

Discovering Alabama

Teacher's Guide

A Walk in the Woods

Suggested Curriculum Areas

Social Studies
Science
Ecology
Literature

Suggested Grade Levels

4–12

Key Concepts

Native American Perspectives
Natural Systems as the
Fundamental Basis of Life
Cultural Differences

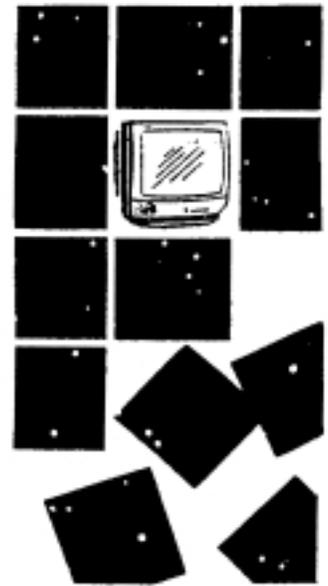
Key Skills

Interpreting Nature
Research
Critical Thinking

Synopsis

In this modern age, much of our daily life involves little direct contact with nature. We wake up in a box (our house), travel to work or school in a box (automobile or bus), and spend the day in a box (our workplace or school). At the end of the day, we reverse the procedure, box to box to box, returning home to the seductive power of yet another box—the television, and its pervasive influence on all aspects of life from how we dress to what we eat. Likewise, the educational experience of children today often reflects this increasing cultural separation from the land. The fields, streams, and woods that once surrounded our schools are being replaced rapidly by shopping areas and adjoining parking lots, while bulletin boards, overhead projectors, and computers are now the primary sources of information.

A key theme of this video is that, even with the many material advances of our industrial society, we remain dependent upon essential processes in nature. Viewers take a walk in the backwoods and encounter nature on a basic level, a theme that is highlighted in the video through several Native American quotations. The program does not seek to deny the value of technology, rather, the video's purpose is to underscore the fundamental importance of the natural environment as the basis of life.



THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA



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Before Viewing

1. Without giving the class advance warning, ask your students to close their eyes and point to the North. When all students have extended arms, ask them to hold their positions and open their eyes to observe one another's sense of direction. (In the typical class, this will be a humorous situation with arms pointing in all directions.)
2. Explain that most experts believe that there is no such trait as an innate sense of direction. Such a skill is learned and is largely the result of paying attention to various signs in nature. Of course, one obvious sign is the Sun, with its east-west path. Inquire as to how many students have noticed the movement of the Sun today.
3. Discuss the fact that, because today we have street and road signs and highway markers to follow, we no longer practice the skills of reading nature's directional signs. Ask if any of your students have been hiking or camping in backwoods far from roads and street signs. Did they use nature's signs to guide them? Where did they learn such skills?
4. Discuss whether any large areas of backcountry—a few thousand acres, essentially roadless, and mostly wooded—remain near your community. Ask students to consider if modern society perceives wild backcountry differently than did our pioneer or Native American forebears. Have the class imagine taking a long overnight hike into a wilderness area, depending on nature for directions, food, water, and all other means of survival. Introduce the video by explaining that the students are about to live such an adventure! If they don't want to get lost, they will need to pay attention.

While Viewing

Before starting the video, mention that the program includes quotations from various Indian leaders. Ask students to take special note of these and to pick one or two quotations that they feel are most meaningful.

Video Mystery Question: Why is it not a contradiction to say that dirt keeps water clean? (Answer: In a healthy forest, the thick humus and soils filter and purify water as it recycles its way to streams, lakes, or underground aquifers.)

After Viewing

Place students in small groups and do the following:

1. Distribute copies of the back page of this guide and ask each group to select the one Indian quotation that is favorite from those listed.
2. Relate that, while the program features the host on a physical journey—a hike in the direction of a campsite—the Indian quotations refer to another kind of journey. Ask students to discuss what kind of journey and to what direction the Indians are alluding. (The Indian quotations refer to society's journey through life on a course that may place a greater distance between man and nature.)
3. Have the class make a list of items at school that come from nature and another list of those that do not. (This is a bit of a trick assignment because most all things originate in some way from nature. Let the students explore this for themselves.) Identify the original source(s) in nature for each item.

