

A photograph showing a group of people, including a young girl in the foreground, interacting with a grey horse. The girl is smiling and touching the horse's nose. Other people are visible in the background, some wearing yellow gloves. The setting is outdoors with green hills and trees.

**Exploring  
Nature & Culture**

**“We were the  
first tribe to breed  
for sure-footedness,  
endurance, and speed.”**

**— Rosa Yearout,  
Nez Perce Tribal Member &  
Appaloosa Breeder**

# Horses, Salmon & Dams

**T**ouch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. Our five senses give us basic information about the world, but they also can take an ordinary classroom lesson and bring it to life.

That's the reason Saint George's sixth-grade teachers Joelle Neiwert and Tyler Hartanov take their 37 students on an exploration of the Nez Perce Reservation east of Lewiston, Idaho. Here are some of the sensory experiences from this year's annual mid-May trip that memorably reinforced their middle school curriculum:

In groups of three or four, students reach out to **touch** the forehead and flanks of two gray Appaloosa ponies. The white-eyed horses with distinctive spotted rumps are introduced by Rosa Yearout, who tells of her great-grandfather who fought alongside Chief Joseph in the Nez Perce's 1877 war with the U.S. Army on horses like these.

In the National Park Service's museum, students gather around a plate filled with small chunks of roasted camas root. They **taste** the Nez Perce staple — high in fat and fiber — that Lewis and Clark's expedition gorged on after emerging from the Bitterroot Mountains on their way to the Pacific. Dug up with a traditional pointed stick, the dark brown bulbs taste like chocolate truffles that have been left near a campfire too long.

In the tribe's hatchery, dim lights faintly illuminate a warehouse full of long green tanks stocked with thousands of three-inch salmon. The **smell** of fish permeates the air as students peer into the tanks and a hatchery worker explains how the Chinook, Steelhead, and Coho fingerlings will restore runs in streams where dams have eliminated the original fish stocks. He says, "tomorrow we will release some in a stream so remote that the only way to get them there is by helicopter."

Sitting under a tree close to a 30-foot hill of grass-covered rocks, the students

**listen** to the Nez Perce creation story.

Sacred to the tribe, the Heart of the Monster marks the place where trickster Coyote killed a giant, whose death created all of the Northwest tribes. Having studied different religions and cultures all year, the students quietly take in the scene before running back to their bus (or around the fenced hill) with typical 11-year-old enthusiasm.

And after walking halfway across the top of Dworshak Dam, a guide leads the sixth graders to the front edge of the massive structure so they can **look** down the dizzying 700-foot concrete cliff to the diminutive river draining off through the green valley below their feet. "Standing up there, they can see why it was pointless to even try building a fish ladder up a dam that size," says Joelle. "It also explains the need for the federal hatchery they just visited four miles downstream in Orofino."

After learning the six stages of a salmon's life cycle in science, writing persuasive essays on Northwest dams, and studying Nez Perce culture in their classroom, these threads all come together on the two-day trip. Having done their research, the kids ask intelligent questions at each stop.

"They understand the significance of what they see and can analyze the choices and trade-offs people have made," says Tyler. "A goal of sixth grade is for them to develop that critical thinking skill."

Watching the milk chocolate brown water of the ironically named Clearwater River flow swiftly by, Tyler views the trip as the culmination of the students' learning experience. "It's education at its finest," he says. "They prep in three or four subjects, go and experience the people and places, and then return and reflect on it. It's exciting to see how much kids retain from this way of learning."

— John Carter

## Students explore Nez Perce culture and modern adaptations



**View from atop Dworshak Dam, feeling furs, Max at the Lapwai Mission founded by his ancestors, and watching the fish at the Nez Perce hatchery**