

RESPONSIBLE USE OF NATIVE AMERICAN THEMES IN WEST VIRGINIA 4-H CAMPING PROGRAMS

4-H camping has been an intrinsic part of the West Virginia 4-H program, since the first organized county camp in the United States, Camp Good Luck, was held in Randolph County in 1915. By providing a fun learning environment for 4-H members and volunteers, camping remains an important educational delivery method of the 4-H program.

State 4-H Boy's Club Leader William H. "Teepi" Kendrick introduced Native American-based themes into the West Virginia 4-H camping program in 1925. These themes were based on the work of other youth development professionals and scholars of Native American culture, especially D. Boone Queen and Ernest Thompson Seton. By incorporating these themes into the camping program, Kendrick hoped to foster a greater understanding of the values of Native American culture, including an appreciation of nature, concern for family and friends, spirituality, and persistence. The foundation of any current 4-H traditions is a combination of ceremonies, imagery, and customs of various Native American cultures.

Native American themes were incorporated into 4-H camping to make the program more thoughtful, respectful, and educational. However, some people have found the use of Native American themes inappropriate and offensive. After all, Native Americans have been victims of stereotyping and discrimination for decades. Although we may not have purposefully meant to be disrespectful with our practices, we need to be aware that if others find something wrong with our actions we may need to change them. It is important that we represent Native Americans' contributions to our nation's history in an accurate and positive way.

The following guidelines will help you evaluate your program and materials:

DO's:

- Do create opportunities for discussion about these issues with youths and volunteers. Work toward a consensus, with everyone agreeing to be respectful and sensitive.
- Do present Native Americans as appropriate role models to children.
- Do meet with local Native Americans and Native American advocacy groups to discuss the 4-H program. Request advice on how to keep the program true to today's Native American practices, ask Native Americans to volunteer with your program, and solicit resources and information to make your program more authentic.
- Do monitor your program to make sure any Native American-based themes are being used appropriately and responsibly. Take time to research the Native American tribes you reference in your program. Visit the library, museums, school, bookstores, and Internet.
- Do stay focused on the educational objectives of 4-H camping.

- Do portray Native Americans as they are today. Our youths and volunteers need to be aware that Native Americans are alive and living in their communities. It is important to find a balance between Native Americans in the past and those of today.
- Do avoid stereotypes and clichés. Use materials that demonstrate respect for and understanding of the sophistication of Native American societies.

DON'Ts:

- Don't assume Native Americans approve of your program, even if they don't openly oppose it. They may be busy dealing with their own concerns, and your issues may not be a priority.
- Don't assume that Native Americans want to be involved in your program. They may not share your feelings or want to discuss their history. Also, taking time off from work, transportation, etc., may be a problem.
- Don't expect a consensus; however, most Native Americans will object if we dismiss activities and customs that are important to them.
- Don't "play Indian" by dressing up in war paint or feathers. Avoid activities that portray stereotyped history of Native Americans; e.g., war whooping, war dances, etc.
- Don't use inappropriate slang to refer to Native Americans; e.g., "squaw," "red man," "buck," "wild Indians," etc. Refrain from speaking in broken English.
- Don't refer to practices as "the Seneca Tribe's (or other Native American name) ceremony." Because it is difficult to be authentic, it is best not to suggest that a presentation is, in fact, a ceremony of that nation.
- Don't focus on Native Americans of the past. Doing this can be both offensive and inaccurate.
- If you have Native Americans in your camps, don't assume that they know all about their own ancestry and the ancestry of all Native Americans.

As representatives of the 4-H program, we want to do the right thing. It is our responsibility to examine ourselves and our programs to ensure that our practices and attitudes are honest, sensitive, respectful, and responsible. Continuously reviewing and being aware of our practices will help us ensure that 4-H will remain a growing, viable program to serve the needs of today's youths.

References:

Anthropology Outreach Office, Smithsonian Institution. (January 30, 1999) Erasing Native American Stereotypes, from <http://www.nmnh.si.edu/anthro/outreach/sterotyp.html> retrieved June 7, 2002.

Y-Indian Program Medallions. (n.d.) Responsible Use of the Native American Theme, From the YMCA of the USA, from http://www.y-indianguides.com/pfm_p_responsibleuse.htm retrieved April 9, 2002.