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# STORIES FROM THE DESERT PEOPLE



## Activity Summary

Students will listen to several different stories or legends from the region. The stories refer to life in the Sonoran Desert and involve the land, people, plants, and animals. The students will discuss the meanings or lessons in the stories as well as the knowledge that is transferred through the story. Students will then research other stories about desert life from their own cultures and write a story of their own with the help of a family member. Students will read or recount their stories aloud to the class.

### Objectives

Students will:

- use listening skills to learn about desert people, plants, and animals.
- learn about the transfer of knowledge through stories.
- recount several stories from different cultures about their Sonoran Desert home.

### Bringing it Together

In this activity the students will listen to several stories or legends from the Tohono O'odham culture. These are among the many stories which offer accounts of animals, plants, and people living in the Sonoran Desert. Some stories have been told for countless years by the O'odham. Others are more recent, involving interesting anecdotal accounts of history.

While stories are fun to listen to, they often present an important lesson or a message about life. In the O'odham culture, it was through stories that O'odham children learned about the desert, legends

### Materials

- Stories from desert cultures (provided).

were recounted, and important events were remembered among the Tohono O'odham communities through time.

Listening is an important skill and for a long time, it was one of the only ways to gain and pass on knowledge among the Tohono O'odham. The Tohono O'odham culture originated here in the Sonoran Desert and stories told by the O'odham go back to the "beginning of time." Even their creation stories involve plants and animals of the desert. The Desert People live very close to the land and their legends reflect that relationship. Although the Europeans who settled in Sonora and Arizona did not originate in the Sonoran Desert, many of these people have also lived in the area long enough to have developed stories about life in the desert.

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This activity involves students researching and bringing back to class other desert stories from their own cultures. O'odham students should be encouraged to find a story they have not heard before -- or perhaps one that has been a favorite of theirs. Students from other cultures may be surprised what they turn up within their cultures. Students should be encouraged to research the stories from their people which arose out of living in the Sonoran Desert.

## Activity Procedure

1) Begin this activity with a review of what students have learned up to this point. Ask for specific pieces of information which students remember from the other activities. Once several items have been discussed, ask students how they learned that information. Lead students to realize that some things they might have learned by *observing* (like watching water evaporate), some things they might have read, some things they actually *did*, and some things they *heard*. Explain that this activity is all about learning by listening -- very carefully.

2) Take time to explain the importance of story telling as a way to transfer knowledge among the Tohono O'odham. Remind students that the Tohono O'odham (the Desert People) culture originated here in the Sonoran Desert and that O'odham stories reflect their close relationship with the desert. Anglo and Mexican cultures had other origins. Students should consider these while listening to the stories.

3) If possible, take the students outside and sit together in a circle under a tree or elsewhere in the shade. If going outside is too difficult, sit on the floor or push your desks together in a circle. The object is for everyone to feel as though they belong to a listening community and to remove students from their normal class routine.

4) Tell the students that you will be reading several stories and that they should listen very carefully. The object is to learn something from each story. Students should listen for the message and meaning within the stories.

5) Slowly read the first story to the class (if you had time to learn the story, *tell it*). You may want to read the story twice before discussing it. Review the story with the students using the following questions to guide your discussion:

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## Taking it Home and Other Extensions

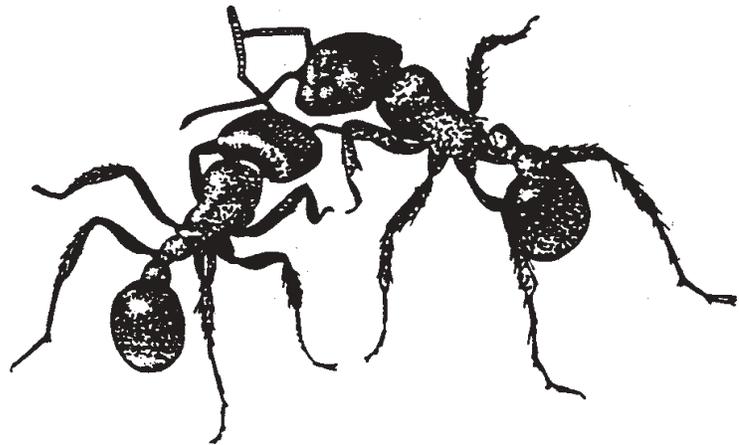
A fun way to involve the students' families is to have the student actually write the story *with* the parent or have the parent write it (this is strongly encouraged). If writing the story is difficult, students should memorize and learn their selected stories. It could be very interesting to have students invite the person from whom they learned the story to the class.

### ***Discussion Questions:***

- *Is there a lesson to be learned in the story? If so what is it?*
- *Who can remember the characters in the story?*
- *What desert creatures can they name from the story?*
- *Which characters tell which messages?*
- *Does the behavior of the desert creature in the story somehow reflect that animal's true character in nature?*
- *How would students remember the stories if it were up to them to pass them on?*

6) Read the other stories and review them using the same guiding questions. Do students seem to get more proficient at listening to things with experience? As you discuss each story, ask if any students are familiar with them -- if so, are their versions the same?

7) Next, tell students that they will have the opportunity to tell their own desert stories. Their story should reflect their own culture - that is, it should come from their family, community, or background. Give students time to go home and ask their parents, another family member, or someone from the community about any stories or legends they could share about living in the desert or desert creatures. They should try to find stories that convey a lesson. They may either write the story down in their Student Journals or memorize it. Once students have selected and prepared their stories, have them share the stories with the rest of the class.



