This lesson will introduce students to the Indigenous Ainu of Japan and to ideas of sustainability by looking at ways in which the Ainu practice cultural, economical, and environmental sustainability. These materials were designed for grades 6-12 and university students, but could easily be adapted for younger children.

**Lesson outcomes:**

Students will:
1. Learn about the Indigenous Ainu of Japan
2. Be able to compare the Ainu to Native American and other Indigenous groups
3. Learn about sustainability in Indigenous peoples’ contexts
4. Gain cultural perspective and appreciation for the Ainu people

**Targeted Age Group:**
- Grades 6-12 or early university levels
- Grades K-5
  - Less emphasis on Ainu/Japanese discrimination history
  - More focus on cultural output – epic poetry (story provided), textiles, and music and dance

**Targeted Subjects:**
- Social Studies
- History
- Politics
- World Civilizations
- Arts

**Materials:**
- Webinar: *Out of the Shadows: The Ainu of Japan – Their History, Struggles, and Traditions*
- Suggested reading and resources: *Out of the Shadows-Resources* in FCCEAS webinar archives
- Video files (optional): YouTube has numerous examples of Ainu dance and music. These can be used to strengthen the webinar for 9-12 and university students or as supplement to the webinar for younger students by emphasizes Ainu cultural output. Search for: “Ainu dance unesco,” “mukkuri,” “tonkori,” “Ainu music”
LESSON PLAN (GRADES 6-12, UNIVERSITY):

1. **Framing:** Since most students have no knowledge of the Ainu of the Japan, beginning the lesson with Native American people will spark ideas of Indigenous people, struggles, issues, cultural rights, history, etc.

   Have students brainstorm what they know about Native Americans. Have them list out their ideas and share with the class. Write their answers on the board for everyone to see and take special note of those ideas that can relate to the Ainu: “native,” “Indigenous,” “minority,” “forgotten,” “discriminated,” “forcibly relocated,” etc.

   Once these ideas have been established, explain that the lesson will center on another Indigenous group that has faced many of the same issues as Native Americans.

2. **Webinar:** Watch webinar entitled *Out of the Shadows: The Ainu of Japan – Their History, Struggles, and Traditions.* Have students right down information based on the classroom subject: e.g. Social Studies – racial issues, discrimination, etc. History – specific dates of Ainu/Japanese history, etc.

3. **Lecture:** The webinar focused primarily on the history of the Ainu people. To continue more on sustainability, talking points are provided below.

4. **Writing/Discussion:** Have students write a short essay on sustainability or have them break into groups to discuss sustainability. Some questions to consider:
   - Why is it important to Indigenous people to be sustainable?
   - What elements of sustainability presented here can be applied to our lives as Americans?
   - What can we do to help Indigenous people be sustainable?

LESSON PLAN (GRADES K-5):

1. **Framing:** Since most students have no knowledge of the Ainu of the Japan, beginning the lesson with Native American people will spark ideas of Indigenous people, history, art, etc.

   Ask students what they know about Native Americans – who are they?, how many?, history with U.S.?, music and dance?, etc. Take this opportunity to discuss ideas of indigeneity and Indigenous people being connected to the land and environment.
Once these ideas have been established, explain that the lesson will center on another Indigenous group that has faced many of the same issues as Native Americans.

2. **Webinar**: The webinar entitled *Out of the Shadows: The Ainu of Japan – Their History, Struggles, and Traditions* will be used as background material for the teacher.

In replace of the webinar, show videos or images suggested under “Materials” in this document. Additionally the suggested reading (provided in *Out of the Shadows-Resources* on the FCCEAS webinar archive) for Grade K-5 can be used to discuss the Ainu people and their connection to the land of Hokkaido.

3. **Lecture**: If desired, the conversation is easily shifted to sustainability. This is an important idea to teach younger students and the Ainu provide an excellent case study to discuss such topics. Talking points are provided below.

4. **Activity**: Have the students talk about the following:
   - Why is it important to Indigenous people to be sustainable?
   - What elements of sustainability presented here can be applied to our lives as Americans?
   - What can we do to help Indigenous people be sustainable?

