

# Make a “Birch Bark” Canoe

## Activity Introduction

Excerpted from *Learning about Michigan Indians*, by Jean McCabe

Our society is very dependent on manufactured goods. When we need something, we go to the store and buy it. By contrast, the early Indian tribes of this area had to depend on the skill of their own hands to make things they needed to live. The earth, woods and water gave them the raw materials necessary for these things.

Because of their feeling of oneness with nature and their great respect for all living things, Native Americans did not use resources carelessly or waste them. For example, when an animal like a deer was killed, every part of its body was put to use. Even its bones, hooves and horns were carved to form tools like needles and awls, or decorations like beads.

One of the most abundant natural resources in Michigan was its trees. Trees provided firewood, wigwam poles, and frames for packs, snowshoes, sleds and canoes. Household utensils like wooden bowls and spoons were carved by hand. Bows and arrows and similar weapons were also made of wood.

Wood was not the only part of the tree used by Indians. Roots, leaves and bark were also valuable to them. A number of medicines were produced from all three of these parts of trees. Usually these were crushed and boiled in water. The solution was applied locally or given internally.

The roots of the tamarack tree were split, boiled and woven into bags used for storing food and medicinal herbs. Spruce tree roots were similarly treated to produce a strong cord. The barks of birch, cedar, basswood and slippery elm trees were used to make bags, kettles, baskets and bowls. These barks also formed the outside walls of most houses as well as the sides of canoes.

The beautiful and useful canoes were made using a frame of wood and outside covering of birch bark. The naturally water resistant bark was cut in large, rectangular pieces from trees and laid atop the wood frame. Spruce root strips were used to lash bark pieces together and to the frame. Cedar wood was carved into thick, narrow ribs for support, and thinner, wider pieces as a lining for the inside of the canoe. Finally, bark seams on the outside of the canoe were painted with tree pitch to prevent leaking.

Then, as now, survival was dependent on wise and careful use of natural resources. Few cultures seem to have been as aware of this as Native Americans.