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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: bicycle, beach, ocean, mountains, powder, snow, blue sky.

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 (What is the white stuff in the pile? And what is the bicycle doing there? Is that water or ice? Where is this?). That's curiosity or wonder—the intermixing of observations and questions. This is a good time to reveal the photo's caption, 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:

Uyuni Salt flats at the southwestern portion of the altiplano. Bolivian campesinos harvest the salt by hand. Photo by Rory O'Bryen.

Photo facts:

The Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia are the world's largest salt flats. They are nearly the size of Connecticut (4,085 square miles) and visible from space.

After a rainstorm, the flats are often covered by a thin layer of very salty water—shallow enough that the pictured bicycle can be ridden through the water.

All of the miners who harvest salt from the Salar de Uyuni are part of the Colchani cooperative. The cooperative collects, processes, and markets the salt. The profits are distributed to the members of the cooperative.

In this photo, something important is invisible: lithium, a rare metal, is dissolved in the mineral crust of the salt flats. Bolivia's Uyuni salt flats contain almost half of the world's lithium. This mineral is now in high demand

because it is used in the production of electric cars.

The Bolivian President, Evo Morales, seeks to ensure that the profits from mining lithium are reinvested and shared with the citizens of Bolivia. He requires that international corporations that want to mine lithium pay special taxes and build factories to manufacture car batteries in Bolivia itself. This would create jobs for people within the country, and raise money for schools and government programs. Car companies claim that these policies would make lithium too expensive.

There is also a dark side to lithium. To extract it, the surface of the salt flats has to be plowed and the slurry of salty water underneath needs to be concentrated in huge evaporation pools, into which toxic chemicals are added. Indigenous Bolivians who live nearby would have their water sources polluted by the saltier, toxic slurry.

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.

All the salt workers in Uyuni work for the Colchani Cooperative. Do you know any cooperatives in your hometown? How can a cooperative help its members?

In the past many cultures have used salt to trade. Do you know of other alternative currencies today?

How would mining lithium from the Uyuni Salt Flats benefit the people of Bolivia? How would it hurt them? Who (or what) else would suffer?

More resources around the image

More art from the Latin America issue:

www.yesmagazine.org/42art

Info about the salt flats and more images:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salar_de_Uyuni

The issues around lithium mining in Bolivia:

news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7707847.stm

Thank you to educator Barry Hoonan for contributing to and shaping this lesson.