



SOCIAL SCIENCES

Salmon's Upstream Journey

ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS

- **Since Time Immemorial**
- **Lifeways**

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will understand

- the challenges salmon face swimming upstream,
- salmon's importance to Columbia River Basin Tribes, and
- many Oregon Tribes planned their lives around the salmon's journey

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What challenges do salmon face when swimming upstream to return home?
- Why is the salmon's upstream journey sacred to Oregon Tribes?

REQUIRED TIME

- 30 minutes

Overview

Students will embark on an active salmon journey, using movement to navigate upstream challenges while learning how Columbia River Basin Tribes have always understood and respected the salmon's incredible journey. Through obstacle movements, students will experience the determination of salmon returning home and understand why this journey has been sacred to Oregon Tribes since time immemorial.

Background for Teachers

The salmon's upstream spawning journey is central to the cultural understanding and seasonal practices of Columbia River Basin Tribes in Oregon. These include the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and historically the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians and Grand Ronde (whose traditional territories included Columbia River tributaries). Adult salmon return from the ocean to the exact streams where they were born, navigating waterfalls, rapids, predators, and human-made obstacles.



Columbia River Basin Tribes have always organized their seasonal rounds around salmon runs. They learned which salmon would arrive when, where they would travel, and what obstacles they would face. Traditional fishing sites like Celilo Falls, Cascade Falls, and The Dalles were chosen because they were natural obstacles where salmon could be caught respectfully as they made their difficult journey upstream.

For these Tribes, the salmon's journey upstream represents more than biology - it symbolizes returning home, determination, and the cyclical nature of life. The First Salmon ceremonies practiced by Columbia River Tribes honor not just the fish, but the incredible journey it undertook to reach the people. The Umatilla, Warm Springs, and other Tribes maintain treaty-reserved fishing rights along the Columbia River system.

This lesson emphasizes how Indigenous knowledge systems across multiple Tribes have always included a deep understanding of natural processes, and how the physical challenges of salmon connect to spiritual and cultural meanings shared across Columbia River tribal communities.

STANDARDS

Oregon Social Science Standards

- 1.6.** Identify people, places, and events in the United States and Oregon history.
- 1.9.** Describe how people live in the community and how communities have changed over time.
- 1.13.** Identify ways people use natural resources in the community.

Oregon Science Standards

- 1-LS1-1.** Use materials to design a solution to a human problem by mimicking how plants and/or animals use their external parts to help them survive, grow, and meet their needs.

Oregon Health & Physical Education Standards

- PE.1.MC.** Demonstrate basic locomotor skills in a variety of movement situations.

Considerations for Teachers

Practices

While teaching this lesson, the following principles can help guide your decision-making and engagement with students.

- Focus on teaching the Essential Understandings, Since Time Immemorial and Lifeways, through the salmon's upstream journey.

Salmon's Upstream Journey



- When sharing content with students, address the "why" not just the "what" - explain why this journey is sacred and meaningful to Oregon Tribes.
- Highlight how tribal traditional knowledge includes deep understanding of salmon behavior and the connection between physical and spiritual journeys.
- Ensure movement activities are inclusive and can be adapted for all students' physical abilities.

Assessment

During this lesson, observe and listen to students during discussions and movement activities to determine how their learning is progressing. Write down what you notice about what students say and do in relation to the success criteria. Use this formative information to provide feedback to students and plan next steps.

At the end of the lesson, provide students with an opportunity to reflect on their learning through a self-assessment.

Success Criteria

Students will

- Navigate upstream salmon journey obstacles through movement
- Name challenges salmon face swimming upstream

KEY WORDS and IDEAS

- **Upstream:** Swimming against the flow of water, toward where rivers begin.
- **Navigate:** Find a way through or around obstacles.
- **Rapids:** Fast-moving, rough water.
- **Spawning:** When salmon return to where they were born to lay eggs.
- **Obstacles:** Things that block the way or make travel difficult.
- **Journey:** A long trip with a purpose.

MATERIALS

What materials are needed for students to engage in this activity?

- Video of salmon run
- Objects to create the salmon journey course
- Student self-assessment



- Explain how Columbia River Basin Tribes have always known about salmon journeys
- Talk about the connection between salmon's determination to return home and tribal values in their own words

Lesson Activities

Opening

Time: 10 minutes

Step 1:

Gather students and introduce them to the topic. Tell students that today they are going to learn about a fish called salmon and how it is important to Native American Tribes living on the Columbia River.

Say to students, "Salmon are born in streams in the mountains. They swim to the ocean to grow big and strong. But then something amazing happens - they remember exactly where they were born and swim all the way back upstream to that same spot. This is called a salmon run! Today we are going to learn more about salmon and then pretend to be on a salmon run."

Step 2:

Watch a clip from the video about the salmon run and Indigenous knowledge by Oregon Public Broadcasting, [How salmon shaped the Northwest](#). Show the video clip from 3:29 - 5:13 minutes.