Extensions

1. Have the class do research on the historical differences between Native American views and the views

in American culture that displaced the Indians. One topic that will create great interest is to contrast and compare the personalities of Andrew Jackson and Creek Indian leaders William McIntosh or William Weatherford.

2. Develop a list of famous people whose special fondness for nature is often overlooked in history books. Examples include: Thomas Jefferson, Margaret Mead, Albert Einstein, George Washington Carver, Emily Dickinson, and Jesus.

Philosophical Reflections

In 1878, the famous Indian Chief Seattle, deeply pained by the white man's excessive slaughter of wildlife during the settlement of the West, reportedly advised U.S. President Franklin Pierce that, "if all the animals were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit." Government officials are said to have dismissed Seattle's words as the ramblings of an impractical sentimentalist who failed to understand the superiority of humans over animals.

Some cultures see humans as superior and other creatures as having no rightful existence beyond serving the wishes of people. But how do we compare ourselves with other creatures—on the basis of physical capabilities? Clearly there are creatures with physical traits that are superior to those of humans. One example is the domestic dog, whose sense of smell is one hundred times keener than ours. How about mental capability? Here again, there is room for debate: The human power of reasoning is frequently offset by greed, hostility, oppression, and many other age-old human tendencies.

Does modern society still consider humans beings to be superior to animals? What beliefs or assumptions are necessary to support such a view? What beliefs or assumptions are necessary to support the contrary view, i.e., that people are simply a part of nature's community of life? Do the two opposing viewpoints imply different responsibilities toward nature? How so?

Nature in Art

Through technology, modern society continues in its quest for mastery over nature. We also seek to find meaning in our world through literature, painting, and other forms of creative expression. Thus, science and art both serve to help us analyze, manage, and manipulate the experience of life. But the Native American perspective suggests a realm of experience more fundamental than that of either science or art. This view is aptly expressed by the nineteenth-century romantic poet William Wordsworth in an excerpt from *The Tables Turned* (1798),

*Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things—
We murder to dissect.*

*Enough of Science and Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.*

Much can be found in the arts that reinforces this view. You might have the class search for similar themes in the works of such poets as Robert Service, John Keats, e.e. cummings, Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, and William Shakespeare.

Community Connections

1. Every community has undergone significant change over time—economically, socially, and environmentally. Conduct an historical investigation to learn how your community has changed since its original settlement. You might wish to explore: a) who were the original residents (Native Americans, European, or African settlers), b) what were the original means of livelihood, c) what were the early values and beliefs, and d) a description of the early landscape. (This activity affords an opportunity for students to interview grandparents, local old-timers, or

others who might have special knowledge of their community's past.)

2. Every community continues to change. Contrast and compare your community's past with its present status. Conduct a citizen survey to assess resident preferences for the community's future, including such matters as natural surroundings and environmental quality. This is an opportunity to let students develop a survey questionnaire to incorporate their own concerns.

3. Every community has access to an agency whose responsibilities involve planning for the future. Invite this agency to: a) speak to the class about current plans for your community's future, b) provide a visit to a local site—planning office, field office, construction site—where plans involve consideration of environmental issues, and c) work with your class in conducting a community planning project whereby students develop scenarios for a desirable future with emphasis on environmental quality, natural surroundings, and concern for maintaining the “web of life.”

Complementary Aids and Activities

Project Learning Tree, Activity Guide, Grades 7–12, “Native American Web of Life.” Available through Alabama Forestry Association, 555 Alabama St., Montgomery AL 36104.

Project WILD, Elementary Activity, “Beautiful Basics.” Available through Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, 64 N. Union St., Montgomery AL 36130.

Additional References and Resources

“Young Readers on the Environment.” *NatureSouth* 4, no. 2, published by the Alabama Museum of Natural History, The University of Alabama, Box 870340, Tuscaloosa AL 35487; 205–348–9826.

Contact your **County Historical Society** for help with research and to arrange tours of their collections.