# Coyote Scatters Saguaro Seed

At that time Turtle lived with his friend by the ocean shore. He had saguaro cactus and when it ripened he would gather the fruit, dry it with the seeds in it and store it in his house. That's the seed that's scattered under the saguaro.

Then Turtle would pick them up and go to the ocean and throw them into the water so the seeds wouldn't grow. This way they were the only ones who ate the fruit.

So Coyote was sent to see if he could get some saguaro seed so the people could also plant it.

Coyote went, thinking of what he could do to deceive Turtle when he met him. He went to the ocean and was wandering around the shore when he saw him. Turtle was coming down from the mountain, so Coyote went to meet him.

When they met, Coyote said, "Where are you going?"

Turtle said, "I'm going to the water to swim."

Then Coyote said, "What's that in your hand?"

Turtle answered, "It's a strange thing that is very dangerous for people. I'm going now to put it under the water. That way it will never come out on the land.

Coyote said, "If it is dangerous, why do you put it under water? Don't you know that the water comes and goes, and will bring it out" I'll tell you what we will do to this dangerous thing so that it will never come out. I'll dig a deep hole and we will bury it and roll a big rock to cover it, then it will not be able to come out."

But Turtle said, "If we bury it in the earth, it will sprout roots and come up and ripen and scatter it's seed. From there it will multiply."

Then Coyote said, "Oh, so it's some kind of seed. Let me see what it's like."

But Turtle said, "If you try to see it, it will make you sick."

"It won't really make me sick. Don't you know that I am also a medicine man? That's why nothing ever makes me sick."

So Turtle held out his hand, and just opened it a little bit.

Coyote said, "Wait, wait! I want to see it real close. It's not clear from here." When he said this, he crept up on Turtle.

When he got up to him he said, "There! Now we'll see what it is." And just as Turtle was opening his hand, Coyote hit it from below, and the seed was scattered wherever there are saguaro growing now.

When Coyote had done this he ran back, telling everyone as he ran, "Even though I did not get the seed, I scattered it everywhere on this land. Maybe when the Saguaro comes up and ripens, you will gather it and eat it."

This is why Coyote is good for something for people. Then they gave him a wife who was beautiful, and Coyote married her and said, "From now on, I will not just wander around. Whoever wants to see me for any reason will go over there looking for me. I will be living in the east where I have already spoken for land."

So Coyote went to the east with his wife. And, because he was a survivor, and saw many things and suffered much and knew the earth everywhere from the beginning until now, he was a very wise person.

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# Coyote's Son is Good for Nothing

## The Bees Trick Coyote and Coyote Deceives Mountain Lion

Coyote's son climbed up somewhere on a mountain. There was a cave and bees were singing there. Coyote turned and went and peeked in the cave and said, "What are you saying? Maybe you are talking about me."

The bees said, "No, no, Uncle. We are just singing because we are happy. You came and will help us kill the mountain lion. He comes here to sleep and doesn't let us sing. One of us just touches his whiskers a little, and he becomes angry and growls and smashes us. Come in Uncle, and help us, and we'll kill the mountain lion that comes."

Coyote believed them and went in.

They said, "Uncle, we will sing one of our songs. You help us and we'll dance. We'll be happy while we wait for the mountain lion." Coyote liked that.

Then the bees sang these words:

Bees, Bees,

Closing the cave, closing the cave.

The center one goes out head first.

We have just a little of the circle left.

That's what they sang. And Coyote was running around in the middle dancing, and didn't see that as they finished their song, some would rush out just as they sang "left". The cave was closing up after them. They were becoming fewer and fewer until just two were left, flying around his ears singing.

Coyote was dancing and running around in a circle getting dizzy, and didn't see anything so didn't know what was happening. These two just finished their song and rushed out. The cave was almost closed up and Coyote suddenly stopped, surprised to see that they had shut him in. He had no way to get out. He said, "I'll just sit here and when the mountain lion comes I will call him "Brother" and tell him what happened to me unawares."

When the mountain lion came he was surprised to see that there was just a small opening and that Coyote was peeking out. The lion said, "If I ever get you out I will kill you. You had better know that."

Coyote tried to call him "Brother" but the mountain lion was not listening, just demanding his prey. He was pounding on the cave, and enlarged the hole a bit, and finally brought Coyote out.

Coyote said, "That's alright. You are going to kill me. I'm just going to say one thing to you, then you can kill me." Then Coyote said, "I have a wife and children, and you are going to kill me so there will be no one to hunt for them. Leave me here a little while and I will pray to our elder brother. Maybe he will have pity on me and will do something good for my wife and children. When I'm finished you can kill me."

The mountain lion agreed and Coyote said, "I'm going to pray over there behind the brush. From here you can listen to me. When I whistle, you can come kill me."

So he went behind the brush and caught a prairie dog and half buried it behind the brush, then ran away. The prairie dog got tired and cried loudly. The lion thought it was the Coyote whistling, so he went running and was surprised to see it was just a prairie dog.

The mountain lion dug him out and the prairie dog said, "Coyote buried me here and ran off and I couldn't get out so I cried." The mountain lion let him go and ran off.

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