Water in Canada's History

Grades 5/6 • Pen Pals for Water

Lesson Details	
Grades	**5-6**
Subjects	**English Language Arts, Science, Social Studies** ***Note:*** *Curriculum connections vary by grade and province/territory. Refer to the Curriculum Connections document for more information.*
Topic	**The importance of Water in Canada's History**
Lesson 2	**80 minute lesson**
Date Taught	

LEARNING GOALS

By the end of this lesson, students will:

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- Understand how rivers, lakes, and waterways shaped Canadian history.
- Explore the importance of water in Indigenous communities, trade, settlement, and economies.
- Recognize human impacts on water over time.
- Develop critical thinking skills through collaboration, research, discussion, and reflection.
- Connect historical water use to current and future environmental challenges.

INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE

- Indigenous Peoples have lived alongside and cared for lakes, rivers, wetlands, coastlines, and other waters across what is now Canada for thousands of years.
- Waterways have supported many aspects of community life, including:
  - Food systems, such as fishing, hunting, gathering, and growing food
  - Transportation and trade routes
  - Cultural practices, teachings, and ceremonies
- Relationships with water are unique to each Nation, community, and region. A few examples from across the country include:
  - **Stó:lō** The Stó:lō, whose name means “People of the River,” have longstanding relationships with the Fraser River and its fisheries, including salmon.
  - **Syilx Okanagan:** Water is deeply connected to Syilx culture, ways of life, and responsibilities to care for the land and water for future generations.
  - **Anishinaabe:** For many Anishinaabe communities in the Great Lakes region, lakes, rivers, and wetlands have long supported fishing, harvesting, travel, and community life.
  - **Haudenosaunee:** Haudenosaunee communities have longstanding farming traditions, including growing corn, beans, and squash. Lakes, rivers, and streams have also supported fishing and food systems.
  - **Métis:** Rivers and lakes have long supported Métis travel, fishing, harvesting, trade, and connections between communities.
  - **Inuit:** Across Inuit Nunangat, freshwater, ice, and marine environments are important to community life, culture, travel, and harvesting.
- For many Indigenous Peoples, water has cultural, spiritual, and ecological importance.
- Caring for water and the ecosystems it supports is connected to responsibilities to the land, community, and future generations.

Note: *These are only a few examples. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities across Canada have distinct cultures, Knowledge systems, practices, and relationships with water.*

MATERIALS

- Chart paper or whiteboard for mind map
- Worksheets:
  - Fur traders
  - Explorers
  - Settlers
  - Indigenous Peoples & Water

Lesson Flow – Quick Guide

1. **Water Shapes Our Lives Mind Map (15 minutes)**
   Purpose: Compare historical and modern uses of water in daily life.
   Activity: Students create a class mind map comparing how water was used 200 years ago compared to today, organized by daily life, food/farming, travel/trade, and power/industry.
2. **Water in History (45 minutes)**
   Purpose: Understand how different groups across history in Canada depended on waterways for survival, travel, trade, and exploration.
   Activity: Students are divided into three groups, Fur Traders, Settlers, and Explorers. Each group uses a worksheet to explore how water influenced their group's daily life and work. Students then share their findings with the class to highlight the unique role of water for each group.
3. **Indigenous Peoples & Water: Life Along Rivers and Lakes (15-20 Minutes)**
   Purpose: Explore how relationships with water can reflect sustainable, place-based knowledge and practices.
   Activity: Students collaboratively complete a worksheet together to explore how Indigenous Peoples have used and cared for waterways, highlighting their environmental knowledge, respect for natural systems, and sustainable practices developed over thousands of years.

Assessment

- **Formative:** Participation in brainstorming, role-play, map/document analysis.
- **Summative:** Worksheets (historical map, research sheet), reflection on future water predictions.
- **Self-Assessment:** "One new thing I learned about water in Canada's history and how it affects communities today."

