

Age

Grades 4 – 8

Subjects

Art, Biology, Social Studies, Language Arts

Skills

Drawing, creating, analysis, application

Duration

Two 45-minute periods

Setting

Classroom

Materials

- Canadian quarter
- Books about Canadian coats of arms
- Images of Santa's reindeer
- Pen and paper
- Drawing supplies

Symbolic Caribou

Objectives

Students should be able to:

1. Recognize that caribou are found in symbols and signs of traditional and modern popular culture.
2. Understand how wild animals are used as symbols of qualities held by countries or people.
3. Create their own 'coat of arms' based on their knowledge of caribou biology.

Method

Students will research how caribou are portrayed in coats of arms, on Canadian money and in popular culture, and then create a coat of arms from the caribou's perspective.

Background

Caribou and other wild animals are sometimes used as symbols. This means they are used to suggest meanings based on people's knowledge of caribou and concepts related to caribou. For example, many countries have in their coats of arms animals that are seen as powerful, such as lions or eagles, or animals that are seen as wise, such as owls or foxes.

The province of Newfoundland has a caribou-like animal on its coat of arms, but it is actually an elk. The coat of arms was designed in 1638, when elk were erroneously believed to inhabit Newfoundland. What people thought were elk were actually caribou! Newfoundland re-adopted its coat of arms in the 1920s.

Caribou can also be found in popular culture. Santa's reindeer are a kind of caribou. And, of course, caribou can be found on the Canadian quarter, used every day by millions of people.

Procedure

1. Call out the names of a number of animals and have the students brainstorm qualities associated with the animals. Are these qualities based on the animal's biology and life cycle, or are they based on inaccurate human perceptions of the animals?
2. Have the students brainstorm places where they may have seen caribou portrayed. Remind the class that reindeer are a kind of caribou. Once they make the connection to reindeer, it may open up some new ideas. Discuss the importance of caribou to traditional cultures, early pioneers and northerners in remote areas. Remind the class that we tend to incorporate important species into our cultural symbols.

3. Break the class into small groups.
4. Tell each group that they are going to make their own caribou coat of arms. The coat of arms can be a drawing or collage of drawings by students in the group. It can include pasted-on features cut out from magazines or objects glued onto the paper.
5. Remind the students to think about things that are important to the caribou when making their coats of arms. For example, it might include lichen or other important caribou foods. It might include wolves or other animals that interact with caribou. They may add a drawing of a river to symbolize barren-ground caribou migration. Also have them keep in mind that they can use symbols to show parts of caribou biology. They can exaggerate important parts of the caribou's body, such as the hollow hooves or branched antlers.
6. Have each group present their coats of arms to the class and explain what each part symbolizes.

Variations

1. Have the class redesign the coat of arms for their province or territory, incorporating symbols that they feel are important.

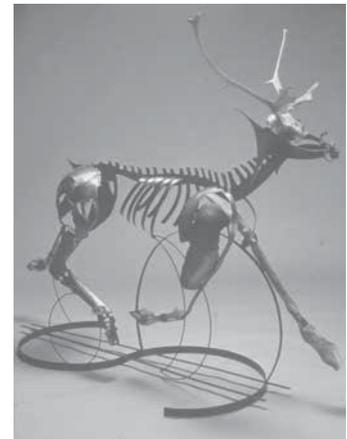
Extensions

1. Have the class study the coats of arms of other Canadian provinces and territories and learn what each symbolizes.
2. Read a story or legend that involves caribou and have a class discussion about the symbolism in the story.

Evaluation

Discuss with students:

1. What a symbol is and why humans use animals as symbols.
2. How caribou are portrayed as symbols and whether or not the portrayals are accurate.



Tundra Ghost by Willow Q. Jones, Fairbanks, Alaska. 1998. Metal and caribou bone sculpture. (Photo used with permission of artist.)

