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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, pulling the observer into purposeful messages.

Most often, newspaper and magazine readers take a quick 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).



In A Bind

Step One: 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: *pile of large stones, field, blue skies, fluffy clouds, wooden boards, stick.*

Step Two: What are you wondering?

After you’ve heard your students’ first observations, you may hear a peppering of questions: *What is in between those boards? How heavy are the stones? Is that an animal in the background?* This is a good time to reveal the photo’s caption and other information about the photo. Watch how the conversation shifts from what they believe to be true to discerning the facts about the photo.

Photo caption:

“Most herding families depend almost entirely on the meat and dairy from their animals for sustenance. Here, large stones are being used to press excess liquid out of curd.” Photo by Taylor Weidman, award-winning documentary photographer and co-founder of the Vanishing Cultures Project.

Photo facts:

Mongolia’s nomads subsist on the meat and milk of goats, camels, and other livestock. They rely on drying techniques to preserve dairy products, which help sustain them through bitter winters. Curds, made from curdled milk, can be shaped and decorated, or pressed. Pressed curds are sliced and dried outdoors to make a rich, nutritious snack that lasts indefinitely. They are better sucked than bit because of their hardness.

Mongolia sits atop some of the world’s richest deposits of gold, copper, and coal. Today’s nomads often push their children out to cities for school or mining jobs. Nomads who remain on the steppes or Mongolian plains must adjust to herding in a landscape changed by mining and development.

In 2010, over eight million of Mongolia’s livestock were killed due to record-cold temperatures, forcing entire families to move to the capital city of Ulaanbaatar because their food source was gone. Almost three-quarters of the city’s inhabitants live in camps of *gers* (yurts), traditional round homes adapted for a nomadic lifestyle. Inside the yurts, wood-and-coal-burning fires keep occupants warm against the average winter temperature of -13 degrees Fahrenheit. The city is blanketed with unsafe levels of smog most of the year from these yurt camps.

Despite opportunities available in growing cities, one-third of Mongolia still relies on a herding lifestyle for sustenance. In a time of changing economic landscape, many people see Mongolia’s nomads and their traditional foods, such as curds, as an integral part of the country’s heritage.

Step Three: What next?

1. Milk from nomads’ sheep, goats, and camels makes up a large part of the traditional Mongolian diet. What foods make up most of your diet? Could you imagine eating just these foods for most of the year?

2. Taking care of livestock herds is a full-time job for nomadic families. Do you help take care of any animals—or want an animal to be responsible for? How would life be different if you had a whole herd to watch every day?

3. Nomads who have lost their herds often move to cities to find a job. They tend to live together in crowded *ger* (yurt) villages within a city, rather than in established neighborhoods or districts. What challenges and changes do you think nomads face when they move to the city? Likewise, what challenges and changes does a city and its local citizens encounter from their new neighbors? What would be the hardest change if you moved from the country to the city, or vice versa?

4. It is becoming increasingly difficult for children of nomads to follow their parents’ traditional lifestyle. Do you hope to have the same job as your parents? Do you have plans to stay in your hometown after high school or college, or does another part of the country or world appeal to you? Why?