**Sustainability Talking Points:**

The Ainu provide an excellent case study to talk about sustainability especially from cultural, economic, and environmental standpoints. Section One includes talking points for Grades 6-12 and university students. These are more conceptual and lead deeper discussions if prompted by the teacher. Section two includes talking points for Grades K-5. These are broader ideas and include Ainu handiworks as examples of sustainability.

Use teacher discretion to determine what ideas are appropriate for individual classrooms and age groups.

**Section One (Grades 6-12, university):**

1. **Framing Sustainability Issues**: The Ainu, like many Indigenous people, have profound connections to their native lands. A large issue facing the Ainu is displacement from their hereditary lands and government control of natural resources. A key example of this is the Nibutani Dam discussed in the webinar. Though Japanese courts sided with the Ainu who brought the claim that Japan illegally seized Ainu land to build the dam, the seizure had already taken place
and the dam already built. Discuss with your students the issues that native people have faced with this. How does society make up for this? What measures can be put into place to prevent future occurrences and what can be done to recoup loss for native people?

The following should be presented together and as a continuous cycle. I like to think of them in the following way:

This equilateral triangle shows the importance of a balanced approach to these three areas of sustainability. No area is more important for the sustainability of Indigenous people living in a globalized world.

2. **Cultural Sustainability**: As the webinar shows, the Ainu faced considerable loss from assimilation. Today, many are contemplating ways in which to be culturally sustainable. Many Ainu turned away from their Ainu heritage to avoid discrimination. How do people recover from this? Today, many Ainu are attempting to rebuild their personal heritage within Ainu contexts, now turning away from their assimilated Japanese heritage.

Many Ainu have used tourism as a space for cultural revitalization and sustainability. Though some would say that tourism creates negative impacts, such as “inauthentic” representations of the people, I assert that today the Ainu use tourism to their advantage. Tourism settings run by Ainu, utilized music and dance as well as handiworks to display their cultural heritage in viewable forms. These forms act as representations for the Ainu, but also act as learning points for the Ainu themselves. By practicing these traditions, tourism provides a conduit in which to learn their heritage. Therefore the Ainu are using tourism as a means to cultural sustainability. Without tourism could cultural sustainability be possible? This might be a good discussion question for the classroom.

3. **Economic Sustainability**: Tourism also provides subsistence through Ainu activities. Japan is a globalized nation and as such most Japanese citizens focus
their life’s goal on economic stability through higher education, high earnings, and material wealth. The Ainu traditionally would have avoided such things, as would other Indigenous peoples. Many Ainu young adults leave their families in pursuit of higher paying jobs, often in Tokyo. But for those who stay, or come back, tourism provides a business in which to gain subsistence but also stay connected to their traditional heritage.

Through tourism, the Ainu create handicrafts, musical instruments, recordings, writings, and more for sale in tourist shops. By concentrating their efforts on traditional handicrafts or producing Ainu music and dance, they are able to earn livings through tourism rather than other business that would not allow the time spent on Ainu crafts. It is one thing to become economically sustained through tourism and tourism being economically sustained. Tourism relies on the seasons and a draw from tourists. Despite this, many Ainu feel comfortable living day to day as tourism merchants because it allows them to economically sustained through Ainu handicraft. Additionally many Ainu are able to live more traditionally and away from urban settings by living and working in these tourism areas.

4. Environmental Sustainability: In many ways this seems to be the most important “sustainability” idea discussed throughout the world. As global and industrial societies, we have significantly effected the environment. Indigenous peoples are examples of ways in which to live environmentally conscience and I propose that the Ainu are actively pursuing sustainability efforts. In fact, the Ainu have for centuries understood that there is equilibrium between humans and the earth. A delicate balance that must be treated with respect.

Despite gains in economic sustainability through the creation of tourism sites, the Ainu do attempt to remain environmentally conscience and sustainable. The lands on which these tourist sites are located have been painstakingly developed in a way to remain connected to their surroundings like their ancestors lived. Materials used to create traditional housing, clothing, foodstuffs, etc. are meticulously collected locally and all efforts are put into place to replenish those natural resources. Many Ainu choose to forage for greens and other foods rather than relying solely on supermarkets. This is a conscience effort to remain dependent on the local environment rather than settle on commercial goods.

