

Learning Guide



A Brief History of the American Southwest for Kids

Episode 1: Footprints

We hope you enjoyed learning all about how fossilized footprints can help us understand what happened in the American Southwest 23,000 years ago. Extend your learning with this print-ready Learning Guide!



What's in this Learning Guide?

Get Set to Listen:

Check your knowledge before and after listening to the episode by determining if statements are TRUE or FALSE.

Vocabulary

Discussion Questions

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3-8.1; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3-8.3

Writing Prompts and Extension Projects

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3-8.1; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3-8.2; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3-8.3; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3-8.4; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3-8.7; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3-8.8

Historical Map of the American Southwest

Footprints Tell Stories: Lesson Plan

NGSS 5-ESS1-1 / 5-ESS3-1; NGSS 3-5-ETS1-2 / 5-PS1-3; CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.5.MD.A.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3 / W.5.2 / W.5.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.3; NCSS: Themes 1-3; NM.SC.5.ESS1.1 / ESS3.1

Ancient Tools: Reading Passage, Comprehension Questions, & Lesson Resources

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.2 / W.5.3 / W.5.7; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.3 / RI.5.7; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1 / SL.5.3; NCSS: Themes 2-4

Additional Resources



The Children's Hour
kids public radio

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<https://www.childrenshour.org/southwest-american-history/>



Get Set to Listen

1. Before listening!

Read each statement and write TRUE or FALSE based on what you already know.



2. After listening!

Based on what the experts said in the episode, write TRUE or FALSE.



Before Listening	TRUE or FALSE?	After Listening
	1. People have been migrating across White Sands for 15,000 years.	
	2. Before White Sands was a dune field, it was a lake.	
	3. The initial footprints discovered in White Sands in 1931 were human footprints.	
	4. The sloth prints indicate that they frequently crossed paths with humans.	
	5. Children from thousands of years ago played in the mud just like children today.	
	6. The human prints at White Sands are from tribes that built extensive, stationary homes there.	
	7. There were many animals that roamed the land along with the humans. One of these animals was the elephant.	
	8. The hunter-gatherers roaming White Sands made their own tools from the resources found there.	
	9. Stories about life in White Sands thousands of years ago have been passed down through indigenous storytelling.	



Get Set to Listen

Answer key

1. FALSE. People have been migrating across White Sands for over 23,000 years.
2. TRUE. Lake Otero used to cover the area of White Sands. It was 20 miles long and 20 miles wide in places.
3. FALSE. They were actually 22-inch-long and 8-inch-wide sloth prints. But inside some of them were human footprints.
4. FALSE. The sloth prints always go a different direction when they encounter human prints, unlike many other animal tracks.
5. TRUE. There are tracks showing that kids 20,000 years ago used to take off their shoes and slip and slide in the mud just for fun, like we do today.
6. FALSE. The people moving across the sand dunes thousands of years ago were hunter-gatherers who were migrating across the dunes finding the resources they needed to live.
7. FALSE. Although they looked somewhat like elephants, they were actually hairy mammoths.
8. TRUE. They used stones from nearby, animal hides, yuccas, and more to make tools and clothing.
9. TRUE. Indigenous groups have deep-rooted traditions of storytelling by the elders, which have helped pass down information about the ways of life at White Sands for dozens of generations.



Vocabulary

Listening for Words

1. Make a four-column chart and label the columns “I don’t know,” “I’ve seen or heard, but don’t know the meaning,” “I think I know the meaning,” and “I know the meaning.”
2. Write the vocabulary word in the column that describes how well you know the meaning of the word.
3. Listen to [the episode](#). Note how the speaker uses the words.

Matching Words with Definitions

1. Print and cut apart the word and definition cards.
2. Spread out the word cards so you can see them all. One by one, attach a definition card to each word card.

Writing with New Words

After working with the words and definitions, write a one-page essay or story that uses at least three of the words.

staples

Basic foods or items that people use often and depend on every day.

tributary

A stream flowing into a larger stream or a lake.



Vocabulary

indigenous

The first people who lived in a place and whose families and cultures have been connected to that land for a very long time.

migrate

To move from one place to another, often for a season, for food, work, or a better place to live.

fossil footprints

A compacted surface of earth made by an animal many years ago; found at White Sands, these are probably the most important resources in the Americas to understand the interaction of humans and extinct animals from the ice age.

megafauna

The large mammals of a particular region, habitat, or geological period.



