

TRACKING THE BUFFALO

Stories from a Buffalo Hide Painting



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Tracking the Buffalo Teacher Guide

INTRODUCTION

The Tracking the Buffalo website is designed for students in grades 3-6 to explore the relationship between Plains Indians and the buffalo. In the You Be the Historian activity, students explore a buffalo hide painting and use related primary sources to better understand the meaning of the buffalo to the people of the Plains and the effect of new settlers on life on the Plains. In the What Can You Make from a Buffalo activity, students play a matching game to learn how American Indians used parts of the buffalo for every day items. The site includes book suggestions, links to related material, and a guiding worksheet for students.

YOU BE THE HISTORIAN

In this section of the website, students can learn about life on the Plains by exploring the symbols on the buffalo hide and the related primary sources. Students can move through this activity in challenge mode or explore mode, and can find an introduction to the activity by clicking the question mark next to the introductory text in the top right corner of the page. In challenge mode, students are guided through each section of the hide and must examine one section before unlocking the next. This section of the website is best completed with the You Be the Historian Student Worksheet, where students can record their responses to the questions in each section of the activity. This worksheet guides students to the appropriate sources to best answer the questions. In explore mode, students are free to examine any section in any order. The questions associated with each section in explore mode are the same questions students encounter in challenge mode, so students may also use the You Be the Historian Student Worksheet when viewing this section. The You Be the Historian activity includes a key in the bottom left of the main page, which guides students to more specific information about the individual symbols on the hide, some of which are not specifically addressed elsewhere in the You Be the Historian activity.

WHAT CAN YOU MAKE FROM THE BUFFALO

In this section of the website, students learn how Plains Indians used the buffalo by matching a part of the buffalo to an object made from it. Students should select a part of the buffalo and find the matching object, and students must select a part of the buffalo to begin the activity. You can help guide the students by providing simple questions to spark curiosity such as:

- How did the children of the Plains go sledding?
- How did the buffalo help Mandan women to travel?
- What are three activities made easier or made possible using parts of the buffalo?

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ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

Make Your Own Buffalo Hide

Some tribes used hide paintings to record their history. Tribal leaders chose the single most important event of each year, and added one picture representing that event to the hide painting. Members of the tribe often identified the year they were born by referring to the event depicted on these “winter count” hides. Have students create their own buffalo hide painting to tell the story of their lives with the activity included on this site. For ideas for symbols, see “More About the Buffalo Hide Painting” under Background Information. Or, have students create a winter count hide for their own life, with symbols for each year. See the National Museum of the American Indian’s Lone Dog Winter Count activity for suggestions.

Create a Scavenger Hunt

Use the “key” in the explore mode in the You Be the Historian activity to create a scavenger hunt to learn the meanings of symbols in the hide and the traditions of the Plains Indians. Students can also explore stories of the Plains people and the additional reading suggestions for more background on these symbols.

Integrate Math

Have students count the total number of individual types of images on the hide (buffalo, cows, men).

- Percentages: Compare the percentage of buffalo killed by the American Indians at the top of the hide to the percentage
- Ratio: Compare the ratio of buffalo killed to men in the section at the top of the hide to the section at the bottom of the hide. Consider what this means about the different uses of the buffalo by American Indian and non-Indian hunters.

Create a Webquest

Use the links provided in the Background Information section to create a webquest on any of the following topics:

- The history and culture of Plains Indian groups
- The effect of the railroad on the buffalo
- The return of the buffalo to the Plains