

Harvest of the Month: Mutton

6-8th Grade

Vocabulary:

- Mutton
- Lamb
- Weaving
- Wool
- Loom
- Gratitude
- Generations

See the attached vocabulary sheet in Educators Guide.

Engage:

- Begin by reading *The Navajo-Churro: The Return of the First Sheep* story as a class as a class. Share that they will hear a traditional Diné (Navajo) story about T'aa Dibé, the First Sheep, and discover why these animals hold special meaning for the Navajo people. Explain that this is not just a story about animals, but about respect, balance, and the deep connections between people and the land they live on.
 - As a class discuss with students what the sheep teach the people in the story and why certain animals become central to a community's identity, traditions, and survival.

Explore and Explain:

- **Activity 1: Past, Present, Future: The Navajo Churro**
 - Have students research the history, cultural significance, and uses of the Navajo-Churro sheep and create a mock Navajo Churro Museum Exhibit that demonstrates their understanding of the Navajo Churro Sheep.
 - In small groups, have students research the following:
 - History: Where did the breed come from? How did it adapt to the Southwest? What role did it play in Navajo life historically?
 - Culture: How do Navajo people use the sheep today? (clothing, weaving, ceremonial uses, food, community practices)
 - Science and Agriculture: How is the breed different from other sheep breeds? What makes it hardy or unique?
 - Conservation: Why is it considered a heritage breed? What efforts exist to preserve it?
 - Students may use the following to research: books, credible websites, interviews (if possible), and journal articles.
- **Activity 2: Create Your Own Healthy Mutton Recipe**
 - Students will design a healthy recipe using Navajo-Churro (or lamb/mutton) meat while considering nutrition, flavor, and cultural connections.

Elaborate

- Remind students that there are many kinds of sheep, and the Navajo-Churro are considered a heritage breed.
- As a heritage breed, they are one of the oldest sheep in the U.S., with records going back to the 1500s, but as culturally significant stories tell us, they've been here since time immemorial.
 - Among the Navajo Nation, sheep are often called mutton.
- Navajo-Churro sheep have special traits that make them different from modern commercial sheep: they have long wool, many natural colors, and sometimes even multiple horns.
- The meat from these sheep is important in Diné food traditions, connecting family, community, and culture at the table.
- Ewes are female sheep. Mature ewes weigh approximately 85-120 pounds.
- Rams are male sheep. Mature rams weigh approximately 120-175 pounds.
- Churro whether ewes or rams can be horned or polled (no horns). A rare trait occurs in Churro sheep that can cause between 2-6 horns to be found on any sheep.
- Activity 3: Navajo Churro Crossword

Evaluate

- Have students write three things they learned during the lesson. Encourage them to include one fact, one cultural insight, and one personal reflection.

Suggested Lesson Activities:

- Indigenous Language Vocabulary
- Past, Present, Future: The Navajo Churro
- Create Your Own Healthy Mutton Recipe
- Navajo Churro Crossword

Additional Educator Resources:

- [Navajo-Churro Sheep Association](#)
- [The Navajo Sheep Project](#)

The Navajo-Churro: The Return of the First Sheep

For Grades 6-8: Please feel free to modify these lessons as needed to fit the needs of your students.

Long ago, when the world was still new, the Diné people were learning how to live in balance with the land. During this time, the Holy People gave them a special gift: T'aa Dibé, the First Sheep. These sheep were gentle, wise, and had soft wool that helped the Diné survive cold seasons. The people cared for the sheep with respect, and the sheep stayed close to them.

But as the years passed, people began to forget the humility and gratitude that kept them connected to their sheep. Because of this, the First Sheep gathered together and left. Before disappearing, they said, "We will return when you remember how to care for us with respect."

Many generations went by. Children grew up hearing the story of T'aa Dibé and wondering if the First Sheep would ever come home again. Then one day, families noticed new sheep wandering through the desert valleys. These sheep were small and deer-like, with bright eyes and wool in many natural colors, white, brown, black, and spotted. They looked just like the sheep from the old stories.

The Diné recognized them immediately. "The First Sheep have returned," they said.

These sheep became known as Navajo-Churro sheep, and the people welcomed them with songs, prayers, and open hearts.

The Navajo-Churro sheep quickly proved how well they fit into the land. They climbed rocky hills with ease and found food even in dry grasslands. They were tough, calm, and clever, perfect for the desert environment of the Southwest. Their wool was long, silky, and strong. Diné weavers used it to create rugs and blankets that could last for generations.

Every spring, mother sheep gave birth to lambs on the open range. Newborn lambs wobbled for only a moment before standing on their tiny legs. The mothers made soft, comforting sounds, and the lambs followed them through sagebrush and sand. People loved watching the lambs bounce and race each other and their little bursts of energy chasing the wind.

