THE TRAILS BEFORE US

THE TRAILS BEFORE US follows 17-year-old Nigel James, a Diné mountain biker, as he hosts the first Enduro race in the Navajo Nation. Through revitalizing livestock and wildlife trails on his grandparents' land, Nigel and a new generation of riders honor the connection to their land, community, and culture.

Directed by Fritz Bitsoie

FILM SYNOPSIS

Additional support of the NFI Film Club is provided by Humanities Montana, the Dennis & Phyllis Washington Foundation, and the Montana Office of Public Instruction.
USING THIS GUIDE

This educator guide is intended to provide context and background to the film THE TRAILS BEFORE US, offering a range of viewing activities that underscore educational benchmarks of Montana Core and National Core Content Standards. This guide aims to provide a framework for teachers to encourage active engagement before, during, and after viewing the film in an effort to engage in a deep dive into the content and craft of the filmmaking process and the stories they bring to life.

THE TEAM BEHIND THE FILM

Fritz Bitsoie
Director

Emma Jackson
Producer

Nigel James
Subject

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Big Sky Film Institute acknowledges that we are in the aboriginal territories of the Salish and Kalispel people. In addition, we honor the twelve Montana tribes that have cared for and honored the distinct and multifarious region we now refer to as Montana. We would also like to pay our respects to the Navajo Nation or Diné (pronounced Dineh for The People), the largest of Tribal groups in the U.S. The Navajo Nation extends into the states of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. It covers nearly 27,500 square miles. Diné Bikéyah, or Navajoland, is larger than 10 of the 50 states in America. Its current population consists of over 250,000 enrolled members with about ⅔ living on the reservation. 88 Tribal Council delegates representing 111 communities, or Chapters, serve Diné Bikéyah.
HELPFUL DEFINITIONS & CONCEPTS:

CULTURE
• Culture includes systems of language; governance; economics; religion, ceremony and spiritual practice; education; defense (health and political); ways of defining identity; forms of recreation; value systems surrounding tradition, faith, justice, love, truth and beauty, and ways of giving meaning to space and time.

WORLDVIEW:
• Worldview is the underlying set of beliefs that define your sense of the world and your place in it. It is the way you interpret events such as time, space, happiness, wellbeing, what is good, what is important, what is sacred, etc. Worldview is shaped by one’s culture and VALUES and in turn, shapes your relationship to your surroundings, other living beings, the natural environment, and events.

PERSPECTIVE
• A particular attitude toward something, or way of regarding something; point of view or mental appearance. “History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised. History told from an Indian perspective frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell.” (See OPI-IEFA Essential Understandings #6)

RECIPROCITY
• Exchanging things with others for mutual benefit including love and support; is “giving” or give-and-take but not necessarily expecting to be given something in return; respectful sharing between individuals or entities; an intentional exchange process i.e., in giving, so shall we receive; mutual action, influence, privilege, or dependance.

REPRESENTATION
• The act of representing or state of being represented; Being given a “voice” - allowed equal opportunity to act, speak and share on behalf of another person or those of a particular group; “having a seat at the table;” the way that someone or something (or group of people) is being portrayed, shown or described.

GUIDING QUESTIONS
• How does ancestral knowledge get passed down and influence current or future practice?

• What are some of the ways people connect with and honor their histories, traditions and place?

• What is the significance of trails for Tribal communities across America? How about horses?

• Why are culture, reciprocity and representation important?

• How does an individual’s worldview impact perspective?

• How does documentary film spotlight stories and histories, and what is its role in underscoring diverse representation on the screen?
Teachers are encouraged to preview the content to give proper context for the film. The film’s content, themes, and message is most clearly connected to the following areas of Montana Core Content Standards (among others not listed):

**MONTANA COMMON CORE STANDARDS**

**Social Studies Content Standards for Grades 6-8:**
- SS.G.6-8.12: Construct and analyze maps using scales, directions, symbols, legends, and projections to gather information about regions across the world.
- SS.G.6-8.2: Identify the location of places and regions in the world and understand their physical, political and cultural characteristics.
- SS.G.6-8.4: Explain how the environment and geographic features have affected people and how people have affected the environment throughout Montana, the United States, and the world.
- SS.H.6-8.2: Analyze how the historical events relate to one another and are shaped by historical context, including societies in the Americas.
- SS.H.6-8.3: Analyze how, since European contact, historical events and policies have mutually impacted American Indian and European societies.
- SS.H.6-8.6: Understand that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events.
- SS.H.6-8.7: Analyze how people’s perspectives shaped the historical narratives they created.

