Indigenous peoples’ relationships with animals are the result of tens of thousands of years of connections to their environments. The non-Native concept of “spirit animals” has seen a recent rise in popularity, in and out of the classroom. Finding animals they connect with can be a fun activity for many students. However, using the concept of a “spirit animal” while teaching Native American culture trivializes Native relationships to the animal world.

In Native American traditions, animals are sometimes used to communicate the values and spiritual beliefs of Native communities. Animals’ importance is also evident in the creation stories of many tribes. Animal imagery is often used to share family, clan, and personal stories. **We ask that you do not copy such imagery from totem poles, pictographs, etc.**

Clan and kinship systems within many American Indian tribal communities reflect relationships to animals. Each animal carries history and meaning. Clan and kinship systems are specific to each tribal community and may vary widely from one another. **We ask that you do not adopt clans into your classroom.**

**The story of American Indians in the Western Hemisphere is intricately intertwined with places and environments.** Indigenous Peoples strive to be respectful of their environments. Many believe in thoughtfully honoring the lives of animals by only taking what is needed. To respect Native Americans and animal life, we suggest that your classrooms work to support your local environments through advocating for animals and their natural habitats.

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**Try these culturally sensitive activities and resources:**
- For elementary students, check out the *Tales of the People* book series, [available through NMAI](https://www.nmai.si.edu/education/reading-and-learning/tales-of-the-people).
- For elementary students, check out *Keepers of the Animals: Native American Stories and Wildlife Activities for Children* by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac. Bruchac has many books on animals and Native life – find his website [here](https://www.josephbruchac.net).
- For grades 4–8, check out this NMAI teaching poster, *Lone Dog’s Winter Count*.
- For grades 9–12, use the NK360° lesson plans *The Pacific Northwest Fish Wars: What Kinds of Actions Can Lead to Justice?*
- Check out the [NMAI Haudenosaunee Guide for Educators](https://www.nmai.si.edu/education/reading-and-learning/haudenosaunee-guide-for-educators) to learn about Haudenosaunee relationships with the natural world!
- Learn about horses in Native American cultures on the NMAI website, [A Song for Horse Nation](https://www.nmai.si.edu/education/reading-and-learning/a-song-for-horse-nation).