But the story of the Navajo-Churro is not only joyful. It is also a story of survival. During the Long Walk, when the Diné were forced from their homes, some shepherds risked everything to protect their sheep. Later, during government stock reductions, many flocks were taken away. Still, some Navajo-Churro sheep survived because families refused to give them up. The sheep living today are descendants of those survivors.

Today, Navajo-Churro sheep can still be seen grazing across the Navajo Nation. Their wool shines in the sunlight, and some even have four horns or more, a rare trait found in few sheep breeds. They move across mesas and valleys just as their ancestors did long ago.

And every time a new lamb is born, the Diné remember the promise of the First Sheep. The sheep returned not only because time had passed, but because the people had relearned how to care for their animals with respect, gratitude, and harmony.

History Behind the Story

Before Spanish explorers arrived, wild bighorn sheep lived in the canyons and mountains of Diné Bikéyah (the Navajo homeland). The Diné called them the sheep of the Holy People. These wild sheep could not be tamed, but the people hunted them for their hides, horns, and meat. Each year, the bighorn sheep would shed their wool by rubbing against rocks and trees, and the Diné collected this wool to use in different ways. According to Diné traditions, the Holy People promised that one day, the Diné would be given sheep of their own to care for.

In the 1500s, Spanish explorers brought sheep called Churra from Spain to the Southwest. These were hardy sheep that could survive in tough desert conditions. By 1600, Diné families had acquired these sheep through trade or capture. When the people saw them—small, agile, with wool in many natural colors—they recognized them as the fulfillment of the Holy People's promise. The Churra became known as Navajo-Churro sheep, and for hundreds of years, they thrived. At their peak, there were millions of these sheep across Diné lands, with some families caring for thousands of flocks.

In 1863, the U.S. government forced the Diné to leave their homeland. Colonel Kit Carson was ordered to make the Diné surrender by destroying their homes, crops, and livestock. Thousands of sheep were killed. Some Diné families fled into canyons with small flocks, hiding and waiting for their relatives to return. But most were force-marched nearly 400 miles to a place called Hwéeldi (Fort Sumner), known as "The Long Walk." Of the nearly 7,000 sheep that survived the march, only 940 remained by 1868. Starvation, harsh winters, and raids reduced the flocks dramatically. The wool was essential for weaving blankets to survive the cold winters.

When the Diné were finally allowed to return home in 1868, the treaty promised each person two sheep. When the sheep arrived in 1869, leader Barboncito told his people: "Take care of the sheep that have been given to you as you care for your own children. Never kill them for food... These few sheep must grow into flocks so that we, the People, can be as we once were." The people listened. Over sixty years, the flocks slowly grew again. By the 1930s, there were once again millions of Navajo-Churro sheep.

In the 1930s, the U.S. government became worried about overgrazing damaging the land. They passed the Livestock Reduction Act to reduce herd sizes. At first the program was voluntary, but by 1935 it became mandatory. Diné communities were targeted more harshly than white ranchers. In just one year, Navajo-Churro flocks dropped from about one million sheep to fewer than 400.

Families who had spent decades rebuilding their flocks watched government officials slaughter their sheep. The Diné call this time "The Second Long Walk" because the loss was so devastating. Many feared the Navajo-Churro would disappear forever. But some families

refused to give up their sheep. Hidden in remote areas, small flocks survived. Many organizations—especially those led by Diné people—have worked to bring the sheep back.

Today, there are about 10,000 Navajo-Churro sheep in the U.S. Historic sites like Bosque Redondo Memorial have donated over 180 sheep to Diné families since 2017, helping rebuild flocks and restore traditions.

What Makes Navajo-Churro Sheep Special:

- Desert adapted: Long legs help them travel across rocky terrain; they need less water and food than many other sheep breeds
- Natural colors: Their coats come in white, cream, tan, brown, gray, black, red, and spotted patterns
- Unique features: Bare legs and faces help them stay cool; some rams have four or more horns
- Special wool: Two-layers, soft inner coat and a long outer coat that repels water; less greasy than other sheep wool, so it needs less water for washing

For the Diné, Navajo-Churro sheep are family members and cultural treasures. The sheep provide meat for traditional meals during ceremonies and celebrations. Their wool comes in natural colors perfect for weaving rugs and blankets without dyes. The long, strong fibers are ideal for traditional hand-spinning methods passed down through generations.

The textiles made from Navajo-Churro wool—rugs, blankets, and clothing—tell stories, honor traditions, and can last for generations. Today, both mutton and wool are highly valued for their quality.

The survival of Navajo-Churro sheep is a testament to the strength and determination of the Diné people who refused to let these sacred animals disappear, no matter what challenges they faced.

TEACHER EXAMPLE

Indigenous Languages Vocabulary Sheet (6-8)

Directions:

- In Column 1, rewrite the word in English.
- In Column 2, rewrite the word in your own Native language (if available). If it's not available, you may use the Native language of a neighbor, friend, or community member.