**Social Studies Content Standards for Grades 9-12**
- SS.CG.9-12.2: Analyze the impact of constitutions, laws, treaties and international agreements on the maintenance of domestic and international relationships.
- SS.CG.9-12.10: Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

**English Language Arts and Literacy Content Standards for Grades 9-12**
- (for Informational Texts, Key Ideas and Details)
  - RL.9-10.2: Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text (the film), including those by and about American Indians; analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; and provide an objective summary of the text.

**Reading Standards for Informational Text**
- W.11-12.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts, including those by and about American Indians, to support analysis, reflection, and research.

**Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies for Grades 11-12**
- (for Integration of Knowledge and Ideas)
  - RH.11-12.9: Integrate information from diverse sources, including American Indian sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

As an educator, you can make connections to all Seven Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians (in this case as it relates to Navajoland, Diné Bikéyah), but this film highlights the following EU’s particularly well. You can find the full list of EU’s at the OPI website [here](https://opi.mt.gov/Educators/Teaching-Learning/Indian-Education-for-All).

**Essential Understanding 3**
The ideologies of Native traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into modern day life as tribal cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by many American Indians and are incorporated into how tribes govern and manage their affairs.

**Essential Understanding 4**
Though there have been tribal peoples living successfully on the North American lands for millennia, reservations are lands that have been reserved by or for tribes for their exclusive use as permanent homelands. Some were created through treaties, while others were created by statutes and executive orders. The principle that land should be acquired from tribes only through their consent with treaties involved three assumptions: I. Both parties to treaties were sovereign powers; II. Indian tribes had some form of transferable title to the land; III. Acquisition of Indian lands was solely a government matter not to be left to individual colonists or states.

**Essential Understanding 5:** There were many federal policies put into place throughout American history that have affected Indian people and continue to shape who they are today. Many of these policies conflicted with one another. Much of Indian history can be related through several major federal policy periods:

- Colonization/Colonial Period, 1492-1800s
- Treaty-Making and Removal Period, 1778-1871
- Reservation Period – Allotment and Assimilation, 1887-1934
- Tribal Reorganization Period, 1934 - 1953
- Termination and Relocation Period, 1953 - 1968
- Self-Determination Period, 1975 - Present
BEFORE WE BEGIN... A NOTE TO TEACHERS

It is important that all students feel safe and respected when studying the themes of THE TRAILS BEFORE US. The strategies below can help students and teachers support positive learning while studying the film:

- Use inviting and inclusive language when discussing themes and ideas from the film. This includes respectful reflection on race and privilege, highlighting that contribution to the conversation is an option for students, not a requirement.
- Encourage students to be active listeners, meaning they are creating space for others to share their experiences and perspectives and providing encouraging response.
- Underscore that the film they are about to watch is a documentary, meaning this film follows real people and lived experiences. Be respectful of personal differences and keep an open mind.
- Remind students to challenge ideas rather than people, with language such as, “I don’t see it that way...”, or “Your comments bring up questions for me...”
- Take ownership of comments and don’t put blame on others. Reframing input as one’s own (“I think...”), avoiding accusational language such as “You should...”
- Give plenty of time for students to think and reflect on discussion topics. You’re digging into some big topics!
- Preface conversation with the Land Acknowledgement on Page 2, engaging in respectful language around personal and cultural needs of students, staff or visitors that identify as Indigenous.

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

1) BRAINSTORM SESSION - Consider this...

- Have students make a list to consider the following and answer the questions:
  - How is riding a horse like riding a bicycle?
  - How is riding a bicycle like hiking a trail?
  - How is hiking a trail like a history lesson? Or a science lesson?
  - For the above scenarios, what connections are being made to people and place?
  - How about connections to the land and culture?

