



Indigenous Resistance: Protecting The Land Across Turtle Island

Grades 9-12

Knowledge Holder

This lesson was created by Jacy Bowles (Xicana and Diné).



Materials

- Computer or library access
- Drawing - Paper, pens, markers, and/or colored pencils
- Painting - small canvases, watercolor or acrylic paint
- Paper-mache masks or sculptures: newspaper, cardboard scraps, flour, salt, water, buckets, stencils

Standards

This lesson aligns with national visual arts, social studies, and geography standards by:

- Evaluating how Indigenous research and resistance movements challenge extractive industries.
- Analyzing how climate change directly impacts non-human relatives.
- Using art as a tool for political activism, community storytelling, and cultural continuity.

Objective

This lesson connects community-led research with creative action through two main goals. Students will step away from Western categorization models to research a specific plant, animal, or sacred landscape that matters to them or their community. They will look at this relative through a climate justice lens, blending independent research with community stories. Second, youth will honor that non-human relative by creating a dedicated art piece, building their own creative confidence while celebrating the historical power of art as a tool for political and cultural resistance.

Educator Note: Some tribes restrict storytelling about animals to certain seasons (e.g., from the first snowfall to the last). Be aware of this seasonal protocol and adjust the lesson timing as appropriate. Additionally, this lesson includes an option for mask-making; be sure to inquire about and respect local cultural protocols if assigning this specific artistic medium.

Survivance Message

Our ancestors were researchers long before we were introduced to that Western term. For time immemorial, Native peoples have not only observed the natural world around us but have actively participated in supporting the health, management, and balance of our ecosystems. Native research is not detached categorization; it is a spiritual and practical process that strengthens our relationships with each other, our values, and our more-than-human relations.

- **The Authority of Ancestral Knowledge:** When you commit to learning, you reclaim your right to protect and research your own history. You are already fully qualified to advocate for your people and all living relatives on this land. Keeping these ancestral teachings alive is how we actively resist being erased.
- **Extractive Realities and Climate Justice:** Today, big industries drive climate change and harm the land through massive resource extraction like open-pit mining, logging, and heavy tourism. These practices don't just change the landscape; they break the natural balance our ancestors protected for thousands of years. Indigenous resistance across Turtle Island isn't just about protesting; it's about actively defending a future where the next generations have a healthy earth to inherit.



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](#).

Vocabulary

Extractive, intersectionality, unceded, generative, protocol, more-than-human

Resources

[Berkeley Prayer Walk: Save the Shellmounds](#)

[How Are Indigenous Peoples Fighting Climate Change](#)

[Mask Making Art & Culture Lesson Plans – UNM](#)

[UNM Mask Making Activity Guide](#)

[Chugach Mask Making Guide](#)

[Cherokee Booger Masks](#)

[Mexican Día de Muertos Mask Making Guide](#)

[Paper Mache Animal Sculpture Guide](#)

[Uprooted Dreams: Oaxacan Alebrijes Virtual Exhibit - Smithsonian](#)

[Free Animal Outline Templates](#)

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Activities

Key Elements of Exploration:

- **Listen and Reflect:** Investigate extractive industries (deforestation, mining, fossil fuels, tourism). Who is causing the harm? How are these industries damaging our natural world, altering the climate, and affecting human health? What does this mean for the next generations, and how are Native people resisting on their territories?
- **Research:** Consider our more-than-human relatives. Humans aren't the only ones in harm's way; animals, plants, and sacred spaces face the frontline impacts of shifting climate patterns. How can we better understand these climate effects through an Indigenous lens, and how do we see ourselves stepping up to care for them?
- **Creative Resistance:** Use available art supplies to create a visual testament honoring a relative, reflecting either their current struggles or an imagined, thriving future.

15 Min: Feel! (Opening Circle & Case Studies) Introduce the concept of land guardianship through raw media, prompting students to emotionally and intellectually connect with real-world frontlines.

- **Media Anchor 1:** [We Are Guardians](#) (2 min. video)
Prompt: What does it truly mean to be a guardian of the land? How are these guardians actively protecting and preserving culture through environmental defense?
- **Media Anchor 2:** *Unceded Secwépemc Territory (British Columbia, Canada)* – [Tiny House Warriors](#) (16 min. documentary)
Prompt: How does environmental injustice and climate disruption intersect with the other systemic injustices Native people face? What elements of creative resistance do you notice here, and how would you describe the overarching goals of the Tiny House Warriors?

