



"Not everything translates directly. For example, in our language, there is not a word that means the same thing as art. We also don't have a word for wilderness, places that are untrammelled by man and pristine and need to be protected. That's a notion that's foreign. And we don't have words for husband and wife. We have words for different ages of girls, different familial relationships in our kinship system depending on whether they're on the mother's or father's side. We have lots of terminology that describe loved ones, old one, girl, little one, but nothing that translates husband and wife."

Bobbie Conner, Cayuse-Nez Perce, 2002

Even communication among the members of the corps could be challenging, because they spoke different languages. If Lewis wanted to speak to Sacagawea, he needed two interpreters. It was important to know who spoke what language. Lewis and Clark often used language chains to communicate with the Indians. When Lewis and Clark reached the Shoshone Indians in present-day western Montana, they were desperate to obtain horses to cross the mountains. Fortunately, Sacagawea spoke the Shoshone language. It took five people to pass along a message.

"Language itself is an integral part of our culture, you cannot separate culture and language. Our language describes our world view, how the world is around us, the way we look at it. We don't look at it in the same way that other people do."

Ronald "Snake" Edmo, Shoshone, 2001

Today, many Indian languages are in danger of being lost because the younger generations are not learning to speak them.

Did You Know?

Thomas Jefferson devised a list of vocabulary words to compare vocabularies of Indian languages. Lewis collected 23 vocabularies, all of which were lost in an accident. He was assuming that all cultures have words to describe certain things. This is not always the case.

Activity

Help Meriwether Lewis, who speaks only English, ask Cameahwait, who speaks only Shoshone, for horses. See if you can put the people in the correct order to communicate the message.*



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*ANSWER: From left to right: Lewis, Labiche, Charbonneau, Sacagawea, Cameahwait