2) FILM TRAILER - Identifying the Hook

- Before you begin... What IS the role of a film trailer?
  - One main purpose of a film trailer is to give a feel for what the full film is about, without giving away the plot.
- WATCH the trailer for THE TRAILS BEFORE US and have students identify themes and ideas addressed in the trailer.
  - Who is being interviewed?
  - What is the conflict / issue presented? In a larger group have students discuss the effectiveness of the trailer as a hook to the story the film presents.
- DISCUSS film themes and character qualities introduced in the trailer. How effective was the trailer in hooking you and your students?
- Trailer link here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxPUpyRYMhI&t=40s

WATCH THE FILM!
Like many Indigenous groups around the world and in the Americas, the Diné people were forcibly removed from their homelands and relocated to other areas. Known as THE LONG WALK, more than 10,000 Diné and Mescalero Apache were marched nearly 500 miles in 1864, from their traditional homelands in the Four Corners region near Fort Defiance, Arizona to Bosque Redondo, New Mexico. In signing the 1868 Treaty, the Diné made cultural and political concessions, but also reserved the right for their people to return to their sacred homelands.

**Mapping Activity**

Consult the three maps on PAGE 10 and answer the following questions:

A) Original Navajo territory map of Diné homelands  
B) Navajo / Diné Long Walk* routes map  
C) Navajo Nation & Hopi reservation map  

*The Long Walk came to be known as the 1864 Diné “Trail of Tears”

- Why do you think it was called, “The Trail of Tears”?
- Why is the area of Navajoland sometimes referred to as the “Four Corners” region?
- Which Map would you use to find the Four Sacred Mountains that historically defined the Diné homelands?
- Why do you think there are multiple routes of The Long Walk?
- How would you best determine the mileage of each one?
- What other well-known trail intersects some of The Long Walk routes?
- How would you best determine to what extent traditional homelands were lost to the Diné after they were moved onto the reservation(s)?
VIEWING ACTIVITIES
1) BACKGROUND - Exploring Trails:

- Trails were systems of travel used by animals and Indigenous peoples for thousands of years
- Trails were intentionally maintained by Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas
- Trails served as routes for trade between various cultural groups
- Trails were used by Western European colonists, turned into wagon routes and eventually roads
- Trails connected lakes and rivers, serving as detours around treacherous white water and waterfalls
- Trails connected small villages, eventually towns and larger cities
- Trails led to modern roads, highways and interstates

Native populations have been dispossessed of their homelands since Colonization. U.S. Federal Indian Policy has impacted generations of people. President Andrew Jackson’s 1830 Indian Removal Act led to what is known as the 1831 “Trail of Tears,” which was over the course of several years, over 5,000 miles long and across nine states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Tennessee.

The National Park Service maintains the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail, parts of which are accessible on foot, by bicycle or by car. There are over 25,000 miles of National Historic Trails stretching across 25 states and following routes that commemorate historic paths of travel.

Historic Trails “changed the course of history and character of the U.S. today.” Have students expand upon this statement with the Trails Activity below - how has this happened?

TRAILS ACTIVITY
Have students select one trail from the list below, and:

1) Research: What/where are the best sources? Is it a well-known trail or a “forgotten” trail?

2) Write about the trail you researched: What state(s) is it in? What Native American tribes historically and currently occupy the areas the trail covers? Why/how was this trail named? How did this trail come about? Is it a long or short trail? How has its use changed over time? Has it had positive or negative impacts?

3) Share their writing and have a class discussion: What have they discovered or learned from this activity that they didn’t know before?

*FIND THE LIST OF TRAILS ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE!*

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION IDEAS:
1) Exploring Trails Continued:
Consider the following trails students may or may not be familiar with:

- Oregon Trail
- Northeastern Iroquois Trail
- Pony Express Trail
- Sleeping Buffalo Trail
- Homolovi Trail I and II
- The Old North Trail
- California Trail
- Mormon Pioneer Trail
- Chisholm Trail
- Tsu’vó Trail
- The Bozeman Trail
- Santa Fe Trail
- Old Spanish Trail (Ute Trail)
- Warrior Path
- Navajo Route 41
- Nasungó Trail
- Gila Trail

*See PAGE 21 for more info on some of the local trails in the area where the film is made*
Several authors attribute widespread horse knowledge across the Great Plains to several American Indian Tribes that inhabited the region. Popular belief is that Spaniards introduced horses to North American Tribes, but contemporary Native American scholar, Evette Running Horse Collin, has debunked this theory. According to Collin, this long-held notion is a culturally-biased Eurocentric myth and Native oral histories support the concept that horses were, “gifted to them by the Creator… and, acquisition of horses was spiritual in nature.” Explore the following points Collin explores in her research:

