



Champion of the Classroom

Rose Star

Looking at the World Through the Eyes of Don YellowBird

Don YellowBird is a man of Arikara and Sioux descent. His home town, White Shield (population about 600 people), is on the eastern edge of Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota. Fort Berthold is often referred to as “The Home of the Three Affiliated Tribes.” The Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa peoples have lived here cooperatively since 1862. At one time Fort Berthold was one large piece of land, but the United States Corps of Engineers built a dam in the middle of the reservation. The land is mostly farmland and badlands.

When Don was younger, he attended elementary and high school in Minot, North Dakota. After high school he went to college, Wahpeton State School of Science. Later he transferred to Grand Forks, North Dakota, where he earned his Bachelors and Masters Degrees in Education. He moved to White Shield where he has lived and worked as an elementary teacher for over fifteen years.

Don grew up as the middle child of 13 children. His mother, Dorothy, has always been very loving and supportive. His father, Grover, died years ago, but Don still feels his influence. His father was a firm disciplinarian, and had high expectations for Don which were sometimes hard to live up to. His parent’s expectations gave him a sense of self responsibility and determination . . . values which helped him to attain many goals.

Don’s many accomplishments include awards in track, football, cross-country, and basketball. He was honored in the Wahpeton’s Hall of Fame for excellence in football. In 1986, the North Dakota Indian Education Association selected him as Indian Educator of the Year.

He helped organize the first North Dakota Native American Science Fair. Don felt that Native American children needed to be recognized for their talents and abilities. In the state science fair competition, only a small percentage of the participants were Native American students. He believed that Native American children would feel more comfortable participating in science fair competitions that were judged on science projects with special meaning to their culture.

He also worked with In-Med (American Indians in Medicine), where he helped coordinate programs to help Indian students who wanted to work in health fields. Don would like to see more Native American children become teachers, lawyers, doctors, and administrators to provide leadership. Don’s love for working with the children brought him back to White Shield where he has continued to teach and coach.

For recreation, Don hunts, fishes, and plays golf. He goes hunting with his friends during hunting season every year, but he says he goes for the pleasure of walking in the “breaks,” observing wildlife, and enjoying the land. The “breaks” is a name for land that has been worn away by erosion of the soil, from rivers or the weather.

During hunting season, hunting for deer is called “harvesting.” Each hunter is allowed to shoot one deer if the deer population is high. If the deer population is low, only a limited amount of deer hunting licenses may be sold restricting the number of hunters. Harvesting, he says, helps keep the deer population stable, because if the deer become too crowded there may not be enough food to feed the deer and they may starve to death. However, if the deer population become too low, then there is the chance they may become extinct.

When Don goes on these hunting and fishing trips he said that if you really look you can see many interesting things. You may even begin to imagine what life was like many years ago.

air. . . like a trophy sits on its base! These great big sequoias are at least ten feet around. Perhaps the area down below in White Shield had been a big sequoia forest at one time. This would explain the rich coal deposit in White Shield. Coal comes from dead vegetation and dead animals and trees. There may have been a lot of dinosaurs here many years ago. Maybe when the dinosaurs died and their bodies decomposed under the weight of the soil, coal formed.

If you look at the soil, you see the clay in a lot of layers and you see the vegetation. When you look at the river, you can see how the water has eroded the shorelines and formed the river. As we looked around, we found a lot of edible plants, like wild turnips and berries (including bull berries, bear berries, and wild cactus berries). All these plants are growing on the land, feeding the inhabitants.

If you walk and don't run, you can see all these things. It's not just badlands; its a place of wonderment! It's a place that makes you wonder, "Why is this like this?" Lots of questions buzz through my mind as I walk on the land. Sometimes when my brothers and I are out walking along these paths, we might find some bones of cows and I wonder how did the bones get there. What happened? How did the animal die? By not hurrying, but stopping, looking, touching, and observing, each person gets a different picture of nature that exists right here in White Shield.

Once I saw some little ants and I observed them and I thought, "These little ants are amazing little insects! They're lifting hundreds of times their own weight." It would be like us, carrying a house on our back. Then we find there are different kinds and colors of ants. Some ants fight and some don't. There are millions of different insects and in order to see what each one does you have to sit and look and watch. If you don't stop to observe, you miss a lot of this stuff.

The time I like to be outdoors is in the morning. So many things happen in the morning. I have camped out overnight, and early in the morning I've seen deer come down to the water and drink. I've seen loons, too. You see ducks, geese, and swans fairly often, but to see a loon is a rare occasion!

Take some time, get some binoculars, and observe all the different types of birds. One thing I have observed was the ducks. You see the males, they're so pretty, so beautiful! Then compare them to the females. They're so drab and plain. Why are male ducks colorful and female ducks plain? The answer is right there. Who has to protect the nest? Who has to camouflage right into the surroundings? The female duck! The male is the one who flies off and gets the attention and the female has to protect their nest, and her blending in is her cover, her protection. The female matches the reeds and grasses, while the male has bright colors on his head and chest that make him stand out. I've seen this in over 50 different species of ducks.

