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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: Ice, Fishing pole, small person, blue water.

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's that kid doing? Is this Antarctica? Why is the ice melted?) That's curiosity or wonder—the intermixing of observations and questions. 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:

"A 3-year-old Inuit girl fishes for Arctic char using the traditional method of fishing line wrapped around a length of wood. Victoria Island, Nunavut, Canadian Arctic, 2005." Photo by Chris Bray.

Accompanying quote:

"The struggle for the environment is the struggle for our own survival." Richard Navarro, founder of the Salvadoran Center for Appropriate Technology.

Photo facts:

The Inuit people, who originated from the arctic regions of Canada, Greenland, Russia, and the United States, traditionally hunted sea animals. Inuit hunting methods include waiting at "breathing holes" in the ice to scratching on the ice with combs to signal seals. Due to a lack of vegetation in the Arctic climates, Inuit people traditionally relied mostly on raw meat and muktuk (whale skin) as a food source.

In December 2005, the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), an NGO representing around 160,000 Inuit in the Arctic regions, filed a petition with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, claiming that global

warming has affected the animals they eat, the land they live on, and, ultimately, the culture they are struggling to maintain.

Since the 80s, Inuit women have been urged not to breast feed their children due to high concentrations of Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in the Arctic. PCBs are a so called persistent organic pollutants, because they are toxic and do not degrade readily. PCBs were once widely used as coolants and added to many products including paints, plastics, glues, and sealants. These PCBs are spread to the Arctic by atmospheric winds and in the droppings of sea birds who eat polluted fish.

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.

Inuit activists claim that climate change is a human rights issue. Knowing what you do about their lifestyle, why do you think they feel this way?

In comparison to the Inuit, what do you think about your own connection to land? Is your livelihood dependent on the land or is it primarily for your enjoyment? What about Americans as a whole?

Sheila Watt-Cloutier, an Inuit activist, describes how the land is important to children and teenagers in particular because it teaches them life skills: "to be bold under pressure, to withstand stress, to be courageous, to be patient, to have sound judgment, and ultimately wisdom." How can land teach these things? What do we rely on in modern society to teach us these life lessons?

More resources around the image

Inuit Fight Climate Change with Human Rights Claim Against US, <http://www.grist.org/article/gertz-inuit>

The Inuit of Nunavut, photo essay by John Hasyn, www.yesmagazine.org/nunavut

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