

This lesson was funded by Minnesota Project Learning Tree and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative State Implementation Committee, and provided by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Respecting Mother Earth

Overview

Children are naturally curious about their environment. They should be encouraged to explore the outdoors, while having respect for living things and their habitats. In this activity, students will develop a set of guidelines for exploring and enjoying nature. The enrichment activity outlines how to respectfully make and use a natural material to honor living thing in nature. This material is called giniginige (Ojibwe), kinnickinnik (eastern Algonquin tribes), or cansasa (Dakota).

Vocabulary pronunciation: cansasa (chahn-sha-sha)ⁱ Dakota word for an offering given to things collected/used in nature

Objectives

1. Students will express appropriate ways to treat living things and how to act in forests, parks, and other natural areas.
2. Students will understand Minnesota indigenous cultures' deep reverence for and connectedness to the natural world and adopt respectful practices: use only what is needed, express thankfulness, and practice careful methods for observing natural objects without harming them.

Grade

K-5

Subjects

Social Studies, Science, Language Arts

Background

The Dakota and Ojibwe of Minnesota recognize that all natural objects have a spirit. They refer to natural objects as living things, even if the thing is not alive (such as rocks). This understanding is reflected in many traditional teachings and stories. It is appropriate that people give proper respect to natural objects (from rocks to flowers to trees) whenever we interact with them, whether we are walking through a natural area or collecting natural objects for examination.

Giving respect can take different forms. We can give respect by telling an object what you intend to do with it, why you are doing that, and thanking the object for allowing you to do that. Among both of these cultures, an offering of traditional tobacco (made of the inner bark of red willow, or red osier dogwood, *Cornus sericea*)ⁱⁱ is a culturally appropriate way to ask permission to interact with natural objects, and to thank them for providing themselves to their human relatives. Refer to the [Doing the](#)

[Activity](#) for guidelines on how to make this traditional tobacco with students. Refer to the [Student Page: Trees Mitigoog](#) for an Anishinaabe story about the spirit of trees and asking permission.

Traditional tobacco¹ made from red bark is known as giniginige (Ojibwe) or *cansasa* (Dakota). While giniginige/*cansasa*, served many purposes, it was used primarily as an offering and communication method to carry messages to the Great Spirit through smoking—holding smoke in one’s mouth before releasing it with a message, known as “sacred breath.” See Enrichment (Students do not smoke in this lesson—they learn how to create traditional “tobacco” and honor nature.)

Red bark comes from the red willow (red osier dogwood), a deciduous shrub that grows in northern and western North America. It prefers moist soil and shaded areas, especially near water. Commonly used in landscaping, it is easily identified in the winter when its bright red bark stands out against the snow. According to community members from the Ojibwe and Dakota, the harvest of this plant should begin in the winter, in February. Harvest can last through the winter (Ojibwe) or until the first thunderstorm (Dakota). When harvested, remove only the top 5 inches of the plant. You can replant the cut end to propagate new growth, if conditions allow. This harvest should begin with an offering. However, on your first time harvesting to produce giniginige/*cansasa*, provide a verbal offering (you can return to the plant from which you harvested and provide a later offering after you have completed the process). To use the giniginige or *cansasa*, give students the opportunity to offer a small amount of the bark to the natural area they are about to explore, followed by an offering to any natural object that may be collected as part of the lesson or activity.

Note: As with all lessons on indigenous cultures, it’s always a good idea to invite a local indigenous person to share stories with students.

Doing the Activity

1. Have students name rules or guidelines they think would make sense for how they should behave when learning outdoors. List these on the board. Here are some examples:
 - Stay on marked trails.
 - Be safe
 - Don’t litter
 - Pick up litter left by others
 - Don’t carve or draw on trees, rocks, or property
 - Show respect and care for all living things.
 - Be careful with fire.
 - Leave an area in the same condition as, or better than, when you go there.
2. Read the story on the [Student Page, Trees \(Mitigoog\)](#), as told by Nancy Jones. Read it slowly, showing them [pictures of trees](#) as you go. Stop at intervals to summarize the story and to have student draw pictures of what they imagine. For grades PreK-K, it is preferable to learn the story yourself and retell it to students in shorter and simpler form.
3. After reading the story, ask the following questions:
 - a. How did the story make you feel?

¹ Traditional tobacco made from red bark predates use of *Nicotiana rustica*¹ (commercial tobacco products), which are used only for personal satisfaction. Traditional tobacco is used for spiritual purposes only.

