the lack of written documentation. An example of oral tradition from class is the Cherokee “Legend of the Cedar Tree.” This legend highlighted the close relationship between the Cherokee people and their physical surroundings. For example, it explained how the Cherokee made use of their environment to hunt, build fires, and plant crops.

6. Why do historians and other scholars like anthropologists and archaeologists rely so heavily upon artifacts when studying the lives of prehistoric Native Americans? (Make sure to define the word artifact and provide at least one example of how experts use artifacts to answer questions about the past).

Artifacts, objects made or modified by humans, are important in the study of prehistoric people because of the lack of written records. Artifacts and oral tradition both serve as clues for scholars who want to learn more about the everyday lives and customs of the first people who inhabited the Americas. For example, recovered artifacts such as stone points suggest that Native Americans hunted, fished, and fought each other. So, even though no written documents exist to describe the lives of early Native Americans, artifacts help to provide some important information regarding the customs and lifestyles of the period.

7. Describe the effects of European contact upon Native Americans.

Decimated by sickness and death resulting from exposure to European diseases and war, Native American tribes struggled to survive. Because of the drastic reduction in their population, the customs and everyday practices of Native Americans (forest management, for instance) collapsed.