

Fire, Forests, & Huckleberries

Grades 3-5

Knowledge Holder

This lesson was created by CJ Senn (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Siletz, Klickitat, Nez Perce, Blackfoot, Cherokee).



Materials

- Balls or crumpled paper to represent “berries”
- Vessel to hold “berries”
- Art Medium of choice

Standards

This lesson aligns with national Social Studies, History, and Science frameworks by:

- Exploring Indigenous cultural landscapes and traditional forest management.
- Understanding ecosystem balance, biodiversity, and how climate change impacts wild plants.
- Examining the difference between traditional stewardship and commercial models of resource use.

Objective

Students will learn how huckleberries are vital to people, wildlife, and the land. By exploring how Indigenous communities have cared for these berries for generations, students will discover that huckleberries are far more than just a snack, they are a sacred part of a living culture. Through stories, games, and outdoor observation, youth will learn how to harvest with care, see how changing weather affects mountain plants, and reflect on what it means to protect a relative who takes care of us all.

Survivance Message

Huckleberries are more than just fruit, they are part of the living, unfolding story of Indigenous peoples who remain here today, actively continuing their traditions and land stewardship. Primarily growing across the Pacific Northwest, huckleberries provide critical physical sustenance rich in antioxidants, while holding immense ceremonial significance. They are a sacred presence at births, deaths, and community celebrations.

In many Native communities, gathering berries is a direct way to connect with family, ancestors, and the Earth. By witnessing how Native people have always respected and protected berry patches, students will see that Indigenous knowledge is not a relic of the past. It is strong, present, and alive. Traditional land management guides us all in navigating current environmental changes.

Today, wild huckleberries are in trouble because of climate change and commercial picking. Shifting temperatures, less winter snowpack on the mountains, and a lack of cultural burning mean that wild berry patches are shrinking. To make sure huckleberries thrive for future generations, we need to bring back traditional forest management, stop commercial exploitation, and see the land as a relative that needs our protection.

Questions to explore: If our summers keep getting hotter and mountain snow melts earlier, why is it harder for a huckleberry bush to survive? Can it just walk to a new home? What is the difference between picking every single berry you see on a bush versus harvesting with active care and reciprocity?

Activities

Set-Up (Can Be Outdoors or in a Gym/Field/Cleared Classroom)

- Scatter purple paper circles or small purple balls (the “huckleberries”) around a designated area.
- Create a Berry Patch zone and a Sharing Table off to the side.



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Braiding Knowledge: Curriculum Standards

This lesson is part of a broader framework that weaves together the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITECK). We teach Western science through a localized, relational lens to honor the history and sovereignty of the land and its caretakers. For a detailed breakdown of how this lesson aligns with specific NGSS benchmarks, ITECK guidelines, and UNESCO climate action goals, please visit our [story map](#).

Umatilla Vocabulary

[Umatilla Language Online Dictionary](#) – ČÁWNA MÚN NÁAMTA. ‘We Shall Never Fade’ Native Land

Wíwinu (pron. Weew-noo):
Huckleberry

Wiyáʔiluk (pron. Wee-YAH-ee-look):
cultural fire, “set fire on the way”

Pítʔxanu (pron. PIT-hhah-noo):
forested mountain

English Vocabulary

First Foods, huckleberry, reciprocity, subsistence, sustenance, stewardship, commercialization, alpine/subalpine, rhizome, prescribed burning

- Assign student roles: You can draw straws, pick numbers out of 100, or something similar to assign roles
 - Humans – may pick one handful of berries at a time
 - Bears – may pick two handfuls (pawfuls) at a time
 - Birds – may pick up berries using only two fingers (beak)
 - Commercial Human Picker – uses a bucket or cup (simulating a leaf blower or rake) to scoop as many berries as possible in one go

5 Min: Feel! Begin with a quiet sensory activity outdoors. Listen to birds. Feel the wind. Smell the plants. Ask students to imagine they’re stepping into a mountain meadow filled with ripe huckleberries.

