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Level: Grades 3-5

Subjects: English Language Arts,
Social Studies

Skills: cooperating, communicating,
listening, following directions, creating

Lesson 1: Maine's Fiber Beginnings

*Mary Dickinson Bird, PhD, author - Created through the
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For thousands of years, the people of Maine have been using fiber to make their lives easier and more comfortable. Maine's earliest inhabitants used animal furs and skins to warm and shelter themselves. About 11,500 years ago as ice age glaciers retreated toward the north, Maine's first hunters used animal tendons and muscle fibers to tie stone spear points to wooden shafts. The spears were launched with a special tool called an "atlatl."

Based on the large size of some of the spear points that have been found, archaeologists believe that these early Maine hunters might have been able to bring down giant beavers, woolly mammoths, and mastodons. In fact, there are several Algonquian Indian legends that mention giant elephant-like animals. Exciting as it is to think about hunting for these prehistoric beasts, archaeologists report that the earliest Maine peoples probably were more successful using their spears to hunt caribou, along with small mammals and birds.

As time passed, the landscape changed, the Maine people changed, and their use of fiber changed, too. The ice age hunters may have moved farther north, following herds of caribou. Those who stayed found themselves in a warming region. By about 7,000 years ago, oaks and other seed-bearing plants were more common.

The Maine inhabitants of this period used tools for grinding seeds and nuts to eat. They used roots and bark fiber to weave fish nets and weirs. They wove baskets from other plant materials. To cook their food, they placed meat or plants in a basket, filled it with water, then added hot stones.



Over the next centuries, there were many more changes in the landscape, plants, and animals of Maine, but the use of plant and animal fibers for hunting and fishing tools, baskets, clothing and shelter continued and improved. The people adapted to their changing landscape, beginning to use canoes for hunting, fishing, and trading. They developed agricultural settlements where they grew corn and other crops, but they also moved with the seasons to follow migrating fish, birds, and mammals that fed their people.

The men continued to use plant and animal fibers to fashion their hunting and trapping tools. It was the work of the women to tend the crops and gather healing herbs and firewood, and to weave baskets, mats, fishing gear, and shelters. It was this complex and well-adapted survival pattern that greeted the first Europeans to explore and settle in Maine, nearly 1,000 years ago.

The fiber traditions of Maine's native peoples are still carried on today by the weaving of baskets that are recognized all over the world for their beautiful use of birch, ash, and sweetgrass, among other plants.