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Lesson Info and Teaching Steps

Activity 1: Water Shapes Our Lives

Mind Map (15 minutes)

Purpose: Compare past and present uses of water.

Activity Steps:

1. Set up the mind map. Draw a central circle on the board labelled “Water Uses.”
2. Create two main branches from the centre:
    - Today
    - 200 Years Ago
3. Start with today. Ask students to brainstorm ways that people and communities use water today. Add their ideas to the Today side of the mind map.
    a. Use prompts if students need help thinking of ideas:
        - Where do you use water in your day?
        - Who else uses water in your community?
        - What jobs or activities need water?
        - What would happen if you didn't have easy access to water?
4. Shift to 200 years ago. Ask students to imagine daily life in the early 1800s. What might have been different about how people accessed and used water?
    a. Use prompts to guide the discussion:
        - How did people get water before most homes had taps and pipes?
        - How might rivers and lakes have been like “roads” in the past?
        - What jobs or activities depended on water?
        - How might water have been used to grow or gather food?
        - Why might people have chosen to live near water?
5. Organize student ideas on both sides of the mind map using four categories:
    a. Daily Life
    b. Food & Farming
    c. Travel & Trade
    d. Power & Industry
6. Compare the two sides. Ask students to look for similarities and differences between Today and 200 Years Ago. Discuss:
    - Which water uses have stayed similar?
    - Which have changed?
    - Has the importance of water changed, or just the ways we use it?
7. Optional – Look to the future. Add a third branch labelled “Future.” Ask students to predict how people might access or use water differently in the future.

Teacher Answer Guide

Today

- Daily Life: Drinking, cooking, cleaning, bathing, washing clothes, watering plants
- Food & Farming: Irrigation, livestock, food production and processing
- Travel & Trade: Ships, ferries, recreational boating, transportation of goods
- Power & Industry: Hydroelectricity, manufacturing, water treatment and other industrial uses

200 Years Ago – Early 1800s

- Daily Life: Collecting water from rivers, lakes, springs or wells; drinking, cooking and washing
- Food & Farming: Watering crops, caring for livestock, fishing, gathering and food preparation
- Travel & Trade: Canoes and other boats, waterways as important travel and trade routes, communities established near water
- Power & Industry: Water-powered mills and other small-scale industries located along waterways

Teaching note — These are examples only. Water use 200 years ago varied considerably between Indigenous Nations and communities, settlers, geographic regions, and ways of life. Encourage students to think about different experiences rather than imagining that everyone accessed or used water in the same way.

Activity 2: Water in History (45 minutes)

Purpose: Understand how different groups in Canadian history relied on waterways for survival, travel, trade, and exploration.

Activity Steps:

1. Divide the class into groups
    a. Create three groups: Fur Traders, Settlers, and Explorers.

    b. Assign each group their corresponding worksheet: Fur Trader, Settlers, Explorers.
2. Students explore their group's water use
    a. Each group reads their worksheet and discusses:
        - How did water influence daily life or work for your group?
        - What activities depended on rivers, lakes, or waterways?
        - Record key points on the worksheet
3. Prepare to Share
    a. Each group summarizes their findings in a few sentences or bullet points explaining:
        - How their group used water
        - Why water was important to them
            - Optional: Draw or diagram important water uses for your group.
4. Class Sharing / Discussion
    a. Groups present their findings to the class.

Highlight differences and similarities in water use among Fur Traders, Settlers, and Explorers.

Activity 3: Indigenous Peoples & Water: Life Along Rivers and Lakes

Purpose: Explore how Indigenous peoples' relationships with water reflect sustainable, place-based knowledge and practices.

Activity Steps:

1. Introduce the activity and explain that students will explore how Indigenous Peoples have lived in relationship with water and waterways across what is now Canada for thousands of years.
2. Work through the Indigenous Peoples & Water worksheet together as a class, reading each section and discussing the examples provided.
3. Pause throughout the worksheet to encourage students to think about how waterways supported travel, food, daily life, and community, as well as the importance of caring for water.
4. Complete the Think & Write and Compare & Reflect questions through group discussion and student reflection.

