

# Living Close to the Land

## *Storytelling Teaches Lessons*

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Pre-visit activity, all grades

### Objectives

To introduce students to storytelling, Native American cultures, and the relationship of those cultures to the natural world

### Materials

The Earth on Turtle's Back

[www.lessonsofourland.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/The-Earth-On-Turtles-Back.pdf](http://www.lessonsofourland.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/The-Earth-On-Turtles-Back.pdf)

### Background

Oral tradition in Native American cultures has always played a very important role. Stories were used both as entertainment and teaching tools. Some of the people that lived in Nevada and Utah were the Goshute and Western Shoshone. Stories that have been told over the years are cultural stories, rather than personal. In fact, most Western Shoshone tales take place in the “mythic past”, when animals spoke and set human customs through their adventures.

Story telling always involved the audience and could be quite animated and theatrical. Native peoples would not sit and listen passively to a story, but would say “yes” at appropriate times, answer questions, interrupt if something was forgotten, and of course laugh. Stories of the people from the Great Basin often taught one how to behave, sometimes by showing the incorrect behavior. Stories were usually told on winter evenings after all the chores were done. (Shoshone Tales, Anne Smith)

## Procedure

Introduce the concept and importance of storytelling for native cultures. Ask students what role storytelling plays in their lives. Do their parents and grandparents tell them stories about when they were little?

Inform students you are going to read them a creation story (a story of how the earth was made) from the Onondaga culture of the Northeast Woodlands. See attached.

After the story help students to better understand it by asking the following questions:

1. Why does the Chief think his wife's dream is so important? Are your dreams important? What do you do when you remember your dreams?
2. Why does the Ancient Chief pull up the Great Tree?
3. In what ways do the animals help the Chief's wife once she falls through the hole in Skyland?
4. Why does Muskrat succeed in bringing the Earth up when the other animals fail, even though they are stronger and swifter than she is? What lesson does Muskrat bring to the people who hear this story?
5. This is one Native American story of how the Earth was made. What are some other ways that people believe the Earth was created?
6. What are the things the Chief's wife will need to survive on the Earth on Turtle's back?
7. Where do these things come from in the story? Where do all of our survival needs come from?

## Extensions

Draw a picture from the story. Possible topics are Skyland, the animals in the story, the ancient chief and his wife, the new earth on the turtle's back.

What kinds of things do you need on your earth to survive? Draw a picture of your home and all of its important places: your room, yard, school, parks, neighborhood.