

Handout A: Beached Whales and Great Tales

Imagine a major event where you live that is so unusual that stories are created to pass along to future generations. For example, consider a whale getting stranded along the shoreline. What do you think might have happened in times past when people knew very little about the oceans and these great beasts came ashore on rare occasions?

Such an extreme event might end up playing a role in a local or cultural story. In fact, the story might be composed just to explain the event, or be used to teach a lesson. Storytellers might describe what happened; how the people reacted; what they thought about a dead or dying whale; what became of the whale or its remains; an explanation for this occurrence; and what might be learned from this event.

The environment often plays a major role in stories, even more so in the stories of traditional cultures that live off the land and sea. This happens not only when there is a unique event to be explained, but also because the natural environment is so much a part of our lives.

The activities in this Learning Center will show how the natural environment is incorporated into stories from four different environmental regions and four different indigenous cultures. The lesson includes Native whale stories from Alaska, Hawai'i, northern Canada, and Massachusetts.

You will read or watch on video, and then research these stories and their locations, looking for ways the natural environment plays a central role in the story and what may be similar and different in the way the same phenomenon is used each.

Later, you may want to research other natural phenomena such as storms, floods, earthquakes, or harvests, and see how they figure in traditional and contemporary stories. You could pick one of these phenomena and look for stories from different locations—different cultures or environments—to compare how the phenomenon was used in the stories from the different locales.