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Who Were Fur Traders?

Fur traders were people who bought, sold, and transported animal furs, especially beaver pelts, from the 1600s to the 1800s. The fur trade was one of the first big industries in what is now known as Canada.



There were several main groups involved in the fur trade:

1. Indigenous Peoples

- Primary trappers and suppliers of furs
- Held deep knowledge of the land, waterways, seasons, and animal behaviour
- Acted as traders, negotiators, guides, and interpreters
- Shaped the economic and cultural systems of the fur trade

2. Voyageurs

- Strong canoe paddlers who travelled huge distances
- Carried trade goods to Indigenous communities
- Brought furs back to trading posts

3. Trading Post Workers

- Worked for companies like the Hudson's Bay Company or North West Company

Managed posts, kept records, and organized trade

What Did Fur Traders Do?

- Travelled by canoe for hours every day
- Traded goods with Indigenous Peoples for furs
- Carried heavy loads across portages (up to 90 kg)
- Built and supplied trading posts
- Camped outdoors through tough weather and long journeys

Indigenous Nations were central to the fur trade.

They trapped and prepared furs, taught canoe routes and survival skills, acted as traders and negotiators, and helped shape the entire fur trade system.

Why Was Water So Important?

Water shaped every part of a fur trader's life.

Transportation

Rivers and lakes were the **main highways**. There were no roads across the wilderness.

Common water routes included:

- The St. Lawrence River
- The Ottawa River
- The Great Lakes
- The Red River
- The Mackenzie River

Canoes and Boats

Fur traders used:

- Birchbark canoes (light and fast)
- York boats (stronger for northern rivers)
- Regional styles, including the sturgeon-nosed canoe

Daily Survival

Water provided:

- Drinking and cooking water
- Directions for travel
- Campsites each night

Food like fish and wild plants

Season Challenges

When the seasons changed, fur traders adapted by using travel methods taught by Indigenous Peoples.

- **In winter, rivers and lakes froze**
  Traders travelled over snow and ice using snowshoes and sleds (toboggans)
- **In spring, melting ice caused flooding**
  Routes changed and travel could be dangerous or delayed
- **Journeys had to be carefully timed**
  Traders planned travel around freeze-up, break-up, storms, and water levels

In Summary

Fur traders helped shape early Canada, and water made their work possible.
Rivers and lakes connected people, supported trade, and created pathways across the land long before roads existed. Water wasn't just part of their journey, it was the heart of their entire way of life.

Think & Write

Name 3 of the most important waterways for the early Fur Traders.

Why do you think fur traders depended on rivers more than roads?

How would winter change a fur trader's journey?

Why do you think fur traders could not survive without help from Indigenous Nations?

Match the Word to Its Relationship to Water

Circle the correct line.

Fur Trader

- Water for staying, growing, and building communities
- Water for travelling, trading, and transporting goods

- Water for moving, mapping, and discovering new lands

As a group, prepare to tell the rest of the class about a day in the life of a Fur trader.

What did they do?

Why did they do it?

How did they do it?

What was the best part of being a Fur Trader?

What were some of their challenges?

Describe ways water was important to a Fur Trader?

Out of 10, how important do you think water was to a Fur Trader?



Who Were Settlers?

Settlers were people who moved from Europe and other parts of the world to establish new homes and communities. From the 1600s onward, many settlers chose to live near rivers, lakes, and coastlines because access to water was important for travel, food, farming, trade, and daily life.



Why Was Water Important to Settlers?

1. Daily Life

Settlers relied on water for almost everything:

- Drinking and cooking
- Washing clothes and dishes
- Caring for animals like cows, pigs, and chickens

Life was much harder if a settlement was far from a river, lake, or well.

