

Learning the Land

Summary

If someone asked you about where you live, what would you tell them? Would you give an address, refer to streets or buildings? What else do you know about where you live? The types of plants and animals that live here? The weather patterns? The people who live here?

What about the history of where you live? All these elements— and more — make up the qualities and character of the land we live on.

Use this activity sheet to get to know where you live!

Background

Though we might think of our cities and ways of life as being human-made, they are tied to the features of the land itself. Every place is unique, and became that way through the combination of the natural history, climate, and human activity that occurred there over time.

The Museum of Life and Science is located in the city of Durham, North Carolina. How did we get to be where we are now, and what does the land have to do with it?

Indigenous people, the first people to live on this land, have made their homes in this area for tens of thousands of years! Centuries ago, before European colonization, this area was a crossroads for many diverse Indigenous cultures. The land supported both hunter-gatherer and agricultural ways of life, and numerous peoples from at least four different language groups traded extensively along the Great Trading Path, a network of trails and paths that run southward from what is now Virginia, through what is now Durham, to Georgia.

Footpaths were necessary for transporting goods in this area because the abrupt rise in elevation from the Coastal Plain into the Piedmont made most major rivers unnavigable.

Later, European settlers also used these trade routes and the Great Trading Path became a wagon road. In the present day, much of I-85 follows roughly the same route as this thousand-year-old Indigenous trading footpath. Over time, a network of settlements grew around these paths, becoming what we call the Piedmont Crescent. This crescent laid the groundwork for the biggest modern cities: the Triangle area of North Carolina!

Everything—our history, our cities and structures, our daily lives—comes back to the land we live on. There are many ways to learn more about this land and commit to protecting it for future generations! This activity has learners contextualize where they live on a map, then get their hands dirty and investigate their surroundings.

Indigenous Peoples' Day

Procedure

1. Choose a location where you spend a lot of your time. This could be your home, your school, the Museum, a local park or library... Select any place connected to an address that you can access in person to safely explore the land around it.
2. Find this location on a map. You might choose to do this by entering the address into Google Maps.
3. With your paper and drawing supplies, draw a simple map of this location. Include both human-made structures like buildings and roads, as well as natural features like trees or creeks. (See Example Map)



Example Map

4. Visit native-land.ca, a website that shows traditional Indigenous territories on modern maps. Enter the address of your location. (This site may be difficult to access on high-traffic days, like Indigenous Peoples' Day. You can still access the map through the free Native Land app.) Whose traditional Indigenous territories do you live on? The Museum is located on Occaneechi land. Are there multiple Indigenous groups with claims to the location you chose for your map? Different groups may have lived in this location at different times, or there may be multiple historical accounts. Modern understanding of borders, boundaries, and property are different than they may have been in the past. Label the traditional Indigenous territories on your map.
5. Time to head outside! Take your clear tape, your map, a metal spoon, a blank piece of paper, and a writing utensil to the location you drew on your map. You've seen this location from a mapmaker's point of view. Now you are standing on this land. Take a look around, use your senses—what do you see, hear, smell that cannot be shown on a map? What's beneath your feet, what details do you notice when you look closely?
6. Now we're going to (literally) scratch just beneath the surface of the land you're standing on. We want to get an understanding of the land that a map probably can't show us.
7. Pick a spot somewhere in the location of your choice. Ideally, choose a spot with some visible soil. Sit or stand in this spot and take a close look at the ground beneath you.

Materials

- Physical or virtual maps of the land you live on
- Internet access and device
- Paper
- Drawing materials
- Clear Tape (packing tape is best)
- Metal Spoon
- Ruler (Optional)
- Magnifier (Optional)

Preparation and Safety

This activity requires access to an outdoor space. Learners should explore with adult supervision. Be aware and respectful of people, insects, and animals who are also using the space.

Indigenous Peoples' Day

Procedure (continued)

8. Find that spot on your drawn map. Mark it on your map with a number one.
9. There may be some plants growing in the spot you chose. If so, gently use your spoon to “scoop” out the top layer of surface level plant roots to uncover no more than two square inches of dirt. Set the plants aside and replace them after you get your sample.
10. Tear off a piece of tape that is about as large as your patch of exposed soil.
11. Gently press the tape sticky-side-down onto the exposed soil, carefully pressing it down so every part of the tape makes contact with the ground.
12. Lift the tape back up off the ground by the corners. It should have a bunch of soil stuck to it!
13. Lay the piece of tape dirt-side up on your blank paper (tape it down if desired). The white background should help you see some details of your soil sample. What do you observe about your sample? What color is the soil? How large are the clumps or grains of dirt? Is the soil wet, dry? Is there any plant matter on your sample? Any pebbles? Clay? Sand? (See Image)
14. Label this sample with a number one, then choose another spot on your map to label with a number two.
15. Walk to that spot and repeat the process, gathering another soil sample from this area.

Repeat as many times as desired, making sure to mark the spot where you collected your sample on your map. How does the soil change (or not) in different areas of your chosen location? Why? Do these characteristics of the land affect how you or others use this land? Could that change in the future?

Science is an important tool for understanding the world. Gathering this data and practicing your scientific thinking is a step toward further listening, learning, and growing as stewards of this land— for the good of everyone we share it with.



Image

Further Exploration

- The land we live on is more than the soil beneath our feet! Using an app like [iNaturalist](#) or [Seek](#), you can catalogue the living things from different areas of your chosen location.
- There are many different ways to understand the world. Learn more about Traditional Ecological Knowledge through an Indigenous ecological lens, along with other Native American science curriculum [here](#).
- You can learn more about the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation [here](#).

Other Resources and References

[UNC Chapel Hill's Research Laboratory of Archaeology maps and information](#)

[UNC Chapel Hill's American Indian Center resources](#)

[NC Office of State Archaeology articles](#)

[NCPedia Articles](#)