

Prairie plant healing saved in cyberspace

Children help preserve elders' knowledge

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Calgary Herald

May 29, 2005

In a seamless marriage of modern technology and ancient wisdom, generations of priceless knowledge about indigenous prairie plants and their healing properties have been preserved on a new website.

The project, titled Nitsitapiisinni -- Stories and Spaces: Exploring Kainai Plants and Culture, saw Grade 4 students from the Blood reserve in southern Alberta conduct extensive interviews with band elders steeped in traditional knowledge.

Armed with digital cameras and camcorders, they walked the reserve's ruggedly beautiful countryside last fall and this spring to showcase plants which have been used for centuries by First Nations peoples.

Spearheading the project was Alvine Mountain Horse, who teaches the Blackfoot immersion course at Aahsaopi Elementary School, about 20 kilometres north of Cardston.

"I learned so much from my grandmother about the plants and I always thought she'd be around forever," said Mountain Horse.

"As our elders pass on, there's a real danger this information may be lost. And as development continues, the habitat for the plants may be destroyed."

Mountain Horse said she developed a personal mission to preserve this knowledge while creating a meaningful, hands-on learning experience for her students.

Marvin Calf Robe Jr., 9, was one of the young researchers who talked to elders. He had the chance to interview his grandmother, Carolla Calf Rope.

"We asked the elders how to use the plants and where we could find them," said Marvin.

"When you turn them into a tea and drink it, the next day, you'll probably feel quite a bit better."

Carolla said she was somewhat reluctant to participate at first because of the intensely private and spiritual nature of sharing traditional healing techniques.

"My learning has been acquired over a lifetime, passed down from my own grandmother," she said.



CREDIT: Mikael Kjellstrom, Calgary Herald

Nine-year-old Marvin Calf Robe Jr. shows his grandmother, elder Carolla Calf Robe, parts of the website where elders knowledge of plants has been pooled together and made available online.

"But when I saw how interested the children were in what I had to say, I wanted to do it for them. And when I saw the website for the first time, I was very humbled and honoured. It's for the kids."

Carolla said many intertwined elements go into traditional Kainai healing techniques, from the proper offering of prayers to knowing the right times of year and locations to pick the plants in their peak condition.

"She's the best tea-maker there is," chimed in her grandson.

Fellow Grade 4 student Bryton Chief Moon said interviews were conducted in both Blackfoot and English.

"We were able to go all over the reserve and discover where to look for these plants," said Chief Moon, 9. "Now, I'll probably take a tea instead of a pill if I get a headache."

Helping put the pieces together was the Galileo Education Network, a Calgary-based, non-profit organization which promotes professional development for teachers and educational research.

"We were able to secure funding from the federal government to get things rolling. This project is contributing to a broader international interest in ethnobotany, of how culture relates to plants," said Sherri Rinkel Mackay, an educational mentor for Galileo.

The website's index of plants and their medicinal properties is supplemented by aboriginal stories, audio and visual interviews with elders, student art, historical photographs, traditional maps and links to more than 40 digitized books.

The new website's address is www.galileo.org/plants/kainai

"What I'm very proud of is that the kids did a big part of the work and that this knowledge and the stories behind it are told from our point of view," said Mountain Horse.

She plans to compile a more traditional set of information sheets on indigenous plants and their qualities for those who don't have easy access to computers.

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