



LESSON PLAN

Investigating the Impacts of Palm Oil



RELATED PHOTO ESSAY

Palm Oil in Myanmar

BY TAYLOR WEIDMAN



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Class: 60 minutes

Key Idea

A corporation's commitment to profit can sometimes undercut other responsibilities toward humans and the environment. This is the case with some palm oil producers, whose unsustainable practices have destroyed rainforests, displaced indigenous villages, and violated human rights.

Background

Palm oil is an edible vegetable oil used in approximately half of all packaged items on American supermarket shelves. Southeast Asia remains the biggest source of palm oil, with Indonesia and Malaysia as leading producers. The demand for palm oil has created a burgeoning global palm oil market, driving the creation and expansion of plantations in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Nigeria. According to Bloomberg.com, global palm oil production has quintupled since 1990.*

Some palm oil producers put profit before social and ethical responsibilities. As corporations create oil palm plantations, huge swaths of primary forests are decimated, including rainforests that help mitigate global CO₂ emissions. Habitat for the Sumatran tiger and orangutan in Southeast Asia are being destroyed, threatening the survival of these and other species. Palm oil production has also had significant human costs. The clear-cutting of forests for plantations have displaced indigenous residents. Human rights abuses against migrant farmers are not uncommon, as men, women, and children have been trafficked—coerced against their will—into low paying jobs with no rights due to their immigrant status. Amnesty International, an international human rights organization, claims some of palm oil's top producers engage in child labor, forced labor, gender discrimination, and do not protect their workers from exposure to toxic chemicals.**

In the photo essay, "Palm Oil in Myanmar," Taylor Weidman documents palm oil production in Myanmar, a country in Southeast Asia. Weidman captures the environmental destruction created by the palm oil industry and the devastating human costs to local villages and to the workers and families employed at plantations.

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- Anthropology
- Environmental Science
- Geography
- Modern World Studies

COLLEGE

- Cultural Anthropology
- Environmental Studies
- Geography
- History

THEMES

- Effects of development
- Human rights
- Cultural displacement
- Corporate abuses

MATERIALS

- World Map
- Access to the photo essay online (or printed copies of it)

PREPARATION

- None



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*E. Benjamin Skinner, "[Indonesia's Palm Oil Industry Rife With Human-Rights Abuses: The hidden human toll of the palm oil boom.](#)" Bloomberg.com, July 20, 2013.

**"[Case studies: Palm oil and human rights abuses.](#)" Amnesty International News, November 30, 2016.

Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.9-10.5 and SL.11-12.5. Make use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understandings of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies. D2.Geo.2.9-12. Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics.

Next Generation Science Standards. HS-LS2-7. Design, evaluate, and refine a solution for reducing the impacts of human activities on the environment and biodiversity.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Show students a map of Southeast Asia, indicating Myanmar, the location of this story. Explain to students that they will be viewing a photo essay that depicts the human costs to local villages from palm oil production.

Explain to students that palm oil is a very common ingredient in products used by many of us every day. It is used in almost half of all packaged goods, according to Rainforest Action Network (RAN), and can be found in the following processed foods: ice cream, cookies, crackers, cereals, breakfast bars, potato chips, baby formula, as well as dry and canned soups.

Ask students: What do you know about palm oil? Introduce students to this interactive resource, "From rainforest to cupboard: the real story of palm oil," from [The Guardian](#). Explore this resource with students to get an



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overarching understanding of palm oil from its origins in the rainforest, to plantations, to the marketplace, and, finally, to the consumer's home.

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Explain to students that they will now examine the impacts of palm oil production, through the lens of a photo essay that depicts individuals and communities living on a palm oil plantation in Myanmar.

Ask students to read Taylor Weidman's photographer statement and view the photo essay, taking note of the impacts that palm oil production has on the environment and the indigenous peoples that live and work in the villages. While students examine the photos, ask them to make a list of observations. What are the human impacts, the causes and effects, of the palm oil plantations on individuals and local communities? In what ways have their lives changed?

Delving Deeper

After viewing the photo essay, lead a discussion with such questions as:

- As noted in Taylor Weidman's photographer's statement, what year did the Myanmar government lay out a roadmap for the development of palm oil? How quickly has development expanded since then?
- Using Weidman's photos and captions as evidence, what are the negative impacts of palm oil production? How are the people that live and work on the palm oil plantations affected environmentally, culturally, and socially? (Some answers include: environmental destruction and species loss, low wages, lack of proper healthcare and educational facilities, human trafficking, and land grabs, etc.)
- A Burmese woman, shown in one of the photographs, works at Southern Youth community service organization; she educates local communities about the issues of land grabs. To answer the question, "What's a land grab?" [Oxfam America](#) provides the following definition: "Imagine waking up one day to be told you're to be evicted from your home—being told you no longer have the right to remain on land that you've lived on for years. And then,



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if you refuse to leave, being forcibly removed. For many communities in developing countries, this is a familiar story.” Using the photos as evidence, how are land grabs impacting the individuals in this photo essay? Do you think land grabs might influence an individual’s identity, livelihood, and security? If so, how?

