LEARNING MATERIALS

DIICYEUGHAN NAII TAII TR’EEDEAA
(We Will Walk the Trail of Our Ancestors)

By Princess Daazhraii Johnson (Neets’aii Gwich’in) and Alisha Carlson (Neets’aii Gwich’in)
Reciprocity
The way of life that centers mutual exchange and sharing amongst all beings — past, present, and future, seen and unseen — and the Earth
Alongside members of our community, it was an honor to explore the theme of ‘Reciprocity’ as well as our connection to the vadzhaih (caribou) and what it means to be a Gwich’iın person. We come from a heavily documented community with regard to our work keeping the calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd safe from oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, yet it is challenging to relay the nature of our spiritual relationship to the vadzhaih and to all life. Through the use of the Gwich’iın language and visuals created from our own perspective, we are able to better express this relationship. We are fortunate to have the teachings of our Ancestors and our Elders to guide us. Listening to Reverend Trimble Gilbert’s voice and wisdom, we hope that our audience is also able to reflect on what it means to be a human being and what values we are passing along to future generations. May we all be guided to restore balance with ourselves, one another, and our beautiful Mother Earth.” — Princess and Alisha

Princess Daazhraii Johnson
Neets’aii Gwich’iın

Princess Daazhraii Johnson (Neet’saii Gwich’in) is a writer/director/actor/producer and is committed to helping to build capacity for other Alaska Native filmmakers. She is on the board of Native Movement, NDN Collective and the Institute of American Indian Arts. She is a Sundance Film Alum, a Nia Tero Storytelling Fellow, and a Creative Producer and screenwriter for the first two seasons of the Peabody award-winning PBS Kids series, Molly of Denali.

Alisha Carlson
Neets’aii Gwich’iın

Alisha Carlson (Neets’aii Gwich’in) follows in the footsteps of her Ancestor’s creativity and imagination. In addition to her filmmaking endeavors, she works for the Arctic Village Tribal Council and is a mother to her two children. She has her AAS degrees in Accounting and Business. She has always been active in ensuring that Gwich’iın dance and songs continue for generations to come. She looks forward to making more films in the Gwich’iın language that uplift her beautiful culture.
FILM SYNOPSIS

Each element in nature is purposeful and related

A grandfather teaches his granddaughter, a young Gwich’in mother named Alisha, how reciprocity is embedded in all aspects of life. The northern lights warm the caribou; the caribou help feed and sustain the community; the community honors the connections. Each element in nature is purposeful and related. In turn, these connections bring new meaning to Alisha and her wishes for her children and for all living beings.
In this film, we are drawn into the beauty of the Arctic homelands of the Gwich’in people. The filmmakers give viewers a glimpse of Gwich’in culture through the window of the Gwich’in language; for them, this film is a deliberate act of language protection for the benefit of the Gwich’in people. Alisha's daughter, Gracie, is one of four Gwich’in children to be enrolled in the Tanan Ch’at’oh language immersion school, revitalizing the language. Viewers are introduced to filmmaker Princess Daazhraii Johnson and to Alisha Carlson, who is a proud mother of two beautiful Athabascan children. Alisha's grandfather is a traditional chief, and a practitioner of the ancient land-based Gwich’in traditions. In the film, Alisha says:

I'll always remember my grandfather’s stories about what it means to be a Gwich’in person.

We want our children to live like our Ancestors.

She shares what she has been taught about their sacred connection to the caribou (vadzaih).

We eat the caribou and we also know them. And the caribou know us as humans too. We really have knowledge of them. And so we live off of them. We also dream of the caribou.

The elder teaches younger community members how to butcher a caribou and how to disperse the meat. We see the interspersing of images that link the migration of the caribou with Alisha walking along a trail with her baby. In this manner, the filmmakers accentuate the Ancestral and on-going connection between the caribou and the Gwich’in people. The food systems are continuous — the health of the caribou, the blueberries, and other traditional foods all depend upon the overall health of their waters, the land, and air. From nursing caribou, to Alisha nursing her daughter, Gracie, we see these rich nutrients, which come directly from the land, being passed along to the next generation. These images help relay a timeless cycle of reciprocity between humans and their relatives in the natural world.

Grandfather talks about the Gwich’in sharing culture, which revolves around their relationship with vadzaih.

Unto this day, we are still taking care of each other and we plan for the future by ensuring the young people now understand this sharing culture. And it is for this purpose that I talk to you now. What we are doing now... people who are growing up now have never heard this. If you learn this well then you will teach the children.

In this way, the generations are connected to each other through the life of vadzaih and its power to sustain the lives of the Gwich’in people.
Caring for the Land, Nurturing the Language (Continued)

In Gwich’in, reciprocity is enacted at the center of community life. Through language we learn that, like other Indigenous cultures, the word “reciprocity” has no direct translation into a single Gwich’in word but rather it is embedded in the values of the Gwich’in culture. Most if not all Indigenous languages are verb-based as opposed to English, which is noun-based. Reciprocity is enacted in the handing down of cultural traditions to younger generations. Despite the cultural disruptions Gwich’in have endured through colonialism (which includes threats to other traditional foods like Chinook salmon, aka King salmon), Gwich’in people still take care of each other through their culture of sharing, and it is by teaching it to children that they ensure its survival.

RECIPROCITY

THE MAN WHO BECAME A CARIBOU
Craig Mishler and Kenneth Frank, 33.
Used by permission.
Discussion Questions

**MEANING**
What meaning does the film’s title, Diiyeghanaii Taii Tr’eedaa (We Will Walk the Trail of Our Ancestors), have for you?