- b. How was the white spruce helpful? How was the cedar, jack pine, poplar, basswood, and willow trees helpful?
 - c. Why should we not cut down trees without having a purpose?
 - d. What are some ways we can respect trees?
4. Discuss *what* natural objects people like to collect and *why* people like to collect them. Examples might include:

Natural things	Why
Birch	To make canoes, baskets
Flowers	Because they are pretty
Stones	Because they are pretty
Sticks	To make forts, to build a fire
Leaves	Because they are pretty, to use in artwork
Sap from maple	To eat
Seeds	To plant or eat
Pitch from balsam fir, willows	To make medicine
Cedar	To make cradleboards

Have the students generate a list on the board. Go over the list with the students, discussing what might be all right to collect and what should be left in nature. Tell them that even picking flowers is usually not necessary because flowers can be enjoyed right where they are. Explain how each fallen leaf and rock is a part of the habitat of living things. While one thing may not be missed, if everyone in the class took one, it could make a big difference.

5. Have the group look at the rules they generated in Step 1. Ask them: Are there any rules to add or change? Adjust the rules on the board accordingly.

While doing this, guide the conversation to deeper concepts. In Indian culture, all objects are considered alive (including rocks) and part of our world. How could we observe and respect objects without destroying them? How do other plants and animals depend on a natural object (like fallen leaves)? If we pick up a thing to examine it closely, we need to replace it exactly how we found it—other living things such as bugs, birds, or foxes may depend on its specific placement. When we need to use objects to live, such as gathering wood to burn or build homes, or gathering berries to eat, always remember that taking requires thanks. We must be sure to take and use only what we need, and no more.
6. For 2-5 graders, ask students to each choose one of the rules. They should write the rule at the bottom of a piece of paper and draw a picture illustrating it above. The pictures should be line drawings (coloring book style) in pencil. Make photocopies of all the pictures and bind them into coloring books that can be distributed to a group of younger students.

For PreK-K and first graders, lead an exercise in which the students act out the rules they listed in Step 1. After they've practiced each one several times, play a game in which you call out a rule and they act it out until you call out another one.

Go outside and practice some examples of rules from Indian culture such as:

- Putting things back exactly where they found it (*pick up a stick, look at it, and put it back exactly as it was found*)

- Observing something closely without disturbing it (*look at tree bark or other natural object, using gentle hands or hands in pockets*)
 - Thanking an object for helping you (*pick an edible berry, tell it that you'd like to eat it, to savor and eat it, and then thank the berry bush for giving you food energy. Or find a flower (don't pick!), smell it, and thank it for making you happy or for providing food for insects.*)
 - Build a pretend fire collecting only the sticks that are needed, wasting nothing. Winter is a good time to build a small, real fire on the snow to let the children watch it while you read a story. Thank the sticks for giving you heat and light.
7. Have students practice their rules every time you go outside to do another PLT activity!

Enrichment: Harvesting Giniginige/*Cansasa*

(Shared by community members from Fond du Lac Ojibwe and Lower Sioux (Dakota) nations with the following message: "It does not matter who you are. You can do this if it is done the right way.")

Beginning in February, find where red willow (red osier dogwood) grows in your area. Harvesting is not allowed in state or national parks and permission is required from landowners. Dogwood shrubs are six to 12 feet tall with bright red bark. If you do not have previously processed giniginige/*cansasa*, it is appropriate to verbally thank the plant for allowing you to harvest it, and return later with the processed offering. If you have giniginige/*cansasa*, offer a small amount to the bush before beginning the harvest.

Using pruning shears or clippers, harvest only as many branches as you need (a little goes a long way). If possible, trim the top 5 inches of your branches and replant the cut ends into the soil for new growth if conditions allow.

Red willow (red osier dogwood) bark has an outer and inner layer. The red outer layer is thin and brightly colored. The inner layer is somewhat sticky and green in color. The inner layer is what makes the giniginige/*cansasa*.

Cut the harvested branches to 6- to 8-inch lengths for each student. Plastic knives are a safe option for removing both layers of bark.

Allow students to carefully remove the red outer bark, while leaving the green inner bark intact. The flat side of the plastic knives works best for this, as it makes it more difficult to remove both layers at the same time. Waste nothing. Save the red outer bark for other uses such as for making tea or fire starters. (Figure 1)

Now have students remove the green inner bark. Again, this can be done using the plastic knives, although either side can be used now. Make sure that students do not remove the white (woody) layer beneath the green inner bark. (Figure 2) As it's removed, collect the green inner bark in boxes or baskets. Allow this material to dry, and you will have created giniginige/*cansasa*.

Use the finished product as an offering when students enter natural areas for lessons or activities. Bring some of the finished product back to the harvest site if a previous offering was made.



Figure 1: Removing the thin outer layer of red bark, which can be used for other purposes, such as for making tea or used as a fire starter.



Figure 2: Scraping the green inner bark from red osier dogwood to make giniginige/*cansasa*.

Photos by Rachel Breckenridge (Gida camp teacher). Reprinted with permission

Long-term enrichment

Create giniginige/cansasa with your students and learn to use it according to Ojibwe/Dakota tradition during your outdoor visits.