Discussion Questions

1. How does hearing about or seeing ancient footprints change the way you think about people who lived long ago?
2. Listen to [*The Children's Hour "A Brief History of the American Southwest for Kids, episode 1: Footprints"*](#) (segment 6:03-7:47). In what ways are people today similar to people who lived 20,000+ years ago?
3. Why is it important to listen to Indigenous elders and stories when studying ancient history?
4. Diego said that visiting the footprint site feels like "visiting your oldest grandparents." What do you think he meant by that?
5. What skills do you think children who lived in the area of White Sands thousands of years ago learned from adults in their community?
6. If you lived as a hunter-gatherer at White Sands, what would be your biggest challenge? What would be your biggest joy?
7. Listen to [*The Children's Hour "A Brief History of the American Southwest for Kids, episode 1: Footprints"*](#) (segment 10:24-12:45). How does the discovery of ancient footprints help validate or support Indigenous migration stories passed down for generations?
8. Why do you think discoveries like this matter to people today?

Group Discussion Strategies

Think Pair Share:

1. Individually, student writes down their answer to a question.
2. Students pair up and tell each other their answers.
3. Teacher calls for volunteers to share with the whole class their answer (and/or their partner's answer). Teacher notes key words/phrases on board.

Round Robin:

1. Teacher poses one question (written on top of a large page) to students, who are assembled into small groups of 3 or 4.
2. Students take turns brainstorming the answers. The recorder of the group writes down all answers.
3. The leader reads the group's ideas to the entire class. Teacher moderates.



Writing Prompts

Narrative Prompts

1. Write a story from the point of view of a child living near ancient Lake Otero. Describe what you see, what you fear, and what makes you laugh or play—just as the footprints show.

Extension: *Illustrate a map or drawing of your character's world, labeling tools, plants, and animals they would encounter.*

2. Tell a story about a caregiver carrying a child across the muddy lakebed—just like the real footprints. Describe why they were traveling, what challenges they faced, and what the journey meant to them.

Extension: *Write a short reflection comparing your fictional story to what scientists can really infer from footprint evidence.*

Informative/Explanatory Prompts

1. Describe how oral traditions from the Pueblo, Comanche, and other Indigenous peoples support or expand the scientific discoveries at White Sands.

Extension: *Interview an adult about an important story in your family and compare how stories preserve knowledge across generations.*

2. Explain how footprints form, how scientists study them, and what they reveal about human and animal behavior at White Sands.

Extension: *Create a labeled diagram showing raised vs. depressed prints.*

Opinion/Persuasive Prompts

1. Write an opinion piece arguing why scientists should always include Indigenous communities when studying ancient sites like White Sands.

Extension: *Find an example from another field—medicine, engineering, wildlife management—where Indigenous knowledge improved scientific understanding.*