5. These three areas of sustainability – cultural, economic, and environmental – are in a continuous cycle for the Ainu. Each component plays into the next and is intrinsically linked. The same could be said for many Indigenous groups, but the Ainu reliance on tourism does put them into a different category than many native peoples.
6. For more examples of environmental and cultural sustainability, the cultural output examples below could be shared and discussed with older ages.

Section Two (Grades K-5):

The Ainu are a great case study to discuss sustainability. Rather than going through the complex relationships between cultural, economic, and environmental as seen above, I suggest discussing cultural and environmental sustainability in regards to cultural output. Below find examples of this output in the form of (1) musical instruments, (2) dance, and (3) handicrafts. Additionally the (4) Marimo Festival is discussed as an example of Ainu connection to the land.
1. Musical instruments:
   - **Tonkori** – this instrument is native to the Ainu and has a long history.
     o Its body is made of spruce or other hard wood local to the island of Hokkaido.
     o Its strings were once made out of fibers from vegetation but now are made of nylon for durability.
     o An animal pelt and intricate carvings are used for embellishment and often have cultural significance.
     o As an interesting side note, the tonkori is said to in the shape of woman.
     o See images 1 and 2 for examples of the tonkori.
• **Mukkuri** – also native instrument to the Ainu.
  o Made from a single thin piece of bamboo, an easily regrown material.
  o Similar to folk metal jaw harps of Europe and the U.S.
  o Music imitates nature: sounds of animals, wind, water, clapping rocks, etc. A musical representation of Ainu connection to the land and nature.
  o This instrument is deceptively simple; the sounds produced come from resonance in the mouth and can be quite difficult to manipulate the oral cavity to produce different sounds.
  o See images 3 and 4 for examples of the mukkuri.

![](image3.png)  Image 3: Mukkuri with actuating string from the top and the stabilizing string on bottom

![](image4.png)  Image 4: Ainu woman playing a mukkuri
2. Dance:
   - Much of Ainu dance is based on nature. Several examples imitate animals (e.g. frogs, cranes, grasshoppers, foxes, etc.). These imitations are a physical sign of the connection between the Ainu and the land of Hokkaido. These dances also are often connected to ceremonial life discussed in the webinar.
     - YouTube clips can be used to show this dance and others like it.
   - Crane Dance:
     - As discussed in the webinar, this dance imitates the famous white cranes of Japan.
     - Note the exchange between the women standing and kneeling, this is in reference to a mother crane teaching her young to fly.

*Image 5: Ainu crane dance in Akan, Japan*
3. **Handicrafts**
- Webinar discussed the use of textiles as a form of oral tradition and cultural sustainability. In addition to these textiles, which are good examples, the Ainu also produce several daily use items that are made from local materials.
- **Textiles**
  - Discuss the textile examples from the webinar with this additional detail.

![Image 6: Cotton Ainu robe with intricate details.](image)
Image 7: Robe made from tree back fibers known as atush. This example is embellished with cotton applique. These fibers are spun from tree bark used for multiple purposes from robes to satchels to shoes.
A raincoat robe made out of salmon skin. Salmon are a crucial part to Ainu livelihood. Every part of the salmon is utilized in food preparation, handicrafts, and clothing.
- **Saranip baskets**
  - These handcrafted baskets are made from locally gathered straw and occasionally bark fiber.
  - These were used to gather food, carry goods, and even carry salmon from the river.
  - These baskets are nearly identical to baskets made by the Inuit of North America.

*Image 9: Saranip basket made of straw*
4. The Marimo Festival

- Marimo [Mah-ree-moe] are small colonies of green algae that naturally form into spherical mounds. These algae colonies are only found in Lake Akan of eastern Hokkaido and a small lake in Scotland.
- The Ainu have developed a festival around these nationally protected natural resource.
- This festival includes dancing, chanting, singing, and a ceremonial releasing of marimo back into the water of Lake Akan by Ainu elders.
- The Ainu link themselves to the marimo because they are both rare and unique elements of Japan – needing protection and respect as well as more knowledge to outsiders. This unique festival is a great example of Ainu environmental sustainability.

Image 10: Marimo algae colony
Image 11: Ainu elder place several marimo back into the water of Lake Akan during the Marimo Festival held every October.