- Zaw Myo Htike is a migrant worker in the photo essay (photograph #6). In an interview for [PRI](#), he said, “At the time, I regretted my decision to come here and work. I was also angry towards the agent for lying to me. But because I was already here, I decided to stay.” Can learning from a personal experience, like Htike’s, allow one to develop empathy about a global issue on the other side of the world? If so, how?
- *The Guardian* reports that global land grabs are “the next human rights challenge for business.” One solution, stated in the article, is for investors to “engage, not evict, the locals, and invest in their future. The results will be not only a more fair and humane policy, but prosperity for everyone who has a stake in these lands.” What do you think about this solution? Do you think investors/corporations have a moral responsibility to respect the local communities and their lives? Why or why not?
- “Man sometimes thinks he’s been elevated to be the controller, the ruler, but he’s not. He’s only part of the whole. Man’s job is not to exploit, but to oversee, to be a steward. Man has responsibility, not power,” said Oren Lyons, a Native American Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Seneca Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy and Indigenous rights advocate. A “steward” can be defined as someone who takes responsibility to care for something, like a farmer would be a “steward” of the land. What do you think Lyons means by this statement? Compare this statement to what you witnessed in the photo essay. What are some similarities?
- According to a farmer from the Taunggyi Township, Shan State in Myanmar, “Land is our life as well as our prestige. It’s the food for us to survive, the home for us to live, and the place of unity for our family. Also, land is our precious inheritance throughout the generations,” For those villagers who have been displaced from their ancestral land, what might be lost?*



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- Do you think the general public should be more aware of palm oil production? Why? Do you think this will make a difference in peoples' purchasing habits? Why or why not?

* "[The Meaning of Land in Myanmar.](#)" Transnational Institute, January 28, 2016.

Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the photo essay to justify their reasoning.)

1. The organization [One Green Planet](#) lists six organizations dedicated to restoring the damage done by the palm oil industry. Visit one of the organizations listed on their website and describe, in a few paragraphs, one potential solution described. How does this solution, big or small, aid in restoring the impacts of the palm oil industry? Why do you think people should care about the solution you chose? (C3.D2.Geo.2.9-12)
2. The video, "[Indigenous Peoples' rights under threat from palm oil plantations in Tanintharyi, Myanmar](#)," from the Tenasserim River & Indigenous People Networks (TRIP NET), gives a voice to the local villagers living in Myanmar who have been impacted by palm oil production. In a peaceful protest, one villager held up a sign that read, "When the rich rob the poor, it's called business. When the poor fight back, it's called violence." In 2-3 paragraphs, describe your interpretation of this quote. How might this quote be applied to another situation you've witnessed in your life—either in the news, in literature, or personally? (CCSS.ELA.SL.9-10.5 and SL.11-12.5)
3. Due to public outcry and advocacy from concerned citizens and environmental organizations, there is a growing voice supporting a "zero deforestation" policy in palm oil production so that critical rainforests can remain.

Supporters of this view are pushing for a clear labeling system, which would clarify for customers which products meet the sustainability requirements set out by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil and



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consumer choice. According to *National Geographic*, the following companies are making commitments to use only sustainable palm oil in their products.

Choose one of the following companies that make a product that you currently use or have used in the past:

- Hershey
- L'Oréal
- Kellogg's
- Colgate-Palmolive
- General Mills
- Mars
- Procter & Gamble
- Johnson & Johnson
- PepsiCo
- Kao Group
- J.M. Smucker
- Agricultural giant Cargill
- Dunkin' Brands and Krispy Kreme Doughnuts

Research the company to find a consumer department and write a convincing letter to a manager or administrator; congratulate them on this choice and encourage them to stick to their commitment to using only sustainable palm oil. Indicate your appreciation for the product but state you will stop using/enjoying it if they fail to comply with sustainable criteria, as set out by the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil. Use the photo essay to support your point of view.*

(NGSS.HS-LS2-7)

*Laurel Neme, "[Endangered Orangutans Gain From Eco-Friendly Shifts in Palm Oil Market.](#)" *National Geographic*, October 11, 2014.



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Resources

Taylor Weidman, "[The human cost of palm oil production in Myanmar.](#)" Aljazeera, January 4, 2017.

Ben Bloch, "[Oil Palm Industry Takes Land, Promises Livelihood.](#)" World-watch Institute.

Laurel Neme, "[Endangered Orangutans Gain from Eco-Friendly Shifts in Palm Oil Production.](#)" *National Geographic*, October 11, 2014.

(Organization Website) [Rainforest Action Network \(RAN\)](#).

Laura Paddison et al., "[From rainforest to your cupboard: the real story of palm oil – interactive.](#)" *The Guardian*, November 10, 2014.

"[Why indigenous and community land rights matter for everyone.](#)" (Organization Website) OXFAM International.

(Organization Website) [Say No to Palm Oil](#).

"[The Meaning of Land in Myanmar.](#)" Transnational Institute, January 28, 2016.

(Organization Website) [Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil \(RSPO\)](#).

Corrine Henn, "[Has the Deforestation Caused by Palm Oil Got You Down? These Organizations Have Our Backs.](#)" One Green Planet, January 13, 2015.