10 Min: Connect! Gather in a circle to discuss what huckleberries mean to the students. Then explore what importance they have in Native communities, especially within the CTUIR. Talk about reciprocity and how people, animals, and the land all share in the bounty.

In the Pacific Northwest, huckleberry bushes love the sun, but over time, dense pine forests grow too thick and shade them out, causing the bushes to stop producing fruit. For generations, Native people practiced Wiyáʔiluk—setting intentional, low-intensity fires on the way up the mountain. This good fire clears away dead wood, leaves the soil rich with ash, and opens up the forest canopy so the sun can reach the huckleberries again. Fire isn’t something to just be afraid of. When used with respect and protocol, it is a tool that wakes up the sleeping plants.

15 Min: Play! “Huckleberry Balance” Game

- Set a timer (1–2 minutes per round). Everyone gathers berries following their role’s rules.
- When time is up, all participants bring their berries to the Sharing Table.
- Reflect together: Who gathered the most? Who struggled to find berries? Was the patch left empty? Did everyone get enough?
- Replay with a new rule: “Leave some for others.” Notice how the results and feelings change.

Gratitude and Reflection: Close by thanking the land and each participant. Ask each student to share one way they can “leave some for others” in their daily lives, whether that’s with food, nature, or kindness.

Reciprocity through Stewardship

Students can bring reciprocity to life by planting a small First Foods garden at school using native plants like serviceberries or elderberries. Tending these plants shows kids how native species keep the local environment healthy and balanced. Students can even make their own signs for the garden to teach others about Indigenous stewardship, language, and history.

Resources

[Article: Huckleberries are an important cultural food...](#)

[Article: Unlawful Commercial Picking](#)

[Article: Climate change shifts in habitat suitability and phenology of huckleberry](#)

[Article: Forest Service Implementing Annual Temporary Closure of Huckleberry Mt to Honor Tribal Tradition of the Klamath Tribe](#)

[Article: USFS halts commercial huckleberry picking in Gifford Pinchot](#)

[Species: *Vaccinium membranaceum*](#)

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A forest or meadow stewardship day invites youth to help restore local habitats through planting, weeding, or trail care. Beginning with a gratitude circle and ending with a reflection helps students recognize their role in sustaining healthy ecosystems. Additionally, students can paint or draw images of huckleberries, animals, and people, leaving the artwork near the site as a thank you to the land. Rocks can be painted or a collective mural added to serve as a constant reminder of reciprocity, honoring the students' efforts to inform others and care for the resources that care for us.

Adaptations & Extensions

- **Cultural Fire to Huckleberry Game:** Introduce a new role or a special event card called the Cultural Fire Steward (Wiyáʔiluk). In Round 2, the Fire Steward gently rolls a hula-hoop or lays down a colored string over a choked-out section of the berry patch. Any huckleberries (purple balls) caught inside that boundary are temporarily cleared of dead brush. For the next 30 seconds of the game, the Humans, Bears, and Birds who harvest from that specific spot get to double their harvest speed (e.g., picking up two berries instead of one), while the Commercial Picker is blocked from entering it because they don't follow the proper protocols. During the Sharing Table discussion, ask the youth: *"How did the good fire change the berry patch? Did it make it easier for the relatives to find what they needed?"*
- **Science & Ecology:** Students can explore plant life cycles and the forest ecosystems that support huckleberries, observing how climate change and forest management affect berry growth and wildlife. Lessons can include discussions on native versus invasive species, biodiversity, and the balance needed to sustain healthy habitats. Students can also compare Indigenous stewardship practices with Western economic models to understand different ways of managing shared resources.
- **Language Arts:** Through creative writing, students can reflect on their learning by writing from the perspective of a huckleberry, a bear, or an Elder teaching about berry gathering. Reading Indigenous-authored stories or oral histories about First Foods and seasonal cycles helps students connect cultural knowledge to their own experiences and recognize that Indigenous traditions remain vibrant and relevant today.
- **Field Trip:** Connect this activity to a field trip at Tamástslikt Cultural Institute on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, where students can learn directly about traditional huckleberry stewardship and how these First Foods continue to be honored and protected today.