

This activity accompanies the *Cambridge in your Classroom* video on  
**'How can we be close to nature?'**

For more information about this video, or the series, visit  
<https://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/study-here/open-days/cambridge-your-classroom>



# Making a cognitive map

Dr Simone Kotva

Faculty of Divinity  
University of Cambridge

## What is a Sámi ritual drum?

This activity is inspired by the ritual drum of the Sámi. The Sámi are a semi-nomadic Arctic people who traditionally herd and farm reindeer for a living. The Sámi ritual drum was traditionally used in healing ceremonies and for divination. It was often painted with a 'cognitive' map of the local environment.

## What is a cognitive map?

A cognitive map can help you become closer to nature. "Cognitive" comes from another word for "thinking." A cognitive map shows how you – its creator – think about the world and how you experience it. A cognitive map can show *what happens* in a place as well as what that place *looks like*. Cognitive maps translate 'place' into 'event'.

## How to draw your cognitive map

- Spend some time making a list of all the things you encounter in your day-to-day life: around your house, the street you live on, your walk to school.
- Then think a bit bigger: where do you go on weekends? What about the nearest big city? And are there places you visit repeatedly but not frequently? A relative in another city? And how do you get there? Car, bus, train, ferry, air travel?
- Now draw a very big circle on a piece of card or paper
- Begin filling it up with the things on your list: places, persons, animals, vehicles. Don't forget to add yourself, your friends and your family or carers. It doesn't need to be fancy drawing, stick figures will do.
- When you are done, take a step back and spend a moment just looking. That moment is important. It's the moment when you see the network linking you to

everything else in your environment. It's the moment you see that nature is not just something "out there," separate from you: "nature" it's all here, in this circle, jostling for space.

## How to use your cognitive map

- Now you need to go for a walk.
- Whenever you recognise something that you have drawn on your map, make a mental note of it. You might even say a quiet "hello" under your breath.
- Using the map as a reference, expand your awareness of your surroundings. Discover where animals make their dens, follow drain pipes to their source, investigate water banks.
- Then come home, and add any fresh discoveries to your map, and put it in a place where you will see it every day.
- Use the internet to research a few discoveries at a time and add this to your map, expanding it with post-it notes and cards where you list important sightings and data. If you keep up the habit of using and expanding your cognitive map, you will soon find yourself an expert on your local environment.

## What does this old religious practice teach us?

Environments are complex things and there are many factors that all play a role in them. The reason why environmental policies do not always work is because there is a lack of detailed knowledge about what the different factors are in a particular area. Building up to that knowledge takes time and demands that one is familiar with the local area in question. This is the reason why cognitive maps are so important; they allow us to become familiar not only with how a place looks but with how it works.