- Depictions of horses date back 20,000 years in European cave dwellings
- North American Indians domesticated horses and were the “first” horsemen in the Americas
- The relationship between horse and rider is one of Trust, Harmony and Respect, and learning to ride horseback was “the first lesson ever learned” (as quoted in Running Horse Collin, p.44, 2017)
- North American Indians engaged in selective breeding, healing, training and gelding of horses
- Many Indigenous Tribes adopted horse racing as a popular sport, gambling on the best riders
- The system of carrying messages and later mail across the continent using horses and riders was called the Pony Express and was most likely taken from early American Indian relay races

As portrayed in the film, many Indigenous perspectives throughout the Americas regarding the horse differs from dominant western views.

- In one Diné account, the Holy People with assistance from the “Talking God,” created the horse; one horse to each direction, for the north, east, south and west. The people have horse-songs because the horse was “sung into existence” (Running Horse Collin, p. 96, 2017).
- Like many Native American communities, the Lakota also have horse-songs honoring, respecting and valuing the horse to a very “high” level, describing the horse in “the language of the soul” (Running Horse Collin, p.104, 2017).
- In at least three similar but different Blackfeet accounts, horses originated in and emerged from the water. In one story, one of the soyilapiki, or underwater beings, a boy-snipe helps a young boy bring horses to the people (Ewers, 1955). In another rendition, it was a mallard duck.

Write a narrative, descriptive essay. It can be a comparative essay or a personal essay based on students’ insights and perspective toward horses and how the film has changed it.

Have students reflect on the film and on the people’s relationship with each other, with animals (specifically horses), nature and tradition. What do the stories (mentioned above) teach us about relationships, perspectives and culture? What do they teach us about OURSELVES?

**CONSIDER THIS QUOTE FROM THE FILM...**

“My grandpa, he told me a story about the horse, and he says it’s the foundation of life...of life. The horse teaches you - if it teaches you YOURSELF...who you are, your attitude.” [00:09:39-00:10:11]
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ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION IDEAS:

POEM ACTIVITY

Students may want to construct a poem incorporating the Diné educational philosophy and worldview that instructs people to live in peace and harmony with the natural world. It values community and natural processes, including the daily cycle of day and night, the annual cycle of seasons and the everyday beauty of the Circle of Life. *Refer to PAGE 21 for additional information.

CONSIDER THIS QUOTE FROM THE FILM...

“...on the bike, we feel it, feeling that terrain, and that’s freedom (and) it has the same feeling as riding that horse...if he [Nigel] can bring people into the Circle, like what the wheels of the bike do...these wheels...they revolve, they go in revolutions, like that..and we do.” [00:10:42-00:11:29]

DOUBLE ENTRY CHART + DISCUSSION
(CAN BE APPLIED TO ANY OF THE ABOVE ACTIVITIES)

*Worksheet attached (Page 18)
As students watch the film have them take notes in the attached Double/Entry Chart provided to have students remember specific moments in the film. After watching, ask students what they wrote down:

· What moments stood out to them?
· Was there anything in the film that changed what they knew or what they thought they knew?
· Many documentaries are also narrative, meaning they tell stories! How do we articulate certain histories through a good story?
  - (Bring this back to the film. From which perspective is the film’s story told? Do they narrate? How much time are watching versus listening? Make a list!)

SUPPORTING AN EFFECTIVE DISCUSSION:
To most effectively track learning throughout viewing and discussion, have students reflect on what they know about the issues being presented in the films. With their Double Entry viewing chart they will have written down observations and inquiries. The following is a short list of keys terms and vocabulary to help students articulate their analysis:

KEY TERMS (to sound like a professional):

EXPOSITION: the information that grounds you in a story (Who, What, Where When, and Why). Exposition gives us the tools to follow the story as it unfolds.

· Questions to ask students:
  · What information is given away?
  · What still don’t we know?
  · Who are we hearing from/who is interviewed (who is not?)?

· Examples of Expository Information:
  · Shot of a place/location and its landmarks
  · Headlines/printed materials
  · Voice over
  · People getting upset over something

BONUS! SHARE THESE EXAMPLES...

