

LESSON NINETEEN: The Buffalo: The Plains Indians' Most Useful Resource

Time 30 minutes

Trunk Resources

Graphics

- #11 Cheyenne woman scraping a hide
- #12 Single Buffalo
- #21 The Buffalo Hunt
- #22 Buffalo Hunt by Indians
- #38 Uses of the buffalo

Book

Buffalo, by Emilie Lepthien

Objects

- Shield
- Scraper
- Awl
- Drum and beater
- Moccasin
- Sinew
- Scapula
- Bladder
- Parfleche
- Fur pouch

Worksheet

- #2 Uses of the buffalo

Teacher Resources

Photocopy worksheet #2 Uses of the buffalo for each student

Objectives

1. Students will identify uses of the buffalo.
2. Students will demonstrate empathetic skills.

Historical background

The ancestors of the modern buffalo probably came to North America across a land bridge from Asia between 200,000 and 800,000 years ago. There is evidence that at least 10,000 years ago early Indian groups were hunting buffalo on the Plains.

By about A.D. 1000, two types of buffalo could be found in North America, the plains buffalo and wood buffalo. However, these are not true buffalo. Scientists say the only true buffalo is found in Asia. The American buffalo is really a member of the bison family.

Full-grown buffalo bulls stand five or six feet tall. They are about nine feet long. Bulls can weigh from just under a ton to about 2,500 pounds. In the wild, buffalo bulls may have lived thirty to forty years or longer.

Buffalo shed their winter coat in the spring. Long strings of winter hair fall off their flanks and hindquarters, leaving a mane around their necks and shoulders. During the days of the great herds, hundreds of buffalo rolled in the dust to scratch away the hair and biting insects. Their hoofs and horns dug into the dirt, creating large round holes. Rains filled these "wallows," and the buffalo enjoyed rolling in them even more. The mud dried in their short summer hair and protected them from insect stings. Some buffalo wallows became watering holes that were used by pioneers.

Experts have tried to estimate the number of buffalo that once lived in North America. Some say it was about 30 million. Others guess as high as 60 or 75 million. In 1870 a Frenchman named L.C. Fouquet hunted buffalo in southwestern Kansas. In one area he counted sixty-three separate herds and estimated each had an average of 2,000 head, or about 126,000 buffalo.

During the 1800s Native Americans lost much of their land to European settlers. Many Europeans enjoyed hunting buffalo. These hunters began killing large numbers of buffalo and the animals' population dropped rapidly. Some hunters claimed that they shot one hundred buffalo a day. Col. Richard Dodge estimated over four million buffalo were killed on the Plains between 1872 and 1874. By the time the slaughter stopped, the buffalo was nearly extinct. Only 551 were found alive in the United States in 1889. By careful management, governments and ranchers kept the buffalo from disappearing completely. In the 1970s more than 33,000 buffalo were in North America. About half of those were kept in the United States. Today 75,000 buffalo are in the United States and 15,000 are in Canada.

Uses of the buffalo

The list of products that Indians made from the buffalo is long. Many things were made from hides. Skins taken in the winter were tanned with the hair left on. They were made into robes, winter moccasins, gloves, and bedding. The hair was taken off most summer hides. Those skins were used for tipi covers, clothing, packing cases, bags, saddles, harnesses, ropes, masks, armor, and snowshoes.

Rawhide, skin that was not preserved by tanning, was very strong and tough. Indians made it into cooking utensils (kettles, cups, and bowls), saddle equipment (bridles, lariats, saddles, and bags used as horseshoes), and other items (cradles, knife sheaths, drumheads, rattles, musical instruments, cases, cages, horse troughs, and fencing).

War shields were made from the tough hide on a bull's neck. Indians repeatedly heated a round piece of the hide until it shrunk into a very thick, hardened circle. Stretched over a frame, rawhide shields formed a protection that could stop arrows and slow the speed of bullets. When covered with paintings that related to a warrior's personal vision, shields were also valuable religious items.