If you have a forest nearby, learn to identify some of the trees mentioned in the story. Label the trees for future reference and introduce your students to each tree over the year. To identify trees, invite a forester or tree expert or use a good tree ID book such as the [Beginner's Guide to Minnesota Trees](#). You may want to add indigenous uses of each tree on the label, such as Maple (sap) or Birch (canoes, baskets). Consider planting some red-osier dogwood on your school grounds, with permission and support from grounds staff.

Assessment Opportunities

Visit a forest or schoolyard trees. Review the rules the students came up with. Observe how they practice their own rules and assess their behavior when outdoors.

Have students create similar “guidelines” for their environmental behavior at school. Encourage the students to word some rules positively, using Do’s as well as Don’ts.

Have students draw pictures of natural items. Help them write words describing what each item is used for.

Student Page: Trees (Mitigoog)ⁱⁱⁱ

As told by Nancy Jones (published in *Dibaajimowinan*^{iv}, by the Great Lakes Indigenous Fish and Wildlife Council. (oral story)

There are many trees here where we live. Perhaps you call them differently; everybody has different teachings, the way they were raised. First I need to talk about this. All these trees in the bush have Indian names. Nanibosh^v gave them all Indian names when he made the earth. The spirit gave us these names so that we can carry them in a sacred manner. If you think about those trees, they all have spirit names. This is what Nanaboozhoo did, he gave all trees names.

That is the white spruce that was named. There are a lot of uses for the white spruce. So he (the white spruce) was asked, "How are you going to help the Anishinaabe when they get here?" "Oh there is a lot they can use me for," he said. "They might even make medicine out of me; they can use my tree-ness and my needles." "Spruce" is apparently what he is called in English.

The cedar tree, that was another one that was asked; "How will you help the Anishinaabe," Nanabosh asked. "Oh there are lots of ways I can help the Anishinaabe," he said. "When somebody has a child, they will use my wood to make a cradleboard. I have many uses that I can give them, when they want to made medicine from my being a tree. When someone is making a canoe, that is one use that will be used to make the strips of cedar on the bottom." And also these trees they will make other things like rice knockers, how it was said.

Next I will talk about the jack pine. "I will also help. I have medicine that the Anishinaabe could use." It is these boughs that these spruce hens eat. That is where the Anishinaabe looked for them to go get when he wanted to eat the spruce hen. "And that is the way I will try to help the Anishinaabe."

Then next the balsam tree arrived. "Oh me too, I shall help in many ways. For instance, when the Anishinaabe makes camp. They will use my boughs as a floor when they need something to lie on. If someone pokes at the lumpy pitch, the blister part of that tree, from there they will get medicine."

Then another one spoke up. "Me too! I carry medicine," the tree said. And now that white birch tree has many uses. My late father would make snowshoes by bending that birch tree. He also made a toboggan. And when he used the bark, he made many things with it. That is what one would use for roofing material long ago.

And now for the poplar² tree. "I too have many gifts to help the Anishinaabe." We would eat sap from the bark of the poplar tree. It almost tastes like sugar. My grandmother told me "You are medicating yourselves when you eat that sap. That is medicine that you are eating."

The basswood, that is yet another one. There are many uses for the basswood when one peels the bark of the tree. After you peel the top bark, then you peel the layers off in strips. It was very light when it got dried.

Red willow, red willow. This is yet another one, a great medicine tree. Apparently the red willow said, "The Anishinaabe that are going to arrive will have many uses for me." This red willow I use when I make little birch bark baskets. I use them to sew on the trimmings, so that it can secure/reinforce around the

² Poplar is the local word for trees in the poplar family: aspens and cottonwoods.

birch bark basket, also when one makes a winnowing basket. It bends nicely, it bends very well when one uses it.

We know what to do when we are doing these things. No one should cut down a tree for no reason. Only if one has a purpose for it. That is what I was told not to do. Do not cut down a tree without a purpose. Only if you have a reason to use it like making a medicine or if one were to make a pipe stem. Even though the tree is rotten or falling, you should do something for the tree. You should also honor the tree and tell it why you are cutting it down. All the trees that you see standing, all of them are someone. That is someone that is standing. It also has a name. That is why you show respect to it. You do not cut it down for no reason. That is what I was told; that you should have respect for all things.

