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Handout 5A: “Nimiipuu Homeland” and “Legend Times”

Directions: Refer to the glossary as needed for definitions of unknown words.

Nimiipuu Homeland – Nez Perce Country

Long before Meriwether Lewis and William Clark ventured West; before the English established a colony at Jamestown; before Christopher Columbus stumbled upon the “new world”; the Nez Perce, who call themselves the Nimiipuu, lived in the prairies and river valleys of north Central Idaho, Montana, northeastern Oregon, and southeastern Washington, an area of approximately seventeen million acres.

In 1805, when Lewis and Clark met the Nez Perce, they encountered a people well-integrated into their environment. Nimiipuu traditions and knowledge of the surroundings were well-honed over thousands of years. The Nimiipuu homeland’s abundant resources sustained their economy, lifestyle and culture.

Legend Times

Nimiipuu oral history records their presence in Nez Perce country since time immemorial. Archeological evidence indicates that people have occupied the Plateau culture area of the Northwest for at least the last 11,000 years.

According to legend, the world before humans was inhabited by animals that possessed human traits. The primary animal was It’s-e-ye-ye (Coyote), who at times had supernatural powers. The Nimiipuu creation story reveals that when a monster began to consume the animals, Coyote tricked the monster into swallowing him. While in the monster’s stomach, he killed the monster and set the animals free. Coyote carved the monster into pieces, and scattered the parts throughout the land, where they became the various tribes. It’s-e-ye-ye left the heart of the monster near Kamiah, Idaho and sprinkled the blood around the surrounding countryside, and created the Nimiipuu, the Nez Perce people. These stories provided instruction in Nimiipuu culture, and often conveyed moral teachings and practical information.

The Nimiipuu have been part of this land for countless generations. Their traditional homeland occupied nearly 13 million acres in what is today Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. The earliest peoples lived in small groups and family units. They were mostly reliant on big game hunting as a

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primary means of subsistence. Starting around 6,000 years ago, many aspects of the historic Nez Perce way of life began to appear in the region. This included the use of a much broader base of locally abundant plant, fish, and game resources.

This shift to a more encompassing use of resources was well adapted to the Nez Perce homeland. It enabled the ancestral Nez Perce to develop a much more sedentary lifestyle as evidenced through the emergence of large winter village sites, and the increasing use of semi-subterranean pit houses.

By about 3,500 years ago, the bow and arrow came into common use in Nez Perce country. This technology eventually replaced the atlatl around 2,000 years ago. Over the last 1,000 years, Nez Perce culture became increasingly reliant on seasonally abundant fish and root resources. As the population grew, large villages located along the Clearwater, Snake, and Salmon Rivers and their tributaries became the norm.

A common thread throughout the Nimiipuu existence has been a keen knowledge of the resources present in their homeland. This included a thorough understanding of when, where, and how to obtain and use these items. Local stone, minerals, and various plant species were crafted to make clothing, baskets, tools, hunting and fishing implements, shelter, and other personal items.

Courtesy of the U.S. Department of the Interior/National Park Service

well-integrated: blended into a harmonious, or pleasing, whole; unified

well-honed: perfected

sustained: kept (something) going or existing; provided with the basic necessities of life

oral history: historical data, often recorded, that comprises firsthand oral accounts

time immemorial: reaching back in time beyond memory or record

archaeological: relating to the study of past human life

Plateau culture area: a region between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Coast, including parts of present-day Canada, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana, that was originally inhabited by Native American peoples

primary: main; most important

supernatural: having to do with forces separate from or higher than natural laws

moral: having to do with what is right and what is wrong in how a person acts

subsistence: that which supports life or continued operation

encompassing: including all of (something)

sedentary: living in a fixed location (instead of moving to different places)

semi-subterranean: halfway underground or below the earth's surface

pit houses: ancient shelters made by digging a pit into the earth and roofed over. **atlatl:** an ancient weapon, used for hunting; a stick used to throw a spear or a dart