2. Farming and Food

Settlers used water to:

- Grow crops

- Water livestock
- Fish in rivers and lakes

Many farms were built near rivers because the land was fertile and easy to water.

3. Transportation and Trade

Before roads and trains, waterways were the fastest way to travel.

Settlers used rivers and lakes to:

- Move people
- Transport goods
- Trade with other communities

4. Power and Industry

Flowing water provided energy for early industry:

- Water-powered mills ground grain into flour
- Sawmills cut lumber for building homes and furniture
- Access to water helped small settlements develop into thriving towns

Think & Write

Why do you think settlers built their homes close to water?

Name two ways water helped settlers survive.

What problems would settlers face if their water source became polluted or if a river dried up?

Name one Canadian city that started near water.

Match the Word to Its Relationship to Water

Circle the correct line.

Settler

- Water for staying, growing, and building communities
- Water for travelling, trading, and transporting goods
- Water for moving, mapping, and discovering new lands

As a group prepare to tell the rest of the class about a day in the life of a Settler.

What did they do?

Why did they do it?

How did they do it?

What was the best part of being a Settler?

What were some of their challenges?

Describe ways water was important to a Settler?

Out of 10, how important do you think water was to a Settler?



Who Were Explorers?

European explorers travelled long distances to map land and waterways, find travel and trade routes, and learn about resources. Many of these lands and waterways were already well known to Indigenous Peoples, and European explorers often relied on Indigenous knowledge, guides, and established travel routes during their journeys. Rivers and lakes were especially important for travelling across long distances.

How Did Explorers Use Water?

1. Travel and Navigation

Explorers used:

- Rivers
- Lakes
- Coastlines

Waterways acted like natural highways through forests and mountains.

2. Canoes and Boats

Explorers travelled by:

- Birchbark canoes (light and easy to carry over portages)
- Wooden boats (for carrying bigger loads)
- Ships along the coast

They followed routes first used by Indigenous Peoples, who shared their knowledge of the land. Canoe designs and travel routes made it possible to navigate even challenging rivers and lakes.

3. Survival

Water helped explorers:

- Drink and cook
- Catch fish
- Find campsites
- Stay oriented on long journeys

Explorers also learned from Indigenous Peoples how to read the water, track animals, and predict weather, which was essential for surviving harsh environments. Without water

routes, exploring Canada would have been nearly impossible.

4. Mapping Canada
Explorers used rivers to:

- Draw early maps
- Name places
- Connect regions

Many modern cities, like Montreal, Quebec City, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Ottawa, grew along the routes explorers once travelled.

Think & Compare

Why was water important to explorers?

Name one way Indigenous Peoples may have helped explorers use waterways?

Why were waterways safer than travelling through forests or mountains?

Why do many cities still exist along rivers explorers used?

Match the Word to Its Relationship to Water

Circle the correct line.

Settler

- Water for staying, growing, and building communities
- Water for travelling, trading, and transporting goods
- Water for moving, mapping, and discovering new lands

As a group prepare to tell the rest of the class about a day in the life of an Explorer.

What did they do?

Why did they do it?

How did they do it?

What was the best part of being an Explorer?

What were some of their challenges?

Describe ways water was important to an Explorer?

Out of 10, how important do you think water was to an Explorer?

Indigenous Peoples & Water: Life Along Rivers and Lakes

Indigenous Peoples have lived in relationship with lakes, rivers, wetlands, coastlines, and other waterways across what is now Canada for thousands of years. Water has supported communities in many ways, including travel, fishing, gathering food and medicines, trade, and cultural traditions. Today, Indigenous Nations continue to care for and protect these waterways, recognizing their importance to people, wildlife, and future generations.



Sturgeon-nose canoe (Yaqsuʔmiɬ) on Kootenay Lake (ʔakuq̓nuk). Image courtesy of Touchstone Nelson Archives, from the Virtual Museum of Canada website.

