

Achievement Goal:
Explain the concepts of “sovereignty” and “self-determination” and how these powers help tribes protect land for tribal members.

Time:
Three class period

Core:
Civics/Government



For Grades 4-5

Standard Three – Lesson Four

Indian Land Education

Contemporary American Indian Land Issues



Background:

To explain it simply, tribal sovereignty means the power of a tribe to govern itself, its members, and make decisions about its land. The powers of sovereign governments include the power to enact laws, to establish systems of justice, the power to require people to abide by established laws, the power to tax, the power to zone property, the power to regulate hunting and fishing and so on.

The sovereignty of the tribe is important to Indian self-determination. Self-determination is the aspiration of a group of people which have a separate and distinct identity to determine its own future in its own way.

Why are these ideas important? In this lesson, students will be asked to perform a thought experiment which will reveal to them the importance of tribal sovereignty and self-determination. They will then learn more about what sovereignty is, how it relates to them, and how to spell the difficult word.

Preparation:

- Be familiar with several types of tribal government.

Student Activity:

- Define and discuss with the students the ideas of sovereignty and self-determination.
- In order to explain the importance of sovereignty and self-determination to young students, have them think back to lessons that focus on how biodiversity is good for the planet. Remind them of how organisms change as they adapt to particular environments and adopt different characteristics to ensure they survive. Now, relate this environmental diversity to the diversity of human communities in

the world. Describe how communities naturally find ways to adapt to and survive in the world. Some of these adaptations are technological innovations, some of these adaptations occur within language, but some of these adaptations help people in the group relate to and cooperate with one another, which helps the group survive. From some of these adaptations, people derive beliefs that make their lives meaningful. Because human beings are imaginative and innovative, these beliefs and adaptations create distinct cultures and these cultures help people understand their world.

- After explaining this, have the students close their eyes and perform the following thought experiment. Ask them to imagine what it would be like to have people with a very different culture and a different language come into the classroom and begin forcing the students to act a particular way. Ask the students to imagine being told not to speak in their language and not to believe in certain things that help them understand the world. Tell the students to imagine how they would feel if these people told them that their beliefs are unintelligent and that the student, their families, and friends belong to an inferior people. Ask the children to imagine how they would feel if they saw these people settle in land that was previously the land of the children's ancestors. Ask them to imagine their relatives beginning to act more like these invaders and forget the language they used growing up. After this thought experiment, ask the students to open their eyes. Explain to the students that this sort of situation occurred when Europeans began to settle North America.
- Again, define the words sovereignty and self-determination for the students. Ask them to describe how these things protect Indian communities and individuals. Ask them: Is it better to be governed by people who do not understand your community, or by members of your community? Is it better to follow your own visions about your future, or be told what you should do and who you should be when you grow up? Emphasize that differences between people are neither good nor bad, but occur naturally. What is important is that people learn to respect each others' differences.
- Ask the students to think about what sovereignty requires. This maybe a tough question, so prompt them by writing the words land, economy, self-government, and culture on the board. You may want to write one word at a time and have the children focus on brainstorming about that particular aspect. Here are some suggested ideas you may what to explain to the students:
 - *Land:* Land is sacred, the basis of tribal economy as well as a place to continue cultural traditions. Maintaining a homeland for future generations is important for all tribes. Additionally, many tribes still rely on the natural resources of the land.
 - *Economy:* Some Indian tribes lease their reservation lands. Natural resources such as trees, water, fish, and minerals may give tribes economic power.
 - *Self-Governance:* One of the most basic powers of a sovereign people is to select their form of government. Each of the approximately 550 Indian tribes in the United States has a unique form of government. Some tribes have chosen to develop their form of self-government in accordance with their political and cultural history. Some tribes have adopted a governmental similar to the U.S. Still others, such as the Pueblos of New Mexico, have chosen to retain their traditional forms of government.
 - *Culture:* Culture guides tribal government and the economy. Traditions are part of daily life. When cultural characteristics are lost, erosion of a nation can quickly occur. Language, customs, religion, dress and beliefs are cultural attributes that are crucial to the survival of *any* society or sovereign nation.
 - On the board, write the words "Land," "Economy," "Government" and "Culture". Discuss how each of these factor into the role of sovereignty on the reservation. Give local examples.
 - Have the students select one of the four basic principles of sovereignty and draw a picture illustrating the principle, with a short written explanation.
 - Display the pictures and explanations in the hall, library or other location within the school.
- Spelling the word sovereignty can be difficult for young students. Help them remember how to spell it by using a pneumonic approach such as:

Several Old Vultures Eat Raisins Even In Great Northern Territories, Yes?

- Discuss the form of tribal government used on the reservation or reservations most students in your class identify with.

- Make copies of the essays and send to your local newspaper with a note asking if they would publish several of them.
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Evaluation:

- Have the students spell sovereignty in a spelling test.
 - Assess the student's understanding of the importance of tribal sovereignty and self-determination.
 - Assess the student's pictures to determine if they comprehend the meaning of sovereignty and the relationship of land, economy, government, and culture to sovereignty.
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Resources:

1. Listing of federally and state recognized tribes with links to official websites, Evergreen State University, <http://www.evergreen.edu/library/govdocs/tribalgov/index.html>