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Building a Just and Sustainable World

EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LEARNING

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 pause to truly understand an image, its message, and why it's interesting (or not).



Dire Straits

Step 1: What do you notice?

Ask your students to make sense of the photograph by trusting their instincts of observation and inference. In doing so, the image offers possibilities and interpretations beyond a typical reading where the reader glances at a photograph to reinforce its title or caption. Do not introduce any facts, captions, or other written words.

In response to the question, “What do you notice?” you may hear: *Distressed black rubber; blue, orange and red nylon; messy pile of trash; bits of dirt.*

Step 2: What are you wondering?

After you’ve heard your students’ first observations, you may hear a peppering of questions: *Why are these things dumped in a pile? What were they used for? Can they be used again? Is anyone going to clean this up? Is there a sad story behind this?*

This is a good time to reveal the photo’s caption and other information about the photo (below). Watch how the conversation shifts from what they believe to be true to discerning the facts about the photo.

Photo caption

Life jackets and pieces of inflatable boats—used to transport refugees across the Aegean Sea—are discarded on the shore of the Greek island of Lesbos (February 2017). Most of these life jackets are cheap fakes filled with packing foam, sponge, or newspaper, and provided by smugglers from Turkey.

Photo by André Kamber.

Photo facts

- According to the UN Refugee Agency, refugees are persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution, crossing national borders to seek safety in nearby countries. Migrants choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work or education opportunities, and reuniting with family.
- In June 2016, there were over 65 million displaced people in the world—about the same as the population of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand combined.
- More displaced people travel through Lesbos than almost any other place in the world because the island is one

of the closest points in Europe to the Middle East. The risks of the 18-mile journey from Turkey to Lesbos—which takes one to eight hours, depending on weather conditions—include being turned around by the Turkish Coast Guard, being robbed by pirates, or drowning when an overcrowded boat capsizes.

- In 2016, an average of 14 people died every single day crossing the Mediterranean to find safety or a better life in Europe. The chances of dying on the route from Libya to Italy are 10 times higher than on the Turkey to Greece passage.
- Crossing to Europe in a smuggler’s boat can cost up to €1,000—more than twice the price of an airplane ticket from Lebanon to London. A smuggler in Istanbul can make \$20,000 in a busy month—more than twenty times what the average Turkish citizen earns.
- The island of Lesbos is the birthplace of the famous Greek poet Sappho (630-570 BCE). She is thought to have written more than 10,000 lines of poetry, which many later Greek poets, including Homer, studied. Sappho’s love for other women inspired the modern term “lesbian.”

Step 3: What next?

1. Imagine you and your family had to abandon your home or leave your country—by foot or by boat. What would you take that you could carry? Where would you go? Describe how this forced departure might feel.
2. Human trafficking—transporting people illegally between countries—is a crime, but smugglers say they are giving desperate people a shot at a better life. Is it ethical to smuggle migrants and refugees across national borders? If a Syrian refugee dies crossing the Aegean Sea to Lesbos, who is to blame? Who has the responsibility to protect migrants and refugees?
3. Volunteering abroad in places like Lesbos is becoming more popular. Despite good intentions, sometimes “do good” volunteering isn’t effective. Have you volunteered to help disadvantaged people in your community or abroad? What motivated you (or people you know) to volunteer? How was the experience for you? For the community? What does ethical volunteering look like to you?
4. The European Union has built walls, erected fences, and capped visas to keep migrants out. The U.S. takes similar measures to secure its borders. Why are developed countries motivated to bar certain people from entering? Describe how immigrants are part of your school or community. Are they welcome? What challenges might immigration create for communities and governments?