Some tribes made boats from rawhide. They made these “bull boats” by draping the fresh hide from a buffalo bull over a circular frame of willow branches. As it dried, the hide shrank around the frame and made a watertight shell. Tribes used them to haul people and supplies across the Missouri River. Several bull boats tied together could maneuver river rapids like a giant rubber raft.

Indians also used rawhide in place of nails, glue, and heavy string. By wrapping wet rawhide around a rock and a handle, they had a very strong club when the skin dried and shrank.

People scraped buffalo hair off hides, cut it from the animals’ heads, or gathered it where animals had shed. They braided it into ropes for belts, cords, and lariats. Some Indians spun it into yarn and wove blankets, scarves, bags, and wallets. They also used buffalo hair to line moccasins, pad sandals, or stuff dolls and balls for children. Women sometimes braided it into earrings, bracelets, or garters. Some men used strands of buffalo hair to make their own hair look longer.

Thread was made from buffalo sinew. This tough material came from long tendons along the buffalo’s backbone. Indians pulled strands of the tendon with their teeth, softened them in water, and twisted them to make a tough thread. They used it to sew tipi covers and clothing, and tie feathers and points to arrowshafts. They also braided it to make bowstrings and ropes.

Buffalo horns were used to make everyday items like spoons, ladles, drinking cups, dishes, arrowpoints, heads for war clubs, and containers for gunpowder. Pieces of horn were used as decorations for war bonnets, emblems, and spinning tops. One tribe cooked horns to make an eye medicine. The Cheyenne used buffalo horns for bows, which they felt were better than those made from wood.

Indians used buffalo bones for many items: war clubs, knives, arrowpoints, pipes, parts of saddles, dice, and many tools (spades, hoes, hide fleshers, arrow making tools, and paint brushes).

Buffalo teeth were used as necklaces and decorations on clothing. Hoofs were sometimes made into spoons. Most of the time, hoofs, eyes, small pieces of hide, and other parts of the animal not used for other purposes, were made into glue.

There were not many buffalo “leftovers.” The stomach was used either as a cooking pot or to store dried meat. In winter the stomachs were filled with snow which melted for drinking water. Buffalo bladders, large intestines, and the sac around the heart also became containers for food and water. Buffalo tongues were either eaten or used as hair brushes, tails were used as flyswatters, and the small intestines were eaten or used as string.

Indians, like pioneers, used dried buffalo chips as fuel. Shredded dung was used to help start wood fires or light pipe tobacco.

The Plains Indians used the buffalo for anything and everything. The buffalo was by far their most useful resource. The importance of the buffalo to the Plains Indians tribes cannot be underestimated. Large scale buffalo hunting was devastating for the Indians. The buffalo population was radically reduced very quickly. The Plains Indians had relied on the buffalo for food, clothing, shelter, tools, and warmth. All the essentials of living. This was taken away from them.

Source: David Webb, *Indians in Kansas*

Vocabulary

Bison – A large shaggy-maned animal with short horns. Commonly known as a buffalo.

Bone awl – Used to make holes in hide so that sinew could be threaded through.

Bowstring – Made from sinew and attached to a stick to make a weapon.

Buffalo – A large shaggy-maned animal with short horns. The true buffalo is found only in Asia.

Flyswatter – Made from a buffalo tail; used to keep flies away.

Hoe – A farming tool made from a buffalo scapula bone (shoulder blade) and tied to a long stick.

Lariat – A long light rope, lasso.

Rawhide – Hide that has not been processed but has been left to dry and become hard.

Scapula – Shoulder blade of a buffalo; used to make a hoe.

Scraper – Made from the leg bone of a buffalo; used to remove the fur, meat, and fat from a buffalo hide.

Shield – Made from rawhide; used for protection in battle.

Sinew – Tendon found along the backbone of the buffalo and other animals; used for sewing thread.

Travois – A carrier pulled by a horse, dog, or person. Two poles are crossed and tied at one end, a leather pad is attached to the other.

