

Our Ancient Relatives: Menominee Sturgeon

Grades K-8

Knowledge Holder

This lesson was created by Lucy Grignon (Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Nation, Menominee Nation).



Materials

- *We are Water Protectors* book by Carole Lindstrom
- [We are Water Protectors Activity Kit](#)
- *On the Trapline* book by David Robertson

Standards

This lesson aligns with national frameworks in Visual Arts, Social Studies, and Environmental Science:

- Exploring how Menominee traditional stories and river restoration protect ancient fish species.
- Investigating how changing water temperatures and industrial dams disrupt natural spawning cycles.
- Looking at how community gatherings like the Sturgeon Feast preserve cultural practices and tribal lifeways.
- Discussing the connection between tribal treaty rights, local ecosystems, and modern conservation laws.

Objective

Students will dive into learning about our ancient more-than-human relatives: the Menominee Sturgeon. These Menominee stories have been alive, practiced, and shared for thousands of years. By introducing students to Menominee storytelling, youth will understand the interconnectedness between human communities and their river environments, investigating both traditional stories and contemporary nonfiction pieces written by and for the Menominee people.

Survivance Message

The Menominee people have been actively fighting to protect their ancestral waterways and working tirelessly to re-establish critical habitat for their Sturgeon Relatives near Keshena, Wisconsin. Keshena Falls on the Wolf River is the sacred ancestral spawning grounds of the herd, a landscape known affectionately as “the place where the Sturgeon come home.” The Menominee Nation is leading a powerful cultural revitalization movement, focusing on the sturgeon to restore physical and spiritual access for these ancient fish returning home.

Dam Obstructions and Warming Rivers: For over a hundred years, industrial dams built downstream have blocked the sturgeon from swimming up to their true spawning grounds at Keshena Falls. On top of that, a changing climate is warming up our rivers faster than normal. Sturgeon are ancient, cold-water fish, and they depend on the exact right spring temperatures and clean, rushing water to lay their eggs. When the rivers get too warm too early, their return is disrupted. Clearing away these old barriers and cooling our rivers isn't just conservation, it's how we welcome our oldest relatives home.

Activities

15 Min: Feel! (Inside the Classroom) Bring the river directly into the classroom by letting students watch the sturgeon's journey in real time.

“Gather around the screen for our daily check-in. We are logging directly into the live, underwater Sturgeon webcam broadcasted from Shawano, Wisconsin. Watch the power and the steady rhythm of these ancient relatives as they move through the current. These fish are living fossils. They have survived ice ages and massive planetary shifts, yet they remain vulnerable to modern human infrastructure. As you watch them swim today, think about the immense strength it takes for them to fight their way back up the river to their families.”

[Sturgeon Live Underwater Camera](#) (Utilize seasonal live feeds from Wisconsin DNR or Wolf River monitoring groups).



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](#).

Menominee Vocabulary

Namāēw (pron. nuh-maew): Sturgeon

Sēpēw (pron. say-pay): River

Nenēkehen (pron. Neh-nay-keh-hen): Relative

Vocabulary

Spawning, revitalization, endangered, infrastructure, equilibrium, protector, colonial-era, resilience, reservation

Resources

Omāēqnomenēweqnaesen, the Menominee language, has been passed down to us for many generations. This webpage is going to be useful for those that have chosen to pursue learning our language, history, and culture. Each of these are intertwined and can not exist on their own, and especially not without you.

[Menominee Language Website](#)

Our Ancient Relatives: Menominee Sturgeon

Grades K-8

30 Min: Connect & Play! (Outside the Classroom) Move your students out of the building and take a walk together to the bank of the nearest local waterway for a relational storytime.

“We are stepping out into Creator’s Classroom today. Find a comfortable place to sit by the water, listen to the current, and feel the breeze. Before we open our text, I want to center your voices: Who are Water Protectors? What does that title mean to you? Together, we are going to read the children’s book, *We Are Water Protectors*, written by Indigenous author Carole Lindstrom. This beautiful narrative shares the vital spiritual and physical importance of water through the eyes of a young girl and her people, providing us with the blueprint of what it means to defend our ecosystems against extractive harms.

Now that we have sat with the story by our own waterway, let’s circle back to our question with deeper knowledge: Who are Water Protectors, and how can we actively stand up for the water in our own area?”

Reciprocity through Stewardship

Encourage students and their families to attend the annual Menominee Sturgeon Feast, celebrated every April at the Menominee Logging Museum. This gathering is a beautiful space where the community comes together to honor, feed, and celebrate our ancient relatives. Traditional foods including smoked sturgeon, wild rice, and sweet maple sugar candies are shared collectively. A traditional Powwow is held in honor of these older-than-human relatives. Generations of sturgeon history, science, and oral protocols are passed down directly to the youth during this feast.

True reciprocity means being an active voice for the river. Because warming waters and downriver dams threaten the sturgeon’s survival, we must show our gratitude through real action. Students can care for their local waterways by cleaning up riverbanks to keep the water clear, or planting native trees along streams to shade and cool the water for our fish relatives. By taking care of the rivers, we ensure that the place where the sturgeon come home remains clean, safe, and welcoming for the next seven generations.

Adaptations & Extensions

This lesson can easily expand into advanced multi-disciplinary units analyzing tribal environmental policy, watershed cartography, and contemporary legislative activism. To spark deeper classroom conversations and expand environmental literacy, utilize these foundational materials:

- [The Ancient Storyteller Film](#): A powerful documentary highlighting the past, present, and future of the Menominee relationship to the Sturgeon, showing how traditional storytelling builds real-world environmental stewardship.

Book: *Saving Our Sturgeon-Protecting Wisconsin's Ancient Fish* by Rebecca Hogue Wojahn includes a chapter about the Menominee Nation's work to revitalize cultural traditions, focus on Sturgeon and restore access to the fish on the reservation.

[The Menominee Nation: Stewards of Sustainability](#) - Come along as we head into the forests of the first stewards and uncover a story rooted in the long history of sustainability.

Our Ancient Relatives: Menominee Sturgeon

Grades K-8

- Journalism Analysis: Read and discuss the newspaper article, "[It's Time to Allow Sturgeon to Return Home](#)" by writer Gracie Waukechon, a Bad River Tribal Member and Menominee descendant. This article examines the modern struggle for environmental justice and tribal fishing rights.
- Geographical Mapping with *On the Trapline* by David Robertson: Use this Indigenous-authored children's book, which follows a grandfather and grandchild returning to ancestral hunting lands, as a catalyst to look at local maps. Many conversations from this book can lead to land and local Menominee connections.
- Trace the waterways, historical roads, and significant cultural sites of the Menominee Reservation, discussing what it means for a community's homelands to be right beneath their feet.
- Policy & Legal Research Tracks: Have advanced students research and debate current state and Tribal legislative acts, including:
 - The ongoing policy battles surrounding keeping Lake Sturgeon in Wisconsin off the federal Endangered Species List through active tribal management.
 - The cultural and sovereign significance of introducing a Spear Act to protect traditional Sturgeon Spearing protocols in Wisconsin waters.
 - [Research: A Bill Keeping Lake Sturgeon in Wisconsin off the Endangered Species List](#)
 - [Research: Introducing A Spear Act to Protect Sturgeon Spearing in Wisconsin](#)