

First Foods of the PNW

Grades K-8

Knowledge Holder

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



Materials

- Construction Paper
- Magazines with Animal Photos
- Art Medium of Choice

Standards

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

- Exploring the cultural landscape, seasonal cycles, and First Foods traditions of the Columbia River Basin.
- Investigating how climate change and environmental shifts alter the habitats of wild plants and animals.
- Examining Tribal adaptation and land management strategies that protect community food security.

Objective

In this lesson, students will get to know the First Foods, the traditional foods of Indigenous people in the Columbia River Basin in the Pacific Northwest. We'll explore how these foods are named in a special serving order (Water, Salmon, Deer, Cous, Huckleberries), how they connect to the land, and how Native communities continue to care for them today.

Survivance Message

This isn't just about the past; it's about how we interact with our foods through seasonality today and into the future. Tending to these same lands for as long as we can remember has always been a sustainable way of keeping Native populations well-fed. Guided by the teachings of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR), we focus on their dedicated system for how First Foods are gathered, honored, and shared. These food relatives have persisted through time, even while facing modern environmental shifts, development, and competition from invasive plants (missed-placed relatives).

The story of our First Foods began with the foods offering themselves to humans as subsistence. Water, giving all of us life, is always recognized first and last to honor the full circle of existence it sustains. We then follow the sacred order through Salmon (fish), Deer (game), Cous (roots), and Huckleberries (berries). Today, a changing climate threatens to throw this sacred order out of balance. Warmer waters confuse the salmon's migration, mountain snowpacks shrink away from wild berries, and the seasons shift unpredictably. In response, Tribes are stepping up to lead their own climate work, protecting these ancient food relationships and exercising our sovereignty to look after the land.

Hunters and gatherers work long days each season to help feed everyone in the Tribe. This is viewed as an honor, to have the opportunity to work alongside other Tribal members to care for the community. Dedicated ceremonies emphasize the importance of community care and generosity. First-time hunters and gatherers are given a moment of recognition, where they show what they have harvested and offer it to someone special as a symbol of kindness, care, and respect—not only to the individual, but to the precious resource gathered as well.



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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](#)

Cúús (pron. Ch-wish): Water

Núsux (pron. Noo-soox): Salmon

Yáamaš (pron. Yaa-mash): Deer

Xáwš (pron. Khowsh): Cous

Wíwinu (pron. Weew-noo):
Huckleberry

English Vocabulary

First Foods, Indigenous, reciprocity, reservation, sustainability, stewardship, ceremony, subsistence, seasonality, invasive, sovereignty

Resources

[CTUIR-CAP-Ch-One-Excerpt-for-Aspen-Institute-ROAD-2021.pdf](#)

[CTUIR - Gatherers Project](#)

[Tamastsiht Cultural Institute – More than just a museum](#)

Activity

5 Min: Feel! Begin by showing photos of the life cycles of the First Foods: Water, Salmon, Deer, Cous, and Huckleberries. As students look at the images, have them discuss where each food lives and why protecting its home is important. Encourage students to imagine being in those places: a cool river, a sunny meadow, or a misty forest. Ask them to take a deep breath and notice the elements (water, soil, air) that connect all living things.

10 Min: Connect! Invite students to draw their chosen First Food in its natural home. Before they begin, ask the group: “How might changing weather, less snowpack, or hotter summers disrupt the delicate balance these food relatives need to survive?” As they draw, talk through what each environment requires to thrive:

- Cúús (Water) in the valleys: Needs to be kept cool, clean, and rushing for everyone to share. When the water is healthy, it gives life to all the swimming and crawling relatives below the surface.
- Núsux (Salmon) in the river: Needs clear, winding rivers with a strong, continuous current. They need an open, safe pathway from the high streams all the way to the ocean, and a clear path back home to complete their life journey.
- Yáamaš (Deer) in the meadow and forest: Needs open access to healthy native vegetation for grazing, balanced predator-prey relationships without over-hunting, and safe, undisturbed nesting and bedding areas.
- Xáwš (Cous) in the meadow: Needs plenty of seasonal rainfall to soften the earth and create strong, deep roots, making it easier to gather. This relative thrives best in flatter meadow areas where rainwater naturally collects.
- Wíwinu (Huckleberries) in the forest: Needs high-elevation mountain habitats (around 2,000–11,000 feet) within evergreen forests that are roughly 15–30 years old to ensure ideal sunlight. This environment relies directly on cultural prescribed burning, as huckleberry rhizomes are naturally fire-resistant.

15 Min: Play! Have students act out, or personify, the First Foods Order by moving like or becoming the food itself:

Water: Flow like a stream

Salmon: Swim upstream!

Deer: Tiptoe like animals

Cous: Wiggle roots underground

Huckleberries: Stretch like bushes

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Reciprocity through Stewardship

Children can use water as an offering by pouring a small amount of water out for each food group as they are mentioned above. This will help to show the reciprocal cycle of taking care of one another to become stronger and more abundant in life. Water is giving life to all other beings, so by offering water to the foods, we can help ensure that they will be well taken care of, strengthening their ability to feed others, and continuing the cycle of reciprocity.

Adaptations & Extensions

- Social Studies & Science: Explore CTUIR history, treaty rights, and stewardship practices while studying local ecosystems including water quality, plant growth, and salmon life cycles.
- Outdoor Learning: Visit local rivers, meadows, or forests to observe where First Foods live in your area and discuss habitat protection.
- Field Trip: Visit the Tamástslikt Cultural Institute on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation to learn directly from tribal educators about First Foods traditions, sustainability, and seasonal cycles. Alternatively, visit a local tribe's museum or ask for a demonstration from a tribal government on history and Indigenous foodways.
- Extension: Partner with Indigenous gardens or restoration projects or create classroom journals or signage that celebrate stewardship and reciprocity with the land.