**RECIPROCITY**
In what ways is reciprocity central to the story told in this film?

**RELATIONSHIP**
How would you describe the relationship between the Gwich’in language, culture, and subsistence way of life? What role does the Porcupine Caribou Herd play in this relationship?

**NOTICE**
What did you notice in the film about how Gwich’in people use all parts of the caribou they hunt?

**THE CALVING GROUNDS**
The potential destruction and desecration of the caribou’s calving grounds by the oil industry will have a profound impact on Gwich’in people. Can you see yourself standing in solidarity with Gwich’in, whose survival depends on the caribou as a main source of food, medicine, and cultural continuity?

**CLIMATE**
What do you think may be the impact of freezing rain, severe drought, melting permafrost and other signs of climate disruption on the Porcupine Caribou Herd and Gwich’in people?

**UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE**
How does the unique perspective and lens of the filmmakers as members of their community differ from other films that may have been made by outsiders?

**YOUR HEART**
If you have an opportunity to speak with someone about this film, from your heart to theirs, what would you want them to know and what would you want them to do?
**KEEP LEARNING**

**Additional Learning Resources**

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<tr>
<th>Resource Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Molly of Denali educator resources:</td>
<td><a href="https://mass.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/molly-of-denali/">https://mass.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/molly-of-denali/</a></td>
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<td>Seedcast episode with Alisha and Princess talking about Gwich’in language:</td>
<td><a href="https://seedcast.buzzsprout.com/1206521/8715532">https://seedcast.buzzsprout.com/1206521/8715532</a></td>
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<td>Tanan Ch’at’oh, Gwich’in language immersion school</td>
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<td><a href="https://www.nativemovement.org/">https://www.nativemovement.org/</a></td>
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<td>This podcast brings you the voices of Indigenous Peoples in this time of political</td>
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<td>and climate insecurity. They tackle difficult discussions on who has access to land,</td>
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<td>water, and air and offer a contemporary understanding of what it means to be</td>
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<td>Indigenous and live in relation to what is often known as the “outdoors” or “the</td>
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<td>wild.” (Alaska Native host)</td>
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<td>Podcast: Coffee &amp; Quaq</td>
<td><a href="https://www.coffeeandquaq.com/">https://www.coffeeandquaq.com/</a></td>
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<td>A podcast to celebrate and explore contemporary Native life in urban Alaska.</td>
<td>(Alaska Native host)</td>
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<td>Impact of mining and oil rigs and harmful chemicals</td>
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<td>For information about the impact of mining and oil rigs and harmful chemicals on air,</td>
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<td>water, and food, and human health in Alaska and how to protect from exposure, see</td>
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<td>Alaska Native Knowledge Network</td>
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Vadzaih


Production Crew

James C. Johnson III, Princess Daazhraii Johnson, Alisha 'Diinashii' Carlson, and Maya Salganek

Ryler Carlson, Aldzak Johnson and Gracie Carlson (Gwich’in) enjoying time on the land. Photo by Keri Oberly

Maya Salganek films Aldzak Johnson and Tyler Carlson (Gwich’in) Photo by Keri Oberly

Maya Salganek and James C. Johnson III (Gwich’in) on the first production of Diiyeghan naii Taii Tr’eedaa. Photo by Keri Oberly

Alisha Carlson (Gwich’in) carrying her baby, Gracie, during a shoot. Photo by Keri Oberly

In Association With:

reciprocity.org
In Association With

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Resources

REQUEST

Request an educational screening or someone to speak online to your class.

LISTEN

Listen to a pre-recorded introduction to the film and post-screening conversation.

NEXT EPISODE

In the next episode, "What They've Been Taught," viewers learn about Giduwa people, Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, and Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians through the narration of respected elder and language teacher, Tom Belt.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

This discussion guide was written by Dina Gilio-Whitaker and Mishy Lesser, Ed. D. in consultation with the filmmakers and Reciprocity Project producers.

CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

The Reciprocity Project embraces Indigenous value systems that have bolstered communities since the beginning of time. To heal from the climate crisis, we must recognize that we are in relationship with Earth, a place that was in balance until the Industrial Age. This short film series and multimedia platform, made in partnership with Indigenous storytellers and their communities worldwide, invites learning from time-honored and current Indigenous ways of being.

https://www.reciprocity.org/

Nia Tero is a US-based non-profit working in solidarity with Indigenous peoples and movements worldwide with a mission of securing Indigenous guardianship of vital ecosystems. Nia Tero is committed to an antiracist and inclusive culture centering Indigenous rights, wisdom, practices, worldviews, and protocols.

https://www.niatero.org/

Upstander Project encourages decolonization and upstander behavior through compelling documentary films and learning resources. Upstander Project's goals are to overcome indifference to social injustice, develop the skills of upstanders, and contribute to action-oriented campaigns in response to vital social issues.

https://upstanderproject.org/

Recreational Equipment, Inc. also known as REI, is an American retail and outdoor recreation services corporation. It is organized as a consumers' co-operative and dedicated to outdoor education. Across films, podcasts, and editorial programs, REI Co-op Studios develops and produces stories that entertain, enrich, and explore the power of time spent outside, while complementing the co-op's broader climate and racial equity, diversity, and inclusion commitments.

https://www.rei.com/newsroom/article/rei-co-op-studios