15 Min: Connect! (Regional & Urban Resistance) Pivot to comparative case studies looking at how the battlefield shifts between sacred high-altitude peaks and urban plots, focusing on underlying values at play.

- **Media Anchor 3:** *Dinetah (Flagstaff, AZ)* – [Protests at Flagstaff Snowbowl on the San Francisco Peaks](#) (2 min. video)
Prompt: Based on the interviews, what does each side value? What specific Indigenous teachings, ancestral values, or ecological relationships did you notice the protesters honoring to protect the peaks?
- **Media Anchor 4:** *Huichin, Ohlone Territory (Oakland/Berkeley, CA)* – [Indigenous Sovereignty: One Plot of Land at a Time](#) (4 mins)
Prompt: What explicit relationships are centered in this urban resistance movement? How might the barriers and strategies to protecting the land and mitigating climate impacts differ in highly developed, urban areas versus less developed tribal territories?



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15 Min: Play! (Engaging Indigenous Research Methods) Transition the room into active researchers. Lighten the air with humor, then lay out the foundational protocol for their community and library-based inquiry.

“Now it is your turn to step into the role of the researcher. To start this process and bring some lighthearted energy into the space: if there was one animal relative you could sit down and have lunch with, what animal would it be, and what would you eat together? Think about that connection. Your assignment is to choose a specific plant, animal, or sacred place you feel drawn to and research it using two distinct methods: community connection and independent investigation.”

The Research Protocol Handout:

- Method A: Speak with a family member or elder. What stories, traditional ecological knowledge, or history do they hold about this relative? What connections does your family, community, or tribe carry? Crucially, ask them: *How has this relative been affected by changes in the climate, weather patterns, or habitats over the last few years, decades, or centuries? What efforts have been made to protect them, and have they been effective?*
- Method B: Research online or at a library. What biological or historical information can you find about the relative you chose? Is anyone else studying or protecting it? Are Native nations involved in the conservation or policy work? How could you see yourself taking physical action to advocate for them? Did you learn anything that surprised you?
- The Share-Back: Create an essay, short story, poem, digital presentation (Canva/Google Slides), or an oral narrative report to share your findings with the class. By each student deeply learning about one relative, you all become teachers to one another, weaving a collective map of ecological resistance.

Reciprocity through Stewardship

Creative resistance is key to preserving our cultures, customs, and the natural world. If we only spend our energy fighting against what harms us, we risk letting that anger define us. True sovereignty isn't just about resisting; it's about creating. By using your creativity, which naturally brings life, joy, and deep connection, you can honor the relative you researched and embed their power and beauty right back into our communities. Then, create a physical piece of art to honor them, embedding their power, beauty, and presence into the history of this place.

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As you design and create this artistic offering, let these prompts guide your hands:

- **Form and Movement:** How do they take shape, and how does that shape alter under changing environmental conditions? Do they rise up on two legs to stand their ground, or does this plant bloom only at a specific, precise time of the day or seasonal cycle?
- **Teachings and Medicine:** What do they teach us about survival? How do they heal us? Is there a word, phrase, or prayer you want to physically paint or write into the work? (For example: the jaguar embodies observation before action; the monarch butterfly reminds us that Native peoples and ecological relatives naturally transcend artificial borders; traditional tobacco teaches us to offer respect before we ask for a resource).
- **Materials and Lineage:** What materials do you want to use? Is there a traditional craft medium rooted in your family or community, or do you want to flex your creative confidence by trying a completely new artistic medium?
- **The Cycle of Gifting:** Do you want to keep this piece of art for yourself as a reminder of your duty to the earth, or will you gift it to an elder, a community leader, or a peer whom you want to inspire, educate, or show gratitude toward?

Adaptations & Extensions

This lesson easily expands into a bigger project connecting Environmental Science, Ethnic Studies, and Creative Arts. To extend the activity, classes can compile their individual research and artwork into a collective community exhibition, a schoolyard installation, or a digital zine to share with local tribal conservation programs or community elders. This ensures the knowledge youth uncover doesn't stay locked in a classroom, but actually goes out to support and inspire the community.