Native American Heritage Month 2026

6-8 Activities



This packet includes...

- Game On, Nation On
- Helping the Earth
- Future Feature
- Native Names Across the U.S.

Native American Heritage Month honors the rich histories, cultures, and contributions of the hundreds of distinct Native nations across the United States. It is a time to learn about and celebrate the ongoing cultures of Native peoples today, not just their history. This month's activities invite students to learn more about how Native Americans continue to shape this country.



Reading List

These middle-grades books by Upper Skagit tribal member **Christine Day** explore Native identity through the lens of preteen characters searching for belonging and understanding. Search for them in your local library!

I Can Make This Promise is an American Indian Youth Literature Award Honor Book about adoption and identity.

We Still Belong centers on the themes of community, family, and finding your voice.

She Persisted: Maria Tallchief is a biography of America's first prima ballerina and Osage member Maria Tallchief.

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Read the information below. Then, choose one of the two activities on the following pages to show what you learned about the history of lacrosse and the debate over Olympic recognition for the Haudenosaunee Nationals.



Picture a field stretching for a mile, with hundreds of players sprinting across it at once. There's no scoreboard, and the game might not end until tomorrow. That's lacrosse, exactly as it was played for centuries before any European reached North America.

Lacrosse is widely considered the oldest organized sport in North America, with roots tracing back at least 900 years. It was created and played by several Native nations, most notably the **Haudenosaunee** (ho-dee-no-SHO-nee), originally five united nations in the Northeast, along with the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw nations in the Southeast.

The word "lacrosse" isn't Native American at all. It was coined in 1636 by French missionary Jean de Brébeuf, who thought the curved sticks resembled a bishop's ceremonial staff, or *la crosse.* The game already had its own names. The Onondaga, one of the founding Haudenosaunee nations, called it *dehuntshigwa'es*, "they bump hips," while the Cherokee called theirs *da-nah-wah'uwsdi*, "little war," since it trained young men in strength and courage. It was also woven into spiritual life, played to thank the Creator, to heal the sick, and to settle disputes between nations without going to war.

That history isn't locked in the past. The Haudenosaunee Nationals are internationally ranked, representing the Haudenosaunee (which grew to six nations in 1722). The Haudenosaunee are a sovereign nation, meaning they govern themselves. Because of this, players travel to compete using Haudenosaunee passports.

Now they want to play at the 2028 Olympics under their own flag. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) generally only admits teams that represent countries recognized by the United Nations, and the Haudenosaunee are not a UN-recognized country.

Puerto Rico and a few other places also compete under their own flags without UN recognition because they joined before the IOC changed its rule in 1996. World Lacrosse, the sport's governing body, has recognized the Haudenosaunee as a full member nation since the 1980s. The question is whether Olympic eligibility should depend on UN recognition, on recognition by a sport's own governing body, or on something else. What do you think?

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Read the information on the previous page about lacrosse and the Haudenosaunee Nationals. Then, complete the activity below to show what you learned.

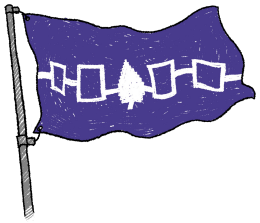
Choose Your Task: Break the News
Imagine you're a sports reporter covering the biggest debate in lacrosse: Should the Haudenosaunee Nationals get to compete in the 2028 Olympics under their own flag? Choose how you want to share your report.

Your report must answer these three questions:

1. Who created lacrosse, and how old is the sport?
2. What is the big debate between the IOC rules and the Haudenosaunee Nationals?
3. What is your professional opinion on how the problem should be solved? Use at least one specific detail from the reading (like the Puerto Rico exception or World Lacrosse's recognition) to explain why you think so.

Pick one way to present it:

- Record it: Make a video or audio clip, about 60 seconds long, speaking clearly into the microphone.
- Write it: Write your report as a short news article, about eight to 10 sentences.
- Draw it: Turn your report into a comic strip or illustrated news page with three to four drawings that show your story in order on your own paper. Add a caption under each drawing to explain what's happening.



In your report you should...

- Use at least two facts from the reading
- Clearly answer all three questions above

Planning: Use this space to help answer the three questions before you begin your report.

1. Who created lacrosse, and how old is it?

2. What's the big debate?

3. My opinion, and the detail from the reading that backs it up:

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Native American nations are making a difference by protecting wildlife and caring for the environment. In this activity, you'll explore how three different Native nations identified problems and found ways to help.

