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



EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LEARNING

It's in the Bag

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: *fluffy costumes, columns and big windows, group of people.*

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 are the three men wearing weird costumes? What are the costumes made out of? Is this a hotel lobby?* 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:

Ban the Bag PDX Plastic Bag Monsters attend a Portland, OR City Council meeting to testify about plastic bag pollution and call for a plastic bag ban in the city.

Photo facts:

The Bag Monster is a shocking visual representation of the average amount of plastic bags a single shopper uses in a year. Each bag monster wears 500 plastic shopping bags. Advocates for plastic bag reduction dress as bag monsters to demonstrate the impact of individual shoppers and attend parades, hearings, and public events to encourage plastic bag bans on city and state levels.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the U.S. goes through 100 billion plastic shopping bags annually, with an estimated cost to retailers of \$4 billion.

Plastic bags, bottles, and other consumer products from land comprise 80 percent of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and have been cited as the cause of deadly floods in Bangladesh and Mumbai. This patch represents a convergence zone stretching thousands of miles across the North Pacific Ocean, between the United States and Japan. Estimated weight of this plastic mass is 100 million tons.

The amount of petroleum used to make a plastic bag would drive a car approximately 11 meters.

Plastic is a material that is created to last permanently, yet is often used just once. Only one to three percent of plastic bags are recycled worldwide.

Plastic bags are not biodegradable; they actually photodegrade. This means plastic bags break down into small toxic bits, contaminating soil and waterways, and are ingested by fish—which people eat. Approximately 2.5 billion people in the world rely on fish for at least 20 percent of their animal protein.

Additional resources around the image:

READ :: Cities Take Up the "Ban the Bag" Fight

LEARN :: Ban the Bag PDX

INVESTIGATE :: Bag Monster

EXPLORE: TEDTalk—Charles Moore on the Seas of Plastic

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

1. Plastic bags are a convenient part of many people's daily lives. What are viable alternatives to plastic bags? Why do we use plastic bags when there are other options?
2. The best answer to the question, "Paper or plastic?" would be "Please put it in this cloth bag I brought with me." Do you think this is a realistic option for you and your family? For most people? What would it take to change your and your family's habits?
3. Plastic bag banners have had lots of opposition at the state level and started advocating for citywide bans instead. Why are activists usually more successful on a city level? What are the arguments against banning plastic bags? Do you think these arguments are valid?
4. Advocates and opponents of a plastic bag ban use all sorts of statistics to make their case to elected officials and to the public. Opponents claim that pro-ban supporters are deciding with their emotions, not the facts. Do you agree? When you make a decision, what carries more weight—statistics and facts, or emotions and beliefs?