Pictures of trees mentioned in *Mitigoog* story



White spruce
Picea glauca



White cedar
Thuja occidentalis



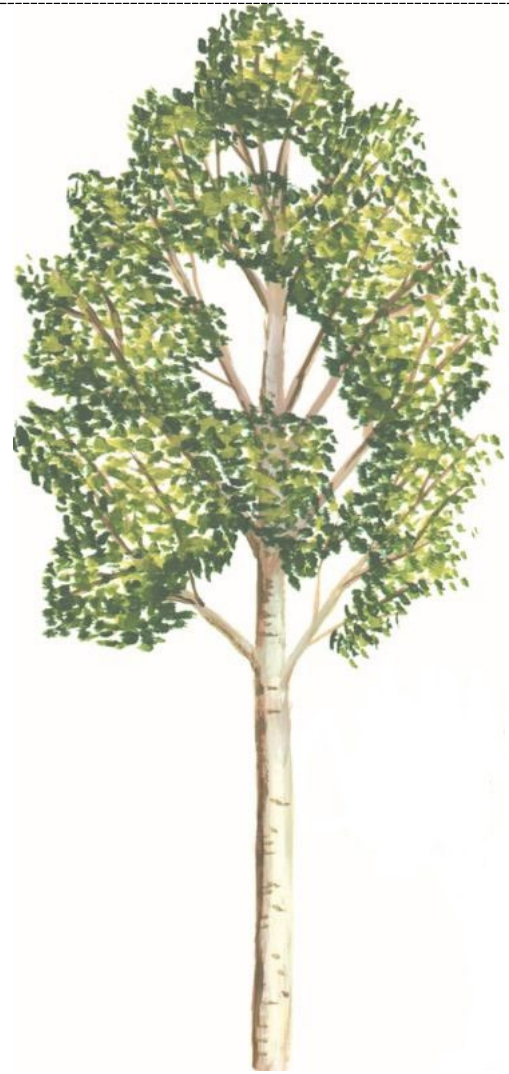
Jack pine
Pinus banksiana



Balsam fir
Abies balsamea



Paper birch
Betula papyrifera



Quaking aspen (Poplar)
Populus tremuloides



Tilia americana



Black willow
Salix nigra

Connections to Minnesota Standards (Science):

1P.4.2.2.1 Communicate solutions that use materials to provide shelter, food, or warmth needs for communities including Minnesota American Indian tribes and communities.* (P: 8, CC: 2, CI: PS1, ETS2) *Examples of cultures may include those within the local context of the learning community and within the context of Minnesota . Examples of solutions may include past and current building practices that incorporate natural building materials and other green practices as used in sweat lodges, green roofs, moss used for insulation, or sustainable food production and tools used for ricing (harvesting and finishing).* NOTE: (To these materials, recognition of plants as living beings and the need to be respectful and make an offering is a vital, cultural component.)

4E.4.2.2.1 Obtain and combine multiple sources of information about ways individual communities, including Minnesota American Indian Tribes and communities and other cultures use evidence and scientific principles to make decisions about the uses of Earth’s resources.* (P: 8, CC: 4, CI: ESS3, ETS1) *Examples of cultures may include those within the local context of the learning community and within the context of Minnesota . Examples may include balancing the water, soil, wildlife, plant, and human needs to support sustainable use of resources.*

2P.4.2.2.1 Obtain information and communicate how Minnesota American Indian Tribes and communities and other cultures apply knowledge of the natural world in determining which materials have the properties that are best suited for an intended purpose.* (P: 8, CC: 2, CI: PS1, ETS1) *Examples of cultures may include those within the local context of the learning community and within the context of Minnesota .*

NOTE: (Cultural knowledge in the form of oral stories passes on important information about the uses of natural materials, often through ‘why’ stories.) Emphasis of the practice is on obtaining, interpreting, and communicating information related to how various cultures have built materials suited for intended purposes according to their properties. Examples of materials may include instruments (Cedar for knockers and Black Spruce for poles) for ricing, birch bark for baskets or other containers for carrying water, and sinew for connecting parts of tools.

ⁱ [Dakota language pronunciation guide](http://www.thudscave.com/petroglyphs/pdf/dakota-pronounce.pdf) <http://www.thudscave.com/petroglyphs/pdf/dakota-pronounce.pdf>

ⁱⁱ [Native Plant Encyclopedia: Red Osier Dogwood](https://webapps15.dnr.state.mn.us/restore_your_shore/plants/plant_detail/128)

https://webapps15.dnr.state.mn.us/restore_your_shore/plants/plant_detail/128

ⁱⁱⁱ [Ojibwe People’s Dictionary: Mitigoog](https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/mitig-na) (plural of mitig) <https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/mitig-na>

^{iv} [Ojibwe People’s Dictionary: Dibaajimowinan](https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/dibaajimowin-ni) (plural of dibaajimowin) <https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/dibaajimowin-ni>

^v Nanibosh, Nanboozhoo, and Nanabosh all refer to the same character in traditional stories; there are many other pronunciations and spellings as well. It is appropriate to adopt the version that is the easiest to remember/pronounce for the telling of this story. [Native Languages: legendary Native American Figures](http://www.native-languages.org/nanabozho.htm) (Nanaboozhoo, Nanabush) <http://www.native-languages.org/nanabozho.htm>