Rivers and Lakes as Travel Routes

Before roads and railways, rivers, lakes, and coastal waterways connected many communities across what is now Canada. These waterways made it possible to travel, trade, share knowledge, and maintain relationships over long distances. Knowledge of waterways, seasonal conditions, and portage routes was passed down through generations, helping people navigate safely and efficiently.

Traditional Indigenous Watercraft

Many Indigenous Nations developed watercraft that were uniquely suited to the waters where they lived. The design and materials varied depending on the local environment and the resources available.

For example:

- **Sturgeon-nose canoe or Yaqsuʔmiɬ**: Built by Nations including the Sinixt and Ktunaxa in what is now southeastern British Columbia. Its pointed bow and stern helped it

travel through shallow water, marshes, and dense vegetation.
- **Birchbark canoe or Mi'kmaw canoe**: Used by many Nations across eastern and central Canada. Birchbark canoes were lightweight, durable, and well suited for travelling long distances on lakes and rivers.

These are just two examples of the many types of Indigenous watercraft developed across what is now Canada. Other Nations used dugout canoes, cedar canoes, kayaks, umiaks, and other vessels designed for their local waterways.

Watercraft were used to:

- Visit family and neighbouring communities.
- Trade with other Nations.
- Travel to hunting, fishing, and gathering areas.
- Carry people and supplies over long distances.

How Did Indigenous Peoples Hunt and Gather Food Near Water?

Fishing

Rivers, lakes, and coastal waters have long provided important sources of food for many Indigenous Nations. The fish species people harvested depended on where they lived.

For example:

- Western Canada: Salmon, Trout, Whitefish
- Central Canada: Walleye, Pike, Lake trout
- Northern Canada: Arctic char, Whitefish
- Easter Canada: American eel, Atlantic salmon

Many Nations developed fishing techniques suited to their local waterways, including nets, spears, weirs, and fish traps. Fishing helped provide food for families and communities and supported trade and cultural traditions.

Hunting Near Water

Many animals gather near rivers, lakes, and wetlands to drink, feed, or raise their young. These areas provided opportunities for hunting species such as deer, elk, moose, and waterfowl, depending on the region.

Animals provided much more than food. Hides were used for clothing and shelter, while bones, antlers, and sinew were used to make tools and other useful items.

Gathering and Farming Plants

Wetlands, shorelines, and riparian areas support many edible, medicinal, and useful plants. Depending on the region, Indigenous Peoples gathered plants for:

- Food

- Medicine
- Weaving and tools

Some Indigenous Nations also developed agricultural practices for growing food. For example, a number of First Nations in the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence region grew corn, beans, and squash, sometimes together in a system known as the Three Sisters. When grown together, the plants can support one another as they grow.

Knowledge of when and where to plant, how to tend crops, when to harvest, and how to gather wild plants responsibly has been shared across generations.

Growing and gathering food depends on healthy land and water. Rain, rivers, wetlands, groundwater, soil moisture, and seasonal conditions can all influence where plants grow and when they are ready to harvest.

Respect for Water

Many Indigenous Nations view water as a living relative and recognize a responsibility to care for it. Water supports all life and connects people, land, plants, animals, and future generations. While teachings and traditions differ among Nations, respect for water and the responsibility to protect it remain important values in many Indigenous Knowledge systems today.

Think & Write

Why were waterways important for travel and daily life for many Indigenous Nations?

How did canoes and other traditional watercraft help people travel efficiently?

Why were waterways often easier to travel than forests or mountains?

Name two ways Indigenous Peoples gathered and farmed food or other important resources near water.

Can you name a river, lake, wetland, or coastline in your region that has been important to Indigenous Peoples? Which Nation or Nations have connections to this place?

How might life change if these waterways became polluted, dried up, or could no longer support healthy ecosystems?

Compare & Reflect

How is travel on waterways today similar to or different from how Indigenous Peoples travelled in the past?

Many Indigenous Nations teach that people have a responsibility to care for water. Why do you think caring for water is important for both people and nature?