Vocabulary Word	English Rewrite	English Rewrite	Navajo
			Language Rewrite
Sheep			dibé
Lamb			
Weaving			
Wool			
Loom			
Gratitude			
Generations			

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Name: _____

Date: _____

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TEACHER EXAMPLE

Create Your Own Healthy Sheep Recipe

Name: _____

Date: _____

Step 1: Choose Your Ingredients

Pick ingredients from each category to make a balanced and healthy dish.

Protein (choose 1–2):

- Ground lamb
- Diced lamb
- Shredded lamb
- Plant-based substitute

Vegetables/Fruits (choose 2–3):

- Carrots
- Spinach
- Bell peppers
- Tomatoes
- Corn
- Squash
- Avocado

Grains/Starches (optional, choose 1–2):

- Whole wheat tortilla
- Rice
- Quinoa
- Whole wheat pasta

Flavors & Herbs (choose any):

- Garlic
- Onion
- Cumin
- Cilantro
- Rosemary
- Oregano
- Sage

Healthy Fats (optional, choose 1):

- Olive oil
 - Avocado
 - Nuts/seeds
-

Step 2: Decide Your Dish Type

- Wrap / Sandwich
 - Stir-fry / Sauté
 - Soup / Stew
 - Salad / Grain Bowl
 - Snack / Appetizer
-

Step 3: Build Your Recipe

Recipe Name: _____

Ingredients List:

Cooking Steps (3–5 steps):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Nutrition Notes:

(Write at least 2 healthy things about your recipe, e.g., high protein, lots of vegetables, good source of iron, vitamins, fiber)

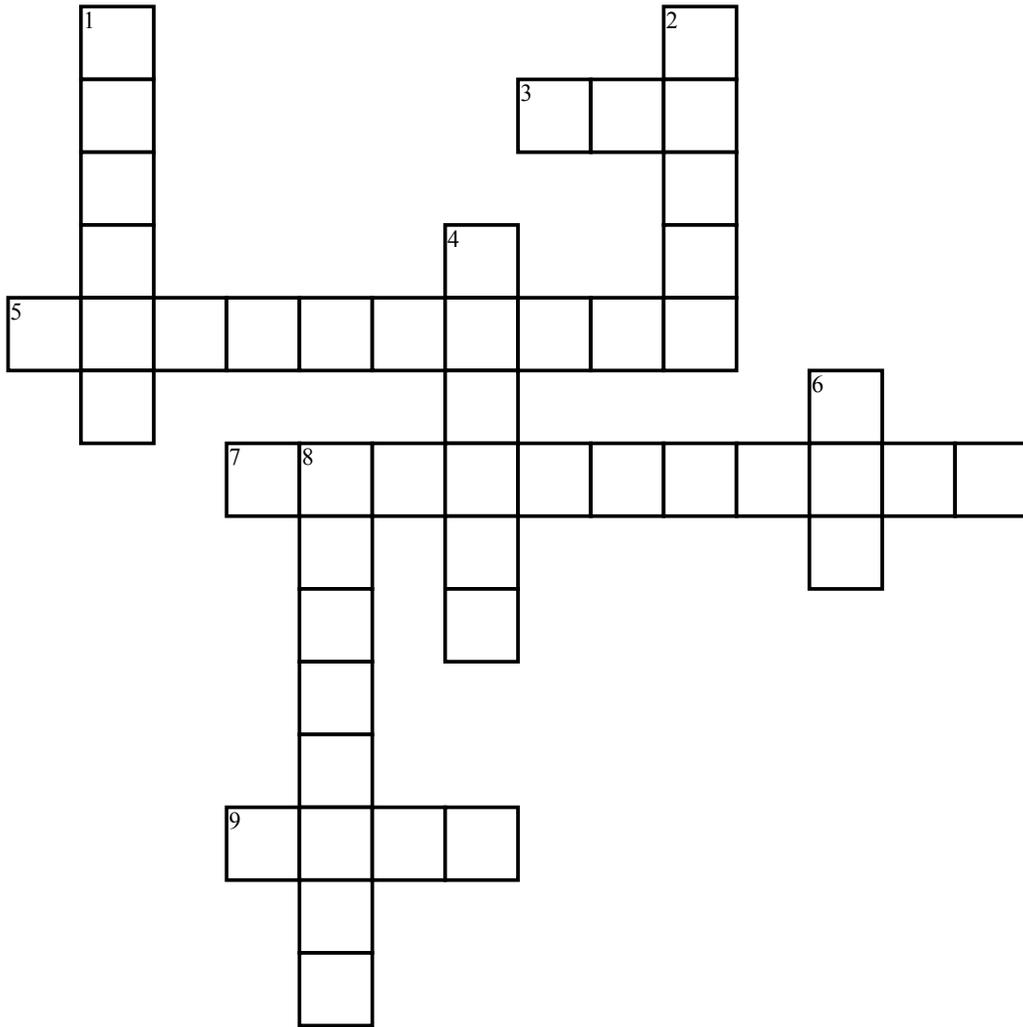
Cultural Connection:

(How does this recipe connect to Navajo-Churro sheep or Diné food traditions?)