Activities

1. Show students graphic #12 Single buffalo. What is the name of this animal? Have any of the students ever seen one before? If so, where? (In the wild, at the zoo, on television) What do they already know about the buffalo? (State animal, previous study or units already completed) Do they know of any Native American uses of the buffalo? (Food, clothing, to make tipis, etc.) Pass around pieces of buffalo fur. How does the fur feel? (Soft, warm) What could it be used for? (Clothing, gloves, blanket, to keep warm)
2. Read aloud to the students from the book *Buffalo* by Emilie Lepthien. You may read the whole book or just pages 22-23. (Sections: “The Buffalo Hunt,” “Horses Change the Buffalo Hunt,” “Buffalo and a Way of Life”)

3. Ask students the following questions about the book:
 - a. Describe ways in which the Indians hunted the buffalo. (Made the buffalo stampede over a cliff; disguised themselves as wolves; rode horses and used a bow and arrow) Show the photographs on pages 24, 25, 26, and 28 from the buffalo book as examples. Also show graphics #21 and #22.
 - b. Why was the buffalo so important to the Indian? (It provided food, clothing, shelter, weapons, and tools.)
 - c. Did the Indians waste any part of the buffalo? (No, they used all of the buffalo.)
 - d. Give some examples of how the buffalo hide was used by the Indians. (Clothing, tipis, blankets, shields, cooking pots, snowshoes, and boats) Show students the shield from the trunk and the photograph of a shield on page 31 of the buffalo book as examples. Also show the drum and beater, moccasin, parfleche, fur pouch, and buffalo bladder.
 - e. What were bones used for? (Tools)

Show students the scapula bone from the trunk. Explain that it would be made into a hoe. A color photograph of a hoe is on page 32 of the buffalo book. Show the students the scraper and the awl as two other examples.

Show students the sinew from the trunk. Explain that this tough material comes from long tendons along the buffalo's backbone. Indians pulled strands of the tendon from the animal with their teeth, softened them in water, and twisted them to make a tough thread. Ask students if they know what it was use for? (They used it to sew tipi covers and clothing, and tie feathers and points to arrows. They also wove it to make bowstrings and ropes.) Show students the back of the drum to show how sinew is used.

4. Students should now know that the buffalo was very important to Indian tribes. Reinforce the idea from the book that the buffalo was used for food, clothing, shelter, weapons, tools, and containers. The students should now try the exercise on worksheet #2 Uses of the buffalo. Under the headings food, clothing, shelter, weapons, tools, and containers, students should fill in the missing words which are all uses of the buffalo. Some letters have been provided to make this a little easier. There is also a graphic #38 Uses of the buffalo that may help students.
5. Read the next section of *Buffalo*, "The Great Buffalo Slaughter," pages 33-39. Discuss with the class the importance of the buffalo and the reduction in the buffalo population that took place in the late nineteenth century. In pairs students should imagine themselves to be nineteenth century Indians and to think about the importance of the buffalo. They should list some reasons why the buffalo is important in their lives. Now ask them to discuss with their partners their feelings

about the reduction in the numbers of buffalo. Encourage them to consider effects on their own lifestyles as well as thinking about why the population is reduced and who is to blame. What action can they take to remedy the situation?

6. Discuss with the students what they would do without their local department store, hardware store, furniture store, supermarket, drugstore, and lumberyard. If a group of people took away all these stores how would the students feel, what would they do about it?

Extended Activities

1. Research project

- a. In earlier times, why did the buffalo exist in such large numbers in this area? Compare the amount of grass needed to sustain cattle today with the amount needed to sustain buffalo herds.
- b. Find out the reasons why European hunters sought the buffalo, what uses did they have for the buffalo? How was this different from the way the Indians use the buffalo? What were the short and long-term effects for the Indian population?

2. Wordsearch

Trunk Resources

Worksheets

#3a and #3b: Wordsearch

Teacher Resources

Photocopy a worksheet for each student

Activity

- a. Decide which worksheet #3a or 3b is the most appropriate for your students.
- b. Divide students into groups of four. Have them study the word list on the wordsearch you have chosen. Have each group discuss the list. Are there any words anyone doesn't understand? The group should then attempt to complete the wordsearch. Words can be found either vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. They may be written forwards or backwards.