The Old Beloved Path by William W. Winn (1992). Written about Native American groups in the Chattahoochee River Valley and is a good general reference for Native American culture and history in the Southeast.

The Way of the Earth: Native America and the Environment by John Bierhorst (1994), for ages 12 and over.

Boy Scout Handbook, 10th edition (1990), “Finding Your Way.”

McIntosh and Weatherford, Creek Indian Leaders by Benjamin W. Griffin, Jr. (1988).

Parting Thoughts

As we mentioned in the video, the nature of life is nature! This principle is fundamental to our physical existence on Earth. An understanding of this principle, especially its manifestations and implications, ought to be an integral part of education. Many people today (educators included) fail to address this issue and, instead, focus their attention on trivial matters. Consider, for example, the preoccupation with television soap operas or with the world of fashion. A recent survey indicates that the average American spends a significant amount of time in such pursuits and yet remains environmentally unaware.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Although the video encourages closer contact with nature, remember that our society has lost many of the skills necessary for sensing and interpreting things in nature. Some of these skills can be regained with practice, but emphasize to your students that they should always use good sense and judgment when venturing outdoors. Proper equipment and training can be a life saver. The Scout motto says it best, “Be prepared!”



Happy outings,

B. DeLoach



Discovering Alabama

Activity/Information Sheet

A Walk in the Woods

THE VIDEO DRAWS largely from a perception of Native Americans that is related to nineteenth-century romantic thinking. But to romanticize and oversimplify the Indians often keep us from seeing them as flesh and blood people, trying like the rest of us simply to get by, and who need our understanding while they sometimes cope with poverty and the social problems that are aftershocks of their shattered native culture.

PHILIP DELORIA IN *THE NATIVE AMERICANS: AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY* (1993) states the case well:

Most of us already know the answers to the questions we put to our symbolic Indians; we simply have difficulty living out

those answers in the modern world. How can we have ties of family and community when we pick up and move every few years? How can we exist in a closer relationship to the natural world when we depend on cities, automobiles, petrochemical backpacks and raingear, and artificially designated lines that tell us where "nature" or "wilderness" begins and ends? It is far easier to think of Indians like Chief Seattle and get misty-eyed and nostalgic than it is to sell the car.

To learn something from Indian people, mainstream Americans need to question basic assumptions they hold precious—government, profit, progress, just to name a few. Once questioned, analyzed, and reduced, assumptions can be rebuilt—not as simply the Indian-tinged rhetoric of Chief Seattle, but as complex and complicated ideas that actually address the modern lives of both Indians and non-Indians. This is no easy task, but even a



little success contributes to the reclaiming of a more legitimate cross-cultural exchange and a new and different view of the future.

THE AMERICAN HERITAGE is largely one of nature, of natural resources, bountiful and beautiful. While not every belief

or practice of native tribes was always environmental in its effects, generally, tribal beliefs were oriented toward harmonious relationships between the land and its inhabitants. In the modern age, where environmental degradation is often the rule rather than the exception, perhaps we can benefit by keeping mindful of this portion of the American Indian heritage.

Our land is more valuable than your money. It will last forever. It will not even perish by the flames of fire. As long as the sun shines and the waters flow, this land will be here to give life to men and animals. We cannot sell the lives of men and animals; therefore, we cannot sell this land. It was put here for us by the Great Spirit and we cannot sell it because it does not belong to us.

—A chief of the North Blackfoot tribe, on being asked to sign a peace treaty

Civilized people depend too much on man-made printed pages. I turn to the Great Spirit's book which is the whole of his creation. You can read a big part of that book if you study nature.

You know, if you take all your books, lay them out under the sun, and let the snow and rain and insects work on them for a while, there will be nothing left. But the Great Spirit has provided you and me with an opportunity for study in nature's university, the forests, the rivers, the mountains, and the animals which include us.

—Tatanga Mani (1871–1967), a Canadian Stoney Indian, from his autobiography

The above two quotations, parts of which are paraphrased in the video, are excerpts from *Touch the Earth: A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence* compiled by T.C. McLuhan (1971).