1. Below and on the next few pages, read about three Native nations and how they each helped solve a problem.
2. Review the takeaways and answer the reflection questions that follow.
3. Write a letter to one of the nations thanking them for their positive impact.

Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians

In Odawa tradition, eagles hold a sacred role: It's believed that when tobacco is offered in prayer, an eagle carries that prayer up to the Creator. Eagles aren't just admired from a distance; they're a living connection between people and something greater.



"DSC_7319" by Jim Sorbie is licensed under CC BY 2.0.
https://www.flickr.com/photos/78833582@N00/3069488563

Rebecca Lessard holding an eagle

That belief is the reason the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians built the Migizi Eagle Aviary and Rehabilitation Center in Michigan. Built through a more than 20-year partnership with wildlife rehabilitator Rebecca Lessard, it became the first tribal eagle aviary and raptor rehabilitation center east of the Mississippi River. The aviary gives a permanent home to eagles and other raptors that were injured or orphaned and can never be released back into the wild.

One Takeaway: The Odawa people cared deeply about protecting eagles, so they took action as a group to find a solution.

Reflect: What's something that means a lot to you, your family, or your community? What are some ways you could show that you care about it? Draw or write about it!

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Ute Mountain Ute Tribe

The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe's biology program monitors big game animals, including mule deer, elk, pronghorn, and gray wolves across tribal land. But tracking wild animals accurately is difficult and expensive. Standard methods like aerial surveys and GPS collars are often unaffordable, which often means less frequent, less reliable data.

The tribe partnered with Wildlands Network to test a different approach: using low-cost tools like drones and hidden trail cameras to gather footage that would provide more accurate animal population data without the high price tag. The information they collect is used to set hunting regulations that keep animal populations healthy long-term.



Two red wolves caught on a Wildlands Network camera in 2015

One Takeaway: The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe had to be creative to solve their difficult tracking problem.

Reflect: Think of a time you solved a problem creatively. What was the problem, and how did you respond to it? Draw or write about it below.

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White Mountain Apache Tribe

The Apache trout is a fish species that only exists in the cold streams of Arizona's White Mountains. By 1955, so few Apache trout remained that the species was in serious danger. The U.S. government didn't federally recognize the species as endangered until 1967, but the White Mountain Apache Tribe didn't wait for the government to intervene. They closed fishing on their own tribal waters to protect the remaining fish.

Once the crisis was recognized more widely, the tribe helped form the Apache Trout Recovery Team in 1975. Partnering with the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Forest Service, they worked for decades to replace old, broken stream barriers so nonnative fish couldn't invade Apache trout habitats. After nearly 70 years of sustained effort, the Apache trout population recovered and was officially removed from the endangered species list in 2024.



"Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland traveled to Arizona, where she joined the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to announce the delisting of the Apache Trout from the Endangered Species list in September 2024 - 4," U.S. Department of the Interior, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Secretary_of_the_Interior_Deb_Haaland_traveled_to_Arizona,_where_she_joined_the_U.S._Fish_and_Wildlife_Service_to_announce_the_delisting_of_the_Apache_Trout_from_the_Endangered_Species_list_in_September_2024_-_4.jpg#/media/File:Secretary_of_the_Interior_Deb_Haaland_traveled_to_Arizona,_where_she_joined_the_U.S._Fish_and_Wildlife_Service_to_announce_the_delisting_of_the_Apache_Trout_from_the_Endangered_Species_list_in_September_2024_-_4.jpg

Politician Deb Haaland, the first Native American Secretary of the Interior, announces that Apache trout have been removed from the endangered species list.

One Takeaway: The White Mountain Apache Tribe noticed a problem early and did not wait to take action.

Reflect: Draw or write about a time when acting early to solve a problem made a positive difference.

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Pick one of the nations you read about, and write a letter thanking them for their environmental conservation work. Your letter should include...

- An explanation of the problem and how they helped solve it, in your own words
- Why it matters to you
- A genuine question that you're curious about and would want to ask them

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Read about the four people featured in this section. As you read, think about…

- What field or career each person is known for
- How their background, culture, interests, or identity shaped their path
- What kind of impact they've had

On the next page, you'll write your own profile, imagining your own future impact and story.



