

Alcohol or what?

History nugget

Excerpts from Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, *The Nootka: Scenes and Studies of Savage Life*. Victoria, BC: Sono Nis Press, 1987 (original work published in 1868).

They worked occasionally as labourers, and with their wages bought new blankets and planks for their houses ... They acquired a taste for flour, rice, potatoes, and other articles of food that were sold to them at low prices, and thus, on the whole, probably spent the first winter after the arrival of the colonists more comfortably than usual. It was only after a considerable time that symptoms of a change, amongst the Indians living nearest to the white settlement, could be noticed ... that a few sharp-witted young natives had become what I can only call offensively European, and that the mass of the Indians no longer visited the settlement in their former free independent way, but live listlessly in the villages, brooding seemingly over heavy thoughts ...

The natives are as careful of their crab-apples as we are of our orchards, and it is a sure sign of their losing heart before intruding whites when, in the neighbourhood of settlements, they sullenly cut down their crab-apple trees, in order to gather the fruit for the last time without trouble, as the tree lies on the ground.

These excerpts describe the decline of the Tseshah people on the west coast of Vancouver Island after their village was turned into a sawmill settlement and their waterways became controlled by the British Navy. One might assume these excerpts illustrate commonly held beliefs about the role alcohol has played in unravelling Aboriginal cultures since first contact with European explorers and settlers.

However, Sproat ruled the settlement like an industrial tyrant and would not allow the importing of "intoxicating liquors." Moreover, even though the Aboriginal peoples of North America, like Polynesians, were unique in not having alcohol in their diets, many native societies exposed to alcohol managed to control its use without great difficulty, or alcohol use became problematic only after their culture had disintegrated.

Instructional strategies

1. Provide students with a copy of [Alcohol or What? The Tseshah People](#) and have them read it. After reviewing the history with the class, brainstorm with students a list of explanations for the cultural decline observed by Sproat. Explore together the impact of the loss of cultural autonomy.
2. Have students research the Tseshah people on the west coast of Vancouver Island and present their findings related to social and community organization, decision-making processes, leadership and governance, medicines and spiritual practices.
3. Have students compare and contrast Sproat's memoir to Bruce Alexander's observations of the situation in Fort Ware (see [Alcohol or What?: A Comparative History](#)) and report how they would explain any similarities and differences.

Drug literacy

Big ideas

- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives
- We can learn how to control drugs by examining human thinking through time, exploring stories from various cultures and listening to each other

Competencies

- Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and well-being of individuals, communities and societies



- Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs

Links to Curriculum

First Peoples' principles of learning

- Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors
- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions
- Learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge
- Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story
- Learning requires exploration of one's identity

Social Studies 9

Big ideas

- Disparities in power alter the balance of relationships between individuals and between societies
- Collective identity is constructed and can change over time

Competencies

- Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to: ask questions; gather, interpret and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions
- Assess the significance of people, places, events and developments, and compare varying perspectives on their historical significance at particular times and places and from group to group
- Assess the justification for competing historical accounts after investigating points of contention, reliability of sources and adequacy of evidence
- Assess how prevailing conditions and the actions of individuals or groups affect events, decisions and developments