Navajo Chant of the Beauty Way I
“The Navajo people sing: In the house of long life, there I wander, in the house of happiness, there I wander. Beauty is before me and behind me. Beauty is above me and below me. Beauty is all around me, with it I wander, in old age traveling, with it I wander. On the beautiful trail am I, with it I wander...”

Navajo Chant of the Beauty Way II (excerpt)
“...on the trail marked with pollen may I walk. With dew about my feet may I walk. With beauty before me may I walk. With beauty behind me may I walk. With beauty below me may I walk. With beauty above me may I walk. With beauty all around me may I walk, in old age wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk.”
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THEME: A recurring idea that illuminates an aspect of the human condition. The theme is the most basic lifeblood of a film, it tells you what the film is about. This differs from the subject, which is the topic of the film. A theme gives a story/subject focus and depth and brings out universals from the subject of a complex/simple film subject. A good theme should have multiple layers: personal level, political level, or spiritual level.

- Questions to ask students:
  - What are the universal ideas behind the film?

SUBJECT: the topic/focal point of the film

- Questions to ask students:
  - What is the general subject of this film?
    - Ex: THE TRAIL BEFORE US follows 17-year-old Nigel James, a Diné mountain biker as he hosts the first Enduro race in the Navajo Nation.

ARC: the ways the events of the story transform the subject/character. Story arcs can be hard to find in documentary film, there is not always an obvious beginning, middle, and an end (as in life).

- Questions to ask students:
  1. What does the protagonist/subject learn about themselves as they pursue a goal?
  2. How has the film challenged your assumption about the film’s subject? Did you have preconceived notions of who the characters were/where they came from? Did this film change your opinion on this subject matter?

PLOT + CHARACTER:

- CHARACTER-DRIVEN: film where the action of the film emerges from wants and needs of the characters
  - Questions to ask students:
    1. Who is this film about? Is it about a person or an event?

- PLOT-DRIVEN: characters are secondary to the events that make up the plot
  - Questions to ask students:
    1. Who is this film about? Is it about a person or an event?
References & Additional Resources:

- Sacred Sanctuary online website (Florence, Alabama) for other research articles published by Yvette Running Horse Collin. https://www.sacredwayssanctuary.org/publications.
- For the Great Seal of the Navajo Nation education packet (PDF) to learn more about it: https://seagrant.whoi.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Navajo-Nation-Seal-Lesson-.pdf
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• The Montana Center for Horsemanship and University of Montana Western (UMW) is featuring “The Natural Horsemanship Revolution” Conference and Equine Film Festival with the William Kriegel Foundation and EQUUS INTERNATIONAL. Equus International aims to advance equine welfare and wellbeing: https://equusinternationalfilmfestival.com.

• For more on the amazing relationship between horse and one NA boy in particular, see the following:
  https://www.southwestindian.com/media/native-american-books/horse-follow-closely-book-dvd

• From the Homolovi State Park website / Hiking Trails: https://azstateparks.com/homolovi/things-to-do/trails
  - Nasungvö Trail: The name means “Place of Rest” in the Hopi language. 1.2 miles primitive hike across high prairie grasslands. This trail goes from the Visitor Center to the campground area.
  - Tsu’vö Trail: The name means “Path of the Rattlesnake” in Hopi. It is a ½ mile loop trail between the twin buttes within the park. It is a nature trail and also an archaeological trail where you can see milling stone areas and petroglyphs.
  - Diné Trail: This 1½ mile trail goes to Diné Point and connects with both other trails. Diné Point shows a scenic view of the park.
  - Homolovi I Trail: parking lot is located about one mile past the park campground and is next to the Little Colorado River. An easy quarter-mile stroll on an old dirt road leads to the site.
  - Homolovi II Trail: ½ mile paved trail that is wheelchair accessible. The 100-yard trail allows access to the largest of the park’s archaeological sites that contains an estimated 1,200 to 2,000 rooms. It is believed that these pueblos were once home to ancestors of the present-day Hopi people.

POEM ACTIVITY RESOURCES

Educational Philosophy of Diné College “Sa’ah Naaghai Bik’eh Hozhoo,” places Diné life in harmony with the natural world and the universe, and grounded in Navajo cultural tradition.


• The Great Seal of the Navajo Nation education packet (PDF): https://seagrant.whoi.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Navajo-Nation-Seal-Lesson-.pdf

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