"Sean Sherman at the Tatanka Truck 2021-10-09" by August Schwerdfeger, CC BY 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sean_Sherman_at_the_Tatanka_Truck_2021-10-09.jpg

Sean Sherman is an Oglala Lakota Sioux chef who is passionate about cooking with traditional ingredients. Growing up on the Pine Ridge Reservation, he learned to hunt and gather food from the land. Sherman opened a restaurant and food truck that serve Indigenous dishes and started a nonprofit organization that works to make Native foods more accessible. Sherman's work has inspired a larger movement to celebrate and preserve Native food traditions across the country.



"Michaela Goade 2022 Texas Book Festival" by Larry D. Moore, CC BY 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michaela_Goade_2022_Texas_Book_Festival.jpg

Michaela Goade is a Tlingit and Haida illustrator known for her vibrant artwork in children's books. She incorporates bold colors and patterns inspired by Native art into her illustrations. Goade illustrated *We Are Water Protectors*, which won the Caldecott Medal, one of the most prestigious awards in children's literature. She also wrote and illustrated her own book, *Berry Song*. Goade's work has helped bring greater visibility to Native stories and artists within children's publishing.



"Sharice Davids" by Kristie Boyd; U.S. House Office of Photography, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sharice_Davids.jpg

Sharice Davids is a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation and represents Kansas in the United States House of Representatives. Before running for office, she trained and competed as a professional mixed martial arts fighter. She later earned a law degree and worked as a lawyer on issues affecting Native American communities. In 2018, Davids became one of the first Native American women elected to Congress. Her election has encouraged greater Native American representation in government and politics.



"Herrington" by NASA, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Herrington.jpg

John Herrington is a member of the Chickasaw Nation and a retired astronaut. He became a pilot in the United States Navy before joining NASA. In 2002, Herrington became the first Native American to fly in space, serving as a mission specialist aboard the space shuttle *Endeavour*. During the mission, he carried the Chickasaw Nation flag and performed three spacewalks. Herrington's achievements have inspired greater interest in STEM careers among Native American youth.

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Using the profiles you read on the previous page, **create** your own profile about your future self. Imagine a future version of yourself, what you'll be doing, and the impact it will have on your community. Complete the table to organize your thoughts, then choose one of the options below to present your profile.

Who You Are What are you interested in? What are you good at?	
Your Future Career Think about the interests and skills you listed above. What career might allow you to use those strengths?	
What You Do What does your imagined work look like day to day in the future?	
Your Impact What difference do you hope to make in your community or the world?	

Now, choose one option to **create** your own profile about your future self:

- ❏ **Magazine Cover:** Create a magazine cover featuring your future self, with at least three short descriptions about your work and impact.
- ❏ **Timeline:** Build a visual timeline from now to your imagined future, with four to six labeled milestones that describe your achievements.
- ❏ **Interview:** Write four to five short questions and answers as if someone were interviewing your future self.
- ❏ **Video or Audio Segment:** Record yourself presenting your future profile, like a news segment or podcast.
- ❏ **Slide Deck:** Create a short slide presentation that includes information about your future accomplishments.

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There's a good chance that your town or state, or one near you, has a name with Native origins! Some examples are on the map below, but there are many more all over the United States.

In this activity, you will learn more about these locations and what their names mean. Please get a trusted adult's permission to answer the questions that require online research. **Before you begin, color in the state that you live in!**



A town name with Native American origins

Why do so many towns and states have Native names?

Since Native people were the first to live in many places on this land, they were usually the first to name them. Once Europeans began colonizing North America, they often learned these names from Native groups and took them, or in some cases, Europeans simply referred to the areas by the Native groups that lived there. Hundreds of these names stuck, and we still use versions of them today. Over time, many have changed spelling or pronunciation, but their origins remain rooted in Native languages.

Look at the map. Which town with a Native name is closest to you?

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What do these names mean?

Some towns are named directly after a Native nation that is or was located there, like Cherokee, North Carolina, or Waco, Texas. Other places have names that mean something in a Native language. Usually, they describe the area in some way.

Check out the examples below. Then, choose another town on the map, or pick a different one, to research. Fill in the last row of the table with what you learn.

Town Name	State	Native Nation	Meaning
Punxsutawney	Pennsylvania	Lenape	Often translated to “town of sand flies” or “mosquito town”
Tallahassee	Florida	Muscogee	Often translated to “old town” or “old fields”
South Lake Tahoe	California	Washoe	“Tahoe” comes from a phrase often translated to “edge of the lake”

Did you know that 27 out of 50 states have names with Native origins? Look up which Native nations these state names come from and their meanings.

State Name	Native Nation	Meaning
Texas		
Massachusetts		
Mississippi		

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