

UNIT 3

ETHICS AND CULTURE

Dispelling Negative Views of Rattlesnakes



Ethics and Culture

Activity 1.1: If You Were a Snake

Science and Technology - Life Systems

Grade 4, Habitats and Communities
Grade 7, Interactions Within
Ecosystems

Language Arts - Writing

Grade 4
Grade 7

Activity 1.2: Legends and Myths

Science and Technology - Life Systems

Grade 4, Habitats and Communities
Grade 7, Interactions Within
Ecosystems

Language Arts -Reading

Grade 4
Grade 7

Language Arts - Writing

Grade 4
Grade 7

Activity 1.3: Missing Links

Science and Technology - Life Systems

Grade 2, Growth and Changes in
Animals
Grade 4, Habitats and Communities

Language Arts - Reading

Grade 2
Grade 4

ACTIVITY 1.1

IF YOU WERE A SNAKE

What would it be like to be a snake? Read each story aloud. Have the students close their eyes and imagine themselves as the snake in the situations below.

Scene One

Imagine that you are a massasauga rattlesnake living in a marshy area. It is a warm day and you are curled up on a rock near the shore. The waves lap against the rock and you feel calm. Earlier today you were lucky enough to catch a field mouse; you are happy and full. It is nice to know that you do not need to hunt for another week or so. The sun is getting very hot so you slither into the tall grass and wildflowers to cool off. Although there are a lot of people that live near your home, they rarely bother you as you take great care to avoid them. However, as you creep in the grass you hear a new sound. Heavy machinery and shouting people are coming toward you. A construction crew has arrived to build a road over your home. The crew walks by, but luckily your pattern camouflages you in the grass.

What is your first reaction?

What do you do next? Where will you go? What do you think will happen to your habitat during construction and after the road is built? How can you live in the same area where people live?

Scene Two

It is a quiet July night and the air is warm and humid. You leave your rocky shelter in search of a midnight meal. It has been a while since your last meal and you use your tongue to pick up the scent of mice. You coil up beside a log where a strong scent tells you mice have been here. Although it is dark, you are able to "see" using your heat sensitive pits, which are able to pick up the heat from other animals. You sense a mouse somewhere up ahead, but there are other animals nearby. The mouse is eating a granola bar next to a large building not far away. The other animals are now moving toward you. You rattle your tail to warn the large animal that you are there. Although you do not realize it, you are in a campground with a camper walking around in the dark without a flashlight.

What will you do? Although the presence of big people makes it dangerous here, there is also lots of food. How do you feel?

Scene Three

You can smell the path of the local mice as they make their way through the berry patch. You find a spot along the trail and are hoping that a mouse will soon scurry by. You are very relaxed. It is a beautiful day and you know that sooner or later a mouse will come your way. In the meantime you are enjoying the warm summer day. You are loosely coiled in the grass, sheltered by a lush juniper. Your pattern blends perfectly with the shadows and with the light and dark groundcover; it is the perfect hiding spot. Suddenly you see the shape of a large dog running towards you.

Do you move away from this dangerous creature? Do you rattle a warning so the dog knows you are there? Or, do you sit still knowing that your pattern will help you remain undetected in the shadows?

Teachers may wish to have students take a moment to write a journal entry about their thoughts.

ACTIVITY 1.2

LEGENDS AND MYTHS

Over the ages, many ancient cultures created legends and myths, sometimes just to tell a story, or sometimes to explain a natural phenomenon. For centuries, snakes have been the focus of many such myths and legends. Native North American cultures such as Ojibway, Apache, and Chickasaw, to name a few, tell many stories involving snakes, particularly the rattlesnake. Many tribes associate rattlesnakes with healing powers and with the weather. The elaborate "snake dance," performed by the Hopi tribe of the American Southwest is an example of this belief.

Included here are two short Native American legends. The first one is about a woman who falls in love with a snake. The second one regards the significance of the rattlesnake to the Ojibway.

Read these legends together as a class. After reading these legends, you may wish to have the students draw pictures to represent the stories. Students can then write their own myth or legend, using the massasauga rattlesnake as a character. The legend should depict the rattlesnake in a positive light. Explain, for example, how the rattlesnake got its rattle, its colour pattern, or its heat pits. General themes to consider include creation, celebration, vision, or survival.

