THE SHAMAN’S APPRENTICE: A TALE OF THE AMAZON RAIN FOREST

Authors: Lynne Cherry and Mark J. Plotkin
Illustrator: Lynne Cherry
Publisher: Gulliver/Harcourt

THEME:
The traditional wisdom of people who know the varied plant life of a tropical rainforest may hold secrets that benefit modern medicine.

PROGRAM SUMMARY:
In this story of discovery and hope, a fatal disease comes to the Tirio village in the Amazon leaving only a few villagers with faith in the shaman’s healing. When a foreign woman arrives, she helps the village understand the importance of the shaman’s wisdom, and this helps a Tirio boy realize his dream.

LeVar and author/ethnobotanist Mark Plotkin visit the Tirio village and meet Kamanya, the boy from the book, who has become a shaman. Your students learn how the rainforest remains a vital source for modern medicines as they join the shaman in a search for healing plants. They also experience daily life of the Tirio people.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:
In the story, why was it important to the Tirio people that the knowledge of the shaman was passed on to another?
In the episode, there were many examples of the Tirios’ self-sufficient lifestyle. Ask students to recall ways they used natural materials for food preparation, tools, transportation, etc.
Discuss with students the kinds of things (e.g., stories, information, objects) that are often passed from older generations to younger.
Sometimes families have “home remedies” for common discomforts, such as earache, sore throat, stomachache, mosquito bites, hiccups, etc. Ask students what their families typically do to alleviate symptoms of these ailments.
LeVar kept a journal of his trip. Discuss why people keep journals and diaries and the different types of things they might write in one.

Both authors of The Shaman’s Apprentice, Lynne Cherry and Mark Plotkin, are committed to teaching people about the importance of preserving the rainforest. Discuss with students how saving the rainforests affects treating illness and curing disease.

CURRICULUM EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:
Kwamala, the setting of this story, is an actual village in southern Suriname, which is located at the northern fringes of the “Amazonia” region in South America. Assist students in locating this approximate area on a map of world. Reinforce the concepts of “continent” (South America), “country” (Suriname), and “village” (Kwamala). Note that its general location is close to the equator and discuss the climate of equatorial regions of the world.

Based on what the students saw in the episode, have them compare their way of life to that of Tirio children. Set up a chart with two columns entitled “Children in (name of state)” and “Tirio Children.” Along the left side of the chart, list categories for comparison, such as “homes,” “means of travel,” “foods,” “school,” “recreation,” etc. List their ideas under the appropriate headings. View the program a second time if necessary to get a better picture of life among the Tirios.

Start a class alphabet book of rainforest plants. (A project of this type might extend through an entire rainforest unit as students continue to locate and read a variety of resources.) Include well-known plants such as bromeliads, epiphytes, the kapok tree, and lianas, and add plants mentioned in the program, such as the cassava and wee-dee tree. The illustrations on the endpapers of The Shaman’s Apprentice book will also assist students in their research. For each plant, have students sketch a picture and add a description or use of the plant.

The Amazon River and its tributaries are crucial components of the South American rainforests. Have the class collect facts about the Amazon River and make a mobile displaying their findings. Twist long narrow pieces of brown bulletin board paper into slender rope-like vines to resemble lianas. Loop them from the ceiling, tacking them in various places. At the end of each one, attach large green paper leaves on which students have written a fact. (Lianas usually put out leaves and flowers when they reach the light. In the classroom, the leaves should be placed where students can read their facts.) Possible facts include: the Amazon River is nearly 4000 miles long; more than 1800 species of fish live in it; thousands of smaller rivers and streams flow into it; it is over 37 miles wide near the Atlantic Ocean; and many others that the students discover.
Based on their collective research, have students make a model of a postage stamp featuring a rainforest plant. Give each student an 8-1/2 x 11 blank “stamp” on which to draw and label a rainforest plant. Display the stamps under a heading decided upon by the class, such as “Saving These Plants May Save Lives!”

In a large area such as the gym floor or playground, have students measure the height of plants in the four layers of the rainforest: emergent (some grow to 200 feet), canopy (up to about 150 feet), understory (to about 66 feet); and floor (very little sunlight, mostly a thick covering of leaves, twigs, etc.). Before they measure, have them estimate how far 200 feet is and mark the spot. After they measure to check the accuracy of their estimate, see if they can use their knowledge of 200 feet to estimate where 150, 100, 66, etc., might be. Then complete the measurements to verify estimates.

Keep a class journal of the year’s events. At the end of each week, compose a short message about memorable events or the most important things the students feel they learned that week. Use 12 x 18 inch paper so there is space for illustrations, photographs, or other memorabilia. Different individuals each week might take the responsibility for the illustrations. At the end of the school year, bind the pages together and review the journal to recall special times.

RELATED THEMES:
habitats
North American rainforests
temperate forests

RELATED READING RAINBOW PROGRAMS:
Program #94 — The Salamander Room

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ILLUSTRATOR:
A lifelong lover of nature herself, Lynne Cherry’s books for children teach preservation of the planet and its resources. She is the author/illustrator of Reading Rainbow review book The Great Kapok Tree which is set in the Amazon rainforest of Brazil. Lynne returned to the rainforest to capture the spirit and details of Tirio life for her illustrations of The Shaman’s Apprentice. Actively involved in environmental causes and organizations (she also authored the Reading Rainbow review book A River Ran Wild), she and her husband divide their time between their home in Washington, D.C. and a farm in Maryland.

Dr. Mark J. Plotkin is a research associate at the Smithsonian Institution and executive director of The Ethnobiology and Conservation Team. In his work as an ethnobotanist, he lives among native peoples and collects information about how they use plants in their daily lives. Since the early 1980s, he has spent long periods of time with the Tirio people, particularly the shamans, making notes about the medicinal uses for more than 300 plants and translating that information into the tribe’s native language. He and his family live in Washington, D.C.

BOOKS REVIEWED BY CHILDREN:
WELCOME TO THE GREEN HOUSE
by Jane Yolen, illus. by Laura Regan (Putnam)

PEOPLE IN THE RAIN FOREST
by Saviour Pirotta (Raintree/Steck-Vaughn)

AMAZON DIARY: THE JUNGLE ADVENTURES OF ALEX WINTERS
by Hudson Talbott & Mark Greenberg (Putnam)

SUPPLEMENTARY BOOKLIST:
PLANTS AND PLANTEATERS (SECRETS OF THE RAINFOREST)
by Michael Chinery (Crabtree)

HERE IS THE TROPICAL RAIN FOREST
by Madeleine Dunphy, illus. by Michael Rothman (Hyperion)

HOW MONKEYS MAKE CHOCOLATE: FOODS AND MEDICINES FROM THE RAINFORESTS
by Adrian Forsyth (Owl Communications)

ABOUT THE RAIN FOREST (“We Both Read” series)
by Heather Johanasen, illus. by Sindy McKay (Treasure Bay)

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ROOF IN THE WORLD
By Kathryn Lasky, photos by Christopher G. Knight (Gulliver/Harcourt)

TREES AND PLANTS IN THE RAIN FOREST
by Saviour Pirotta (Raintree/Steck-Vaughn)

A WALK IN THE RAINFOREST
by Kristin Joy Pratt (Dawn Publications)

PLANTS OF THE RAIN FOREST
by Lynn M. Stone (Rourke)

AT HOME IN THE RAINFOREST
by Diane Willow, illus. by Laura Jacques (Charlesbridge)

PLANTS OF THE RAIN FOREST
by Mae Woods (Abdo & Daughters)