

# Website passes on Kainai medicinal knowledge

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A fascinating and remarkable project that combines local tradition with modern technology has recently come to fruition. On May 27, at the University of Calgary, as part of the Association for Media and Technology in Education in Canada conference, the website *Nitsitapiisinni-Stories and Spaces: Exploring Kainai Plants and Culture* was officially launched.

The visually rich and interactive site can be found at [galileo.org/plants/kainai](http://galileo.org/plants/kainai).

It explores 62 plants, in five different local landscapes, that have medicinal significance to the Kainai people. The knowledge of these plants and their uses is in danger of being lost and this modern medium is designed to prevent that.

A number of partners have been involved in the extensive research for and development of the site. A Grade Four Blackfoot Immersion class from local Aahsaopi Elementary School had an important role in almost every aspect of the project. The students in that class interviewed Kainai elders, helped gather the plants and assisted with research from old records. They also learned to use equipment like digital recorders and camcorders and were able to participate in the design and crafting of the actual website. "It takes a lot time to learn but people will know about the plants later on; some of them are medicines and can really help us," said Bryce Many Fingers, one of the students, about his work on the project.

In addition to the class, the major force behind Nitsitapiisinni was the Galileo Educational Network, based in Calgary. Sherri Rinkel Mackay of Galileo explains its purpose. "We are a not-for-profit group that develops professional development material for teachers."

Galileo was able to provide much of the technical support, access to Canada Culture funding and educational curriculum tie-ins, among other things. The support and encouragement of those at Galileo were much-appreciated by the Kainai students, elders and staff.

Other partners in the project

were the federal government's Canadian Culture On-line, the Kainai Board of Education, Red Crow College and the University of Calgary's Information Resource department.

The idea for this website goes back a number of years. Alvine Mountain Horse, the teacher of the participating Grade Four class, has been trying to pass on Kainai traditions — especially plant and herb knowledge — to the next generation for a while. In 1990, when teaching at Laverne Elementary, she had no Blackfoot resources from which to teach. Consequently, she began, on her own, to collect



and preserve plants.

In 2002, Mountain Horse's husband Narcisse Blood, who teaches at Red Crow Community College, became involved with her in the effort.

A chance meeting last year between Blood and members of Galileo sparked the idea of the website itself. Funding was in place by the end of last September and research was basically completed by March of this year.

The layout of the site is another unique combination of tradition and modernity. It makes very good use of Flash, a website technology that allows sound and video to be integrated seamlessly.

Interestingly, Flash also allows the site to be laid out in a traditional manner. As you enter the site, you click on a Kainai elder or

teacher to lead you through different aspects of the information presented. As in traditional methods of teaching, much of the information is presented orally and visually rather than written on the screen.

This feature allows the information to be accessed and understood by a variety of website visitors.

Plants are presented in a simulated natural environment. They are often hidden on screen unless an elder points them out. The sounds of birds and animals that live near the plants are also heard while accessing certain pages.

Aside from the remarkable layout the site, it also contains a vast amount of information.

There are details on the harvesting and use of the 62 plants. A comprehensive history of the Grade Four class' work is also recorded. Kainai elders Pete Standing Alone, Carolla Calf Robe, Adam and Alfreda Delaney are featured in video, audio and visuals on the site. In seemingly every nook and cranny of the site there is culturally-relevant knowledge to be found.

All of the participants in the project acknowledge that the Kainai elders who hold these sacred traditions are unavoidably passing away. It is hoped that a new generation will have access to this information through the website.

Narcisse Blood hopes that instead of eroding his people's traditions, technology like this website can be used to preserve it.

"It can help teach all people that there is so much we can learn from Our Mother Earth."

Alvine Mountain Horse says this in closing about the education potential of the site: "It's first of all a resource for schools but we are hoping that whoever goes to the site can use the information and preserve the knowledge."



Grade Four Blackfoot Immersion students from Aahsaopi Elementary visiting the Glenbow Museum in Calgary as part of their research (top), Sommer Chief Moon views the Nitsitapiisinni site on a laptop at the AMTEC conference in Calgary. (above) and Shelby Wells using a camcorder in the field (right).



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