Legend #1

Once there was a young girl and she fell in love with a snake. This snake lived in a lake, and when the young girl came there she would sing and he would crawl out of the water and shed his skin and become a handsome young man. They would then be together until evening, when he would crawl into his skin and return to the lake and the girl return to her people. This kept on for some time until the girl's family became suspicious that all was not right, for the girl was gone almost every day. Finally they decided to follow her and find out what she was doing. Accordingly, the next day when she went off she was followed by one of the family, and he heard her sing beside the lake and saw the snake come out and shed his skin and become a man. The next day the family had a meeting to decide what to do, for they could not kill any snake so powerful that he could change into a man. After a long time a plan was decided upon. The next time the girl went out she was followed by her brother. When she came to the lake the girl began to sing, and the snake crawled out and shed its skin. After a while the two became sleepy and lay down on the moss to sleep. The brother then crept out of his hiding place and made off with the snakeskin. That evening when the young man went to return to his skin he could not find it. He and the girl hunted without success. When the sun went down, the young man lost the power to turn back into a snake and remained a man. They went to the girls village and were married. The skin meanwhile turned into black and white wampum.

Legend #2

According to an Ojibway elder of Shawanaga First Nation, the rattlesnake holds very special meaning and purpose to other living things.

The rattlesnake is a plant protector. It looks after all plant life to prevent over-harvesting and over-consumption: “the snake buzzed and people left so berries or plants would have some remaining for the bears and birds, or whoever else required them.” Thus, the snakes are a “conservation mechanism tying in the balance of nature.”

The rattlesnake is a medicinal entity:

“In the old times, medicine men used to look for a cloudless sky in the summer and go to Georgian Bay or a lake in the territory on a sand spit leading out onto the lake. They would conjure the **mshibzhi** who was the snake in another form to proffer medicines to the community. They had to pick a clear day so the thunder spirits would not endanger the snake who came ashore to help the medicine man. The big snake would come and lay across the sand spit and the medicine man would advise the snake of the illness in the community and ask the snake for a cure. Wherever the rattlesnake twitched its body, the medicine man took a wooden spatula and bowl and scraped the skin off that area of the rattlesnake’s body. The medicine man took the potion from the snake back to who was ill and the person got better.”

Lastly, the rattlesnake is a spiritual entity. It is perceived to have cosmic knowledge.

ACTIVITY 1.3 MISSING LINKS

Fill in the missing letters to complete the story.

One sun_y summer day I was wa_king through the w_ods. The birds were si_ging and an _range butterfly landed on my shoulder. It was my _ucky day. I looked over at a large f_at ro_k. It looked like an o_dinary gr_y rock. Suddenly I noti_ed a beautiful _nake cur_ed up on the rock. I was car_ful not to get any closer but I sto_d adm_ring the sna_e as the snake wa_ched me. The snake was not very b_g. It was grey and had b_ack s_ots on its bac_. I reme_bered seeing a pi_ture of this s_ake at sc_ool. It might have been a ma__asauga ratt__snake. Eventually the snake un_urled itself and s_owly slit_ered o_f the rock and under a l_g. I went o_er and touc_ed the rock. It was ver_ warm. I kept on walking carefully in the woods but I sta_ed away from the log where the snake wa_hi_ing. It was f_n to watc_ the snake war_ing up in the su_. It really was my luc_y day! I visited the r_ck several t_mes over the _ummer but ne_ver saw the _nake again. I hope that one day you will be lucky enough to see a snake too!

Draw a picture to represent the story you just completed.



ACTIVITY 1.3

MISSING LINKS (Continued)

One sunny summer day I was walking through the woods. The birds were singing and an orange butterfly landed on my shoulder. It was my lucky day. I looked over at a large flat rock. It looked like an ordinary grey rock. Suddenly I noticed a beautiful snake curled up on the rock. I was careful not to get any closer but I stood admiring the snake as the snake watched me. The snake was not very big. It was grey and had black spots on its back. I remembered seeing a picture of this snake at school. It might have been a massasauga rattlesnake. Eventually the snake uncurled itself and slowly slithered off the rock and under a log. I went over and touched the rock. It was very warm. I kept on walking carefully in the woods but I stayed away from the log where the snake was hiding. It was fun to watch the snake warming up in the sun. It really was my lucky day! I visited the rock several times over the summer but never saw the snake again. I hope that one day you will be lucky enough to see a snake too!