I think the bottom line is this: Do we want someone to destroy this? Where will the ducks live? Where will the ants live? Ants help to break down plants so that they may be recycled. People may kill off the insects by spraying insecticides and the wilderness will disappear, and our children will not see what we can see now.

Many farmers use chemicals to fertilize their fields and to kill insects. These chemicals filter down through the ground into underground rivers, called the groundwaters. Through natural springs this same water enters our rivers and is then taken into water treatment plants where some impurities are filtered and the water is recycled for us to use. Many impurities are still in the water. We drink this water. Animals (including cows, pigs, and chickens) drink the water. The chemicals are absorbed by plants. We in turn are swallowing those same chemicals into our bodies when we drink the water, eat the animals that drink the water and eat the plants, and when we eat the plants.

There are other more natural ways to make the soil rich and reduce the number of crop eating insects. We can use manure, the natural waste of livestock, as a fertilizer. It puts nitrogen back into the soil and won't hurt us. There are insects that can be put into these same fields, that will eat the insects that feed off the crops. Chemicals may or may not be quicker and easier, but they may be

around. I breathe in pure air, because the rain has cleaned the air of all impurities (like dust, smoke, and chemicals) by driving them into the ground. In that short period of time, we breathe in pure air. After a while, we start smelling pollution. But the smell of fresh air is great!

After the rain, I often see a rainbow. It is beautiful! A rainbow is made from water droplets suspended in the air like prisms. Sunlight is bent, or refracted, as it passes through the water droplets. Normally, we can't see the color of light. The colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, blue-violet, and violet are streaming down on us all the time. These seven colors are the colors of light, but when they shine together they turn to white light. After a rain, when the sun is to our back, the light rays hit a raindrop and are refracted and we see the colors of the spectrum: the rainbow.

The rain also nourishes the trees. Trees are pretty to look at and they give us shade. The grass is green, and nice to lie on. We often think of plants as the lowest form of life, but we really don't realize how important plants are. Where would we be without them? We use them for food. So do the animals that we eat, such as cows and pigs. This is called the food chain. One food chain begins with grass. The cows eat the grass and we eat the cows.

We also need plants for oxygen. People breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. Plants take in carbon dioxide from the air and give off oxygen. Oxygen is produced during the food making process of the plant called photosynthesis. Without this oxygen cycle, we would die. When we kill plants, we cut off our own oxygen supply. The Native Americans have known for many years the importance of the balance of nature and have used storytelling to help others understand and have respect for our environment.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Don YellowBird say that it is important to walk slowly and observe?
2. What role does deer harvesting have in the balance of nature?
3. Why are the colors of the male and female duck important?
4. Why should we care about groundwaters?
5. Why is it important to understand the way the land used to be and the way it is now?
6. Where do you see colors of the spectrum? What makes those colors?
7. If a food web is the complex interaction of many food chains, why is every plant and animal important?



Illustration on page 1: Tracks (clockwise from lower left) - 4 prints of bullfrog, 2 prints of beaver (one with webbing), lizard (with trail of tail), 2 prints of raccoon pointing right, 2 prints of skunk

Language Arts

Ecology Word Search

Directions:

Find the following words in the puzzle below. They will be horizontal, vertical, diagonal, or backwards. Discover the definitions for the words in the dictionary. Write the words and the definitions on the back of the puzzle.

EROSION
PHOTOSYNTHESIS
GROUND WATERS
SEDIMENTARY
VEGETATION

EDIBLE
POLLUTION
RAINBOW
CAMOUFLAGE
RECYCLED

OXYGEN
INHABITANTS
ENVIRONMENT
INSECTS
SPECTRUM

P	O	L	L	U	T	I	O	N	X	Y	D	E	S
G	H	N	O	D	E	L	C	Y	C	E	R	G	E
R	E	O	T	H	E	R	M	I	S	M	A	A	D
O	G	X	T	C	R	Z	V	N	C	O	I	L	I
U	N	Y	Z	O	O	S	W	H	I	S	N	F	M
N	I	G	S	A	S	V	P	A	E	E	B	U	E
D	T	E	T	L	I	Y	S	B	N	L	O	O	N
W	S	N	C	B	O	A	N	I	C	B	W	M	T
A	E	Y	E	Z	N	B	L	T	E	I	N	A	A
T	V	L	S	Y	O	C	Z	A	H	D	K	C	R
E	R	E	N	V	I	R	O	N	M	E	N	T	Y
R	A	R	I	K	A	R	A	T	G	P	S	H	Z
S	M	U	R	T	C	E	P	S	L	S	A	I	D
V	E	G	E	T	A	T	I	O	N	P	T	C	S