Step 4: Share & Reflect

- Share your recipe with a partner or the class.
 - Reflect: *“What did I learn about healthy eating or Navajo-Churro sheep while creating this recipe?”*
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-
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The Navajo-Churro



Across

- 3. A female Churro
- 5. The Churro were given to the Navajo by the _____
- 7. When the Navajo were forced from their home
- 9. A young sheep, under 1

Down

- 1. Navajo often call sheep _____
- 2. Wool is used to _____ rugs and blankets
- 4. Has no horns
- 6. A Male Churro
- 8. a breed that has been around for a very long time

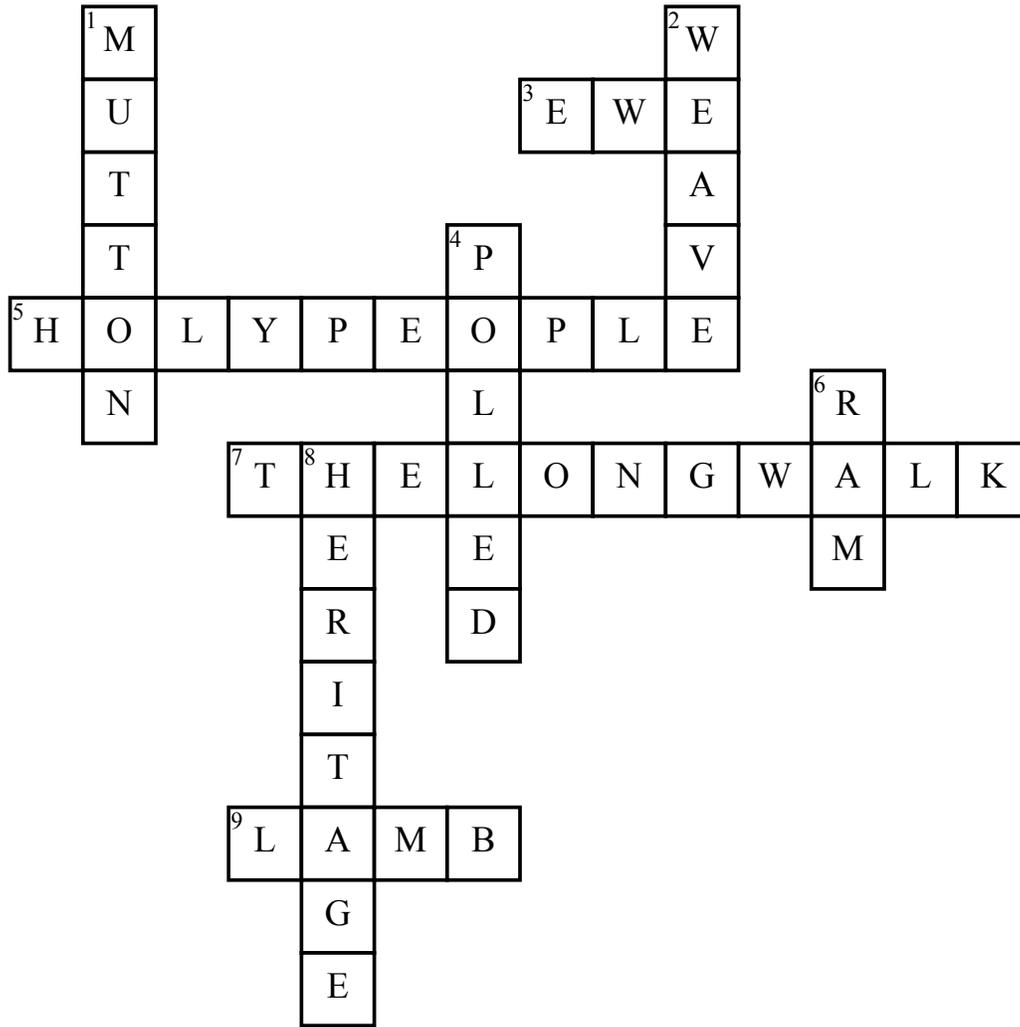
Word Bank

Ewe
Weave
Heritage

The Long Walk
Mutton
Ram

Polled
Lamb
Holy People

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Word Bank

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|---------------|-------------|--------|
| Heritage | Ewe | Ram |
| The Long Walk | Holy People | Lamb |
| Mutton | Weave | Polled |