

# Trees as a Source of Life and Knowledge

## Activity 4



**PURPOSE:** To expose students to the literature and culture of other cultures while encouraging them to look at their environment in new ways.

**TIME:** Half an hour to discuss, and several class periods for research and writing.

**BACKGROUND:** Legends about world trees can be found in the folklore of countries around the world. Some examples are Japan, Greece, Egypt and Siberia.

The Arikara Indians of the North American prairie believed that the cedar tree was sacred. They called this tree the “Grandmother of Life”. Because the cedar stays green all year long, it promises that the world will be reborn again each year in the spring.

Many cultures feature trees and other natural wonders in their historical and current tales. An excellent resource for finding appropriate books on multicultural themes is Paula Kezwer’s *Worlds of Wonder*. Detailed listings provide descriptions of 320 multicultural titles for young people of all ages. Two books mentioned are *The Native Stories from Keepers of the Earth* and *The People Who Hugged the Trees*. These stories illustrate the respect that different cultures have for the natural resources of the earth, and their fight to preserve the natural world for all.

In *The People Who Hugged the Trees*, Amrita, an Indian girl, learns to love trees at an early age and leads her village in an effort to save their beloved trees from being cut down. The villagers need the trees to provide shade, shield the village from sandstorms and to invite the water that people need to survive. “Trees,” says Amrita, “you are so tall and your leaves are so green. How could we live without you?” (Adapted by Deborah Lee Rose from a story of Rajasthan, India. Roberts Rinehart, Inc., 1990.)

Children in Senegal, West Africa, often tell stories during gonall (night time story telling) that centre on trees because they play such a vital role in their lives. These stories often include the mysterious or spiritual aspects of trees.

### METHOD:

Invite students to pick a culture and research its literary tradition of looking at the natural world. Alternatively, suggest that students look up traditional folk tales, find one they especially like and make a presentation to the class on the story. They should include additional information about the culture where the story originates.

### To share with your students:

The best writing comes from writing about things that are important and interesting to you. Get inspired! Go out and sit under a tree, think about how long the tree has been there, how beautiful the forest is. Write your own story about a Canadian tree with personality.

Children in Senegal often make up traditional poems about trees called taalifs.

The following poem is an example of taalif, or “free style” poem.

**I Love Nature** (written by Samba Fatim Ndione, 6th class, Piot Diak School)

Each morning I look  
At the sun rising at last  
The trees bow to the will of the wind  
And give us shade just in time  
On the soil already clean and healthy  
At daybreak the fruit trees  
Like the guava laden with water  
My father goes to gather the fruit  
Pleased with his morning harvest  
My mother at her improved stove  
Prepares the day’s meal



**WHAT DO  
FORESTS BEAR?  
SOIL, WATER  
AND PURE AIR.**

*Slogan of the Chipko  
Environmental Movement  
in India*