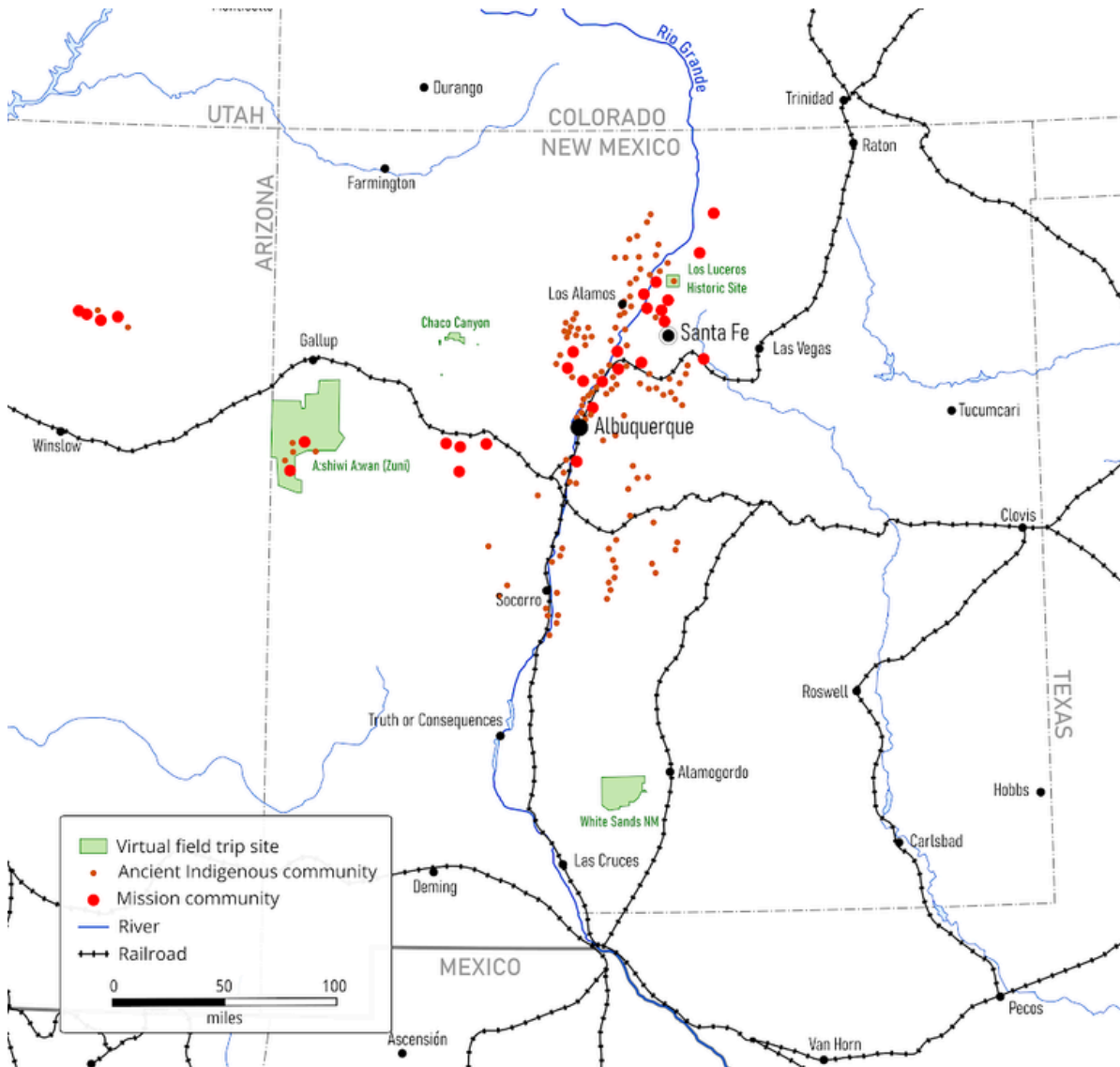
2. Some people think the White Sands footprint sites should remain restricted to protect them; others believe the public should be allowed to visit. Take a position and defend it with reasons and evidence.

Extension: *Design a plan showing how you would balance education and preservation, such as virtual tours or rotating visitation.*



Historical Map of the American Southwest

On this map, the places that we “visited” with our experts are shown in green. Each place was important in the history of the American Southwest. Have you ever been to any of these locations?



map created by Fehér Dániel 2022

Along with the modern cities, you can also see where the many ancient communities existed, long before the Spanish colonizers arrived (shown as orange dots). How many can you count?

After the Spanish arrived, they built missions (shown as red dots). How many of these mission communities were located near the Rio Grande?

To learn the names and locations of the 19 modern Pueblo nations, you can study [this map](#). Can you label the Pueblo nations on this map?



Footprints Tell Stories

“What do you think these footprints can tell us about life 23,000 years ago?”



[Image source:](#) Fossilized human footprints from White Sands National Park.



Footprints Tell Stories

Fossilized footprints at White Sands tell stories of people living there for at least 23,000 years. Long ago, the area was a large lake called Lake Otero. The footprints, made in soft mud and hardened over time, show humans and giant animals like mammoths and sloths sharing the land. Some prints reveal children playing and mothers caring for their kids, showing that daily life, play, and family were important even back then. These footprints match the stories Indigenous peoples have passed down for generations. What stories can you discern from studying ancient footprints?

Look

at photos of fossilized footprints.

Listen

to [The Children's Hour "A Brief History of the American Southwest for Kids, episode 1: Footprints"](#) (segment 6:03-7:47)

How Fossilized Footprints Form

1. **Impression:** A person steps in soft, wet soil or ash.
2. **Drying:** The sun can bake the print to help it hold its shape.
3. **Burial:** Another layer of sediment covers the print, keeping it safe.
4. **Hardening (Lithification):** Sediment and minerals press together and turn the print into rock.
5. **Casting (Optional):** Minerals fill the print and make a solid 3D shape.
6. **Exposure:** Wind, rain, or erosion wears away the top layers, showing the fossil.

Make your own fossilized footprint by pressing a hand or foot into damp sand, clay, or playdough, then sprinkle dry sand over it to simulate burial.

Read

["Fossilized Footprints" article from the White Sands National Park website](#) to see photos of fossilized human footprints found there and visualize artist interpretations of the story that may have resulted in the formation of the footprints.

Tell Your Own Story with Footprints

1. Use figurines to act out a scenario in clay, making sure that they leave clear footprints.
2. Give the footprints in clay to a partner to interpret.
3. Write or tell the story of the footprints your partner made.



