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Building a Just and Sustainable World

EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LITERACY

Images, photos, and pictures stimulate the mind. For the viewer, they offer a chance to connect and question. They also offer potential for play and imagination, and pulling the observer into purposeful messages.

Most often, newspaper and magazine readers quickly glance at photos and their captions. With this YES! lesson plan, you and your students can luxuriate—and pause—to truly understand an image, its message, and why it's interesting (or not).



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Step One: What do you notice? (before the facts)

Ask your students to make sense of the photograph by trusting their instincts of observation and inference. In doing so, the photograph offers possibilities and interpretations beyond a typical reading where the reader glances at the picture to reinforce their interpretation of the picture's title or caption. Do not introduce any facts, captions, or other written words outside of the image. You may hear: clear water, Native American, long hair, little fish, rock, earring, reflection.

Step Two: What are you wondering? (thinking about the facts)

After you've heard what your students are noticing, you'll probably hear the peppering of questions: Why is this person's hair so long? Is this person going to eat the fish? Why is this person holding the fish so carefully? Was the fish caught with bare hands? Where is this? This is a good time to reveal the photo's caption, accompanying quote, and facts about the actual situation. Watch how the conversation shifts from what they believe to be true to discerning the facts about the photo.

Photo caption:

"Rex Bizahaloni of the Diné (Navajo) Tribe stands in the river confluence of the Colorado and Havasupai Canyon. The Grand Canyon is a sacred place to many indigenous tribes yet water rights issues and uranium mining threaten the river corridor."

Photo by Raechel Running

Photo facts:

Situated in the northeastern portion of Arizona and in the northwestern part of New Mexico, the Navajo Nation is the largest Indian reservation in the United States. The average rainfall in this region is from 10 to 14 inches, and is usually confined to two short seasons. Much of the country is barren with few running streams or springs.

In the early 1920s, the first uranium extraction began on the Navajo Nation, with demand increasing exponentially between World War II and the Cold War, when atomic, and then nuclear, weapons were developed. More than 15,000 people have mined uranium since the 1940s, including many Navajos, who were paid low wages and not informed about the hazardous affects that uranium was having on their lives.

According to their creation story, the Navajo were given a choice between yellow corn pollen, which possessed positive life elements, and uranium, which was thought of as an element of the underworld that should remain in the earth. When uranium

was released from the ground, Navajos believed that they would face great problems, many of which have become reality since mining began and pollutants started entering their bodies and water sources.

The International Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers is deeply concerned with the unprecedented destruction of the planet and indigenous ways of life. The grandmothers are from Alaska; North, South, and Central America; Africa; and Asia; and visit their homelands to pray, advocate, educate, heal, and protect diverse cultures, lands, medicines, language, and ceremonial ways of prayer. Their message of hope is that by going back to the ancient and time-proven, earth-based traditions and practices of our Indigenous people, we will be able to break away from our destructive habits and make the changes necessary for our survival.

More resources around the image

EXPLORE: A Quote From Agnes Baker Pilgrim

READ: Tribes Unite to Fight BP

LEARN: Amazon Tribes Win Against Big Oil

Step Three: What next? (jumping off the facts)

Learning more about a photo leads to bigger questions and an opportunity to discuss broader issues and perspectives.

1. A water right allows an individual, business, community, or agency to use a specified amount of water. People may own the water right, but never the water. Why do water rights sometimes pose conflicts between landowners and users?
2. Who typically is exploited when it comes to environmental inequity? What does "environmental justice" mean to you?
3. What is your culture or community's relationship to the land? Are there certain bodies of water, landmarks, or natural resources that are sacred or significant to you or your community? If so, why?
4. In Hawaii, anything new—like a road or building—receives a blessing in a public ceremony. The International Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers blesses rivers and water around the world. Why do you think blessings are so important in many cultures? Do you or your family participate in any blessing?
5. What, if anything, should the United States Government do to protect the Navajo Nation's natural resources?