Debrief the video with students. Ask students questions such as, "Why do Native peoples in Oregon believe they need to take care of the salmon?" and "How do you think salmon bodies help them survive their journey?"

Before answering questions, students can take some time to think, share with a peer, and then with the whole group. For the whole group setting, allow 3-4 responses.

Step 3:

Connect to tribal knowledge. Say to students, "Oregon Tribes along the Columbia River and its streams have always known about this incredible journey. For thousands and thousands of years, Tribes like the Warm Springs, Umatilla, and others watched salmon

Salmon's Upstream Journey



swim upstream and planned their fishing around when salmon would arrive at different places."

Step 4:

Share the essential question, learning outcomes, success criteria and key words and ideas with students to provoke their thinking, build background knowledge, and clarify expectations.

Main Activity

Time: 20 minutes

Step 1:

Set Up the Salmon Journey Course. Create stations around the room or outdoor space representing upstream obstacles:

- **Rocky Rapids:** Zigzag path with cones or markers
- **Waterfall Jump:** Small step or platform to step up onto
- **Deep Pool Rest:** Designated resting area - mat or some such
- **Narrow Canyon:** Space between two desks to squeeze through
- **Swift Current:** Area where students swim against imaginary current with strong arm movements
- **Home Stream:** Final destination with "spawning ground" circle.

Step 2:

Engage students in the Great Salmon Journey. Students become salmon swimming upstream, navigating each obstacle. Explain to students that they will be doing their own version of a salmon run to get a sense of what it might be like for the salmon. Guide students through the stations using the following prompts.

- **Start at Ocean** (classroom entrance): "You are strong adult salmon. You've lived in the ocean for years, but now you feel the call to return home. Columbia River Tribes know you're coming - they've been watching for signs."



- **Rocky Rapids Navigation:** Students zigzag through markers using strong swimming arm motions. "Swim carefully around the rocks! Native fishers know salmon must work hard here."
- **Waterfall Jump:** Students step up onto a platform, then jump down (safely) or jump over a line. "This is where Tribes would use dipnets at places like Celilo Falls - they knew salmon would be tired after jumping waterfalls."
- **Deep Pool Rest:** Students rest briefly in the rest area. "Even salmon need to rest. Native people understand that salmon need deep pools to gather strength."
- **Narrow Canyon Squeeze:** Students carefully move through a narrow space. "Squeeze through the narrow canyon. Stay together like salmon families do."
- **Swift Current Challenge:** Students use very strong swimming motions against imaginary current. "Push through the strongest current! You're almost home!"
- **Home Stream Arrival:** Students reach the circle and curl up like spawning salmon. "You made it home! Right back to where you were born, just like your ancestors did."

Step 3:

Gather students in a reflection circle. Ask questions such as, "How did it feel to swim upstream like salmon? What was the hardest part?" "What were two challenges salmon face swimming upstream?"

Closing

Time: 5 minutes

Step 1:

Connect to the Essential Understandings. Share with students that the Columbia River Basin Tribes have watched salmon make this difficult journey since time immemorial and learned from it. They passed down this knowledge of salmon over generations, from grandparents to parents, and then to children. Oregon Tribes learned that salmon are incredibly strong and determined to return home.

Ask students to turn and talk and explain in their own words how Columbia River Basin Tribes have always known about salmon journeys.

Step 2:

Draw the connection. Tell students that just like salmon never give up swimming upstream to get home, Oregon Tribes have never given up maintaining their connection to salmon and their traditional ways."

Step 3:

Engage in a final movement. Have all students do one final "upstream swim" motion while saying: "Since time immemorial, Columbia River Tribes and salmon have made this journey together."

Ask students to turn and talk and share what Tribes learned from salmon.

Say to students, "Show me with your body how hard salmon work to swim upstream" (strong swimming motions). "Show me how Columbia River Tribes have always known salmon" (point to head for knowledge, then to heart for connection).

Step 4:

Ask students to self-assess using the success criteria. Either guide students through the process collectively, or have students complete the handout independently.



Additional Resources

- 1st grade [C'waam and Koptu lessons](#) by the Confederated Tribes
 - Presentation: [C'Waam and Koptu](#)
 - Video: [Saving the C'Waam](#)

Student Self-Assessment

Name:

Directions for teachers: Read aloud the lesson success criteria in the first column to students. Have them indicate if they were able to meet the criteria by marking it in the handout, with hand gestures, or by sharing aloud. Ask students to explain why they chose "not yet" or "yes" to a peer.

Success Criteria	Not Yet	Yes
		
I can navigate upstream salmon journey obstacles through movement.		
I can name challenges salmon face swimming upstream.		
I can explain how Columbia River Basin Tribes have always known about salmon journeys		
In my own words, I can talk about the connection between salmon's determination to return		

home and tribal values.		
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