Footprints Tell Stories

Write

Choose a prompt:

Narrative Prompt

Imagine you lived 20,000 years ago. Describe a day in your life. How is it similar or different from your life today?

Include details about weather, hunting, playing, family, gathering plants, and traveling around Lake Otero.

Informative/Explanatory Prompt

Explain how fossil footprints form and what the White Sands tracks tell us about ancient people and animals.

Include diagrams of raised vs. depressed prints.

Opinion/Persuasive Prompt

Why should sites like White Sands be protected and studied?

Support your reasons with science and history.

Family History Connection

Play segment 16:10–18:02

- How long has your family lived where you live now?
- What stories does your family tell over and over?
- Write a song based on a family story and perform it.

Discuss

- How do footprints act like a “time machine”?
- What do the mother-and-child prints tell us about ancient families?
- How are these discoveries connected to Indigenous stories from the region?

Extensions

- Create a map or diorama of ancient Lake Otero. Compare it to modern White Sands.
- Compare megafauna footprints to modern animals.





Footprints Tell Stories





Ancient Tools

Take a step back thousands of years in time. What tools might people have needed to survive thousands of years ago as they were migrating through the White Sands area?

Listen

to [The Children’s Hour “A Brief History of the American Southwest for Kids, episode 1: Footprints”](#) (segment 9:03-10:15).

Prehistoric Agriculture & Tools in the Southwest

Long before farming—about 20,000 years ago—the ancestors of Pueblo peoples lived by hunting and gathering. They used many kinds of tools made from stone, wood, bone, and plants. Stone tools included sharp points for hunting big animals, scrapers and knives for cutting and cleaning, and mano-and-metate stones for grinding seeds and nuts. They also used hammerstones to help make other tools.

Wood and bone tools were also important. People used atlatls (spear-throwers) to throw spears farther, digging sticks to find roots, and bone awls and needles for making clothing and baskets. They used plant fibers to make cords and baskets, and animal hides to make clothing and bags.

Around 5,000 years ago, Indigenous people in the Southwest began growing their own plants. They still did not have metal tools or animals to help them farm. Instead, they planted seeds using fire-hardened digging sticks and used wooden or bone hoes and shovels. They also used shells, pottery pieces, and stones as simple tools. To keep the soil healthy, they used crop rotation, let fields rest, and relied on rainwater runoff to bring fresh silt. Sometimes they burned old plants so the ash could help new plants grow. Water for gardens was carried in large pottery jars.

These tools show how people in the Southwest changed over time—from early hunter-gatherers to farmers who later built the first Pueblo communities.

Respond to the questions on the following page.



Ancient Tools

Respond

Read the passage “Prehistoric Agriculture & Tools in the Southwest” and respond to the following questions:

1. How did early people use animals and plants to make tools and clothing?

2. What is one way life was similar for people 20,000 years ago compared to today?

3. How did Indigenous people make sure their tools lasted and could be reused?

Additional Resources

[The Power of Tools](#) lesson plan from the National Park Service about the differences and purposes for a variety of tools (1400-1800).

Grade: 5 Social Studies Standards: NM.II; II-A.8a; II-C.

Grade: 4K-4 Benchmark I-A—New Mexico



Additional Resources & Book List

[“Fossilized Footprints”](#)

An article from the White Sands National Park website shows photos of fossilized human footprints found there and provides artist interpretations of the story that may have resulted in the formation of the footprints.

[The Power of Tools](#)

A lesson plan from the National Park Service about the differences and purposes for a variety of tools (1400-1800).

Grade: 5 Social Studies Standards: NM.II; II-A.8a; II-C.

Grade: 4K-4 Benchmark I-A—New Mexico

[Fossil Footprints Suggest Two Early Human Species Crossed Paths within Hours](#)

This *Scientific American* article describes the astonishing discovery of two side-by-side sets of fossilized proto-human species.

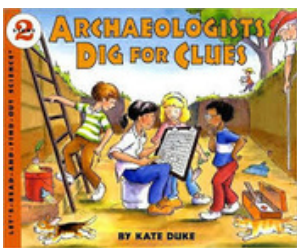
Books



Dig It! Archaeology for Kids

by Caitlin Sockin

Take a global, hands-on journey through archaeology, exploring how archaeologists uncover, study, and protect the past through real discoveries, engaging visuals, and activities that inspire curiosity and critical thinking. Available on [Epic!](#)
ages 10-16



Archeologists Dig for Clues

by Kate Duke

This engaging, illustrated Level 2 nonfiction picture book introduces young readers to archaeology, showing how archaeologists work like detectives to uncover clues about how people lived in the past.
ages 4-8