

Wiigwaas Ciiman | Birch Canoe

Through this information and the activities/lessons, it is the hope you will build a sense of community, learn the importance of language, culture and gain some teachings of the land all while building a relationship with Wiigwaas Aatik, Betula Paperifera, or White (paper) Birch.

To the Anishnabe (Ojibway) people the canoe was an important tool for survival in the Northern Boreal forest. The environment/land (aki) was filled with rivers and lakes and these were the highways of the past and even the present. Most major cities and towns are located on a water route and it was these routes that made canoe travel so essential for trade, travel and collection of essential resources such as fish, fur and wild rice.

The birch bark canoe is a true example of innovative technological design. So innovative that the only real thing that has changed over time has been the building materials. The craft was light and could be picked up by one person and carried from lake to lake, easily maneuverable and propelled with a single blade, and easily repairable with materials found readily in the environment. The designs were varied as the land and the water and the purpose dictated the design and particularly the end profile of the canoe. The Ojibway had two main designs the Ojibway long nose (shown in the model in the lesson) used for harvesting wild rice. This bow style allowed them to cut through the rice and not knock it off the stalk before harvesting it. The other one often termed the old Ojibway style had a higher end profile used for lake travel and allowing the canoe to cut through the waves without taking on too much water. Many other design such as the Cree crooked canoe and the Passamaquoddy canoe (hear from a Passamaquoddy builder <https://youtu.be/WHd8z4bEHUA>).

Lesson 1 (Canoe Innovation)

This topic can be covered across the science curriculum in various aspect of design/technology especially STEM and at various grade levels. Further details can be added to strengthen certain ties to more Intermediate and Secondary curriculum areas.

Canoe Innovation

<http://mbaerospace.ca/community/new-world-ideas/birch-bark-canoe/> Check out this website as it lists resources and many other curriculum connections. It also contains an excellent 20 min video on Bark Canoe innovation. You can order a copy free of charge for your classroom.

Once completed the video, present to the students two very different canoe designs. Athabaskan Canoe model and Ojibway Long nose canoe model (included below). Depending on time have students break up into pairs. Give one canoe design to one student and another to the other student. Have them build the models (best to use a card stock to print them on) and create a Venn diagram of the similarities and differences of each canoe style then have them discuss why designs would have been different. Share their ideas in a bigger group.

Depending on time and purpose for a more Inquiry based activity to investigate properties of building materials you may give students a variety of building materials (paper, card stock, newspaper, etc.). Have students choose the material and construct the canoe and add gunnels and thwarts with pipe cleaners. Pre and post activity questions could include; Why do you think birch bark was used vs other materials (wood or other bark)? Which material that you used most represented birch bark. What were the pro/cons to using the material you used?

Many great videos exist on canoe construction and images. A Virtual tour of Canadian Canoe Museum (<http://canoemuseum.ca/new-museum/>) can be set up through contacting the museum.