



LESSON PLAN

Valuing an Ancient Vocation



RELATED FILM

The Last Ice Merchant

BY SANDY PATCH



Valuing an Ancient Vocation

Key Idea

For centuries, indigenous people living near Mt. Chimborazo, the highest mountain in Ecuador, have harvested ice from its glacial peaks. Like many traditional vocations, ice mining is disappearing due to a variety of modern influences. As it disappears, a unique way of life is being lost.

Background

The short film, *The Last Ice Merchant*, documents Baltazar Ushca and his two brothers, Gregorio and Juan, all of whom have witnessed cultural change through different perspectives. In 2016, Baltazar was one of only a few remaining glacial ice miners continuing a centuries-old tradition at Mt. Chimborazo. With an elevation of just over 20,000 ft., Mt. Chimborazo, an inactive volcano, is the highest mountain in Ecuador. It provides drinking water to over half a million people in two provinces in surrounding areas. While its glacial peaks have been warmed by climate change, it remains a source of ice for those willing to engage in the arduous and uneconomical work of ice mining.

In years past, Baltazar was one of forty ice collectors in the region. At 67-years-old, he continues to hike for approximately 5 hours twice a week. The journey takes him up 16,000 feet to the glacial peaks, using a pickaxe to collect ice. He uses his donkeys as well as his own strength to transport the ice to market. His brothers retired from the ice mines of Chimborazo to find other work; Gregorio sells ice cream to the local communities and Juan works in construction. *The Last Ice Merchant* explores the culture of a Chimborazo indigenous community, inevitable change due to modernization, and the loss of an ancient vocation. The film explores the value and pride of one's culture despite change.

Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.11-12.1.c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.



Film: 14 minutes

Class: 60 minutes

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- Anthropology
- English Language Arts
- Geography
- Modern World Studies

COLLEGE

- Cultural Anthropology
- English
- Geography
- History

THEMES

- Effects of modernization
- Traditional knowledge
- Effects of climate change
- Human connection to the environment

MATERIALS

- Online access to the film
- Equipment for showing film

PREPARATION

- None



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College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies.

D2.Geo.6.9-12. Evaluate the impact of human settlement activities on the environmental and cultural characteristics of specific places and regions.

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.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Ask students to describe their communities and where they live. This could include their families, neighbors, as well as a description of the natural world around them. Then, introduce the following quote from writer, linguist, and activist Helena Norberg-Hodge. In her book, *Ancient Futures*, Norberg-Hodge writes about her experiences with traditional cultures and their connection to the natural world:

“A sense of place means helping ourselves and our children to see the living environment around us: reconnecting with the sources of our food, perhaps even growing some of our own, and learning to appreciate the cycles of seasons and the characteristics of the flora and fauna. Ultimately, this involves a spiritual awakening that comes from making a connection with others, and with nature. It requires us to see the world within us—to experience more consciously the great interdependent web of life, of which we ourselves are part.”

Ask students what they think about this quote. Do they feel connected to the place they live? Why or why not? What connects them to this place?

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Tell students they will be watching a film, *The Last Ice Merchant*, about an ice miner, named Baltazar Ushca, who is the last of his profession. His work includes climbing Mt. Chimborazo, the highest mountain in



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Ecuador, slicing ice from the frozen glaciers, and carrying it to market on his donkeys. Explain that due to a variety of cultural and geographic factors, particularly the advent of refrigeration, ice mining is a vanishing profession.

Direct students to observe Baltazar and his two brothers—Gregorio and Juan—while watching the film. Before watching the film, share the following questions with students: What does Baltazar enjoy about his family tradition of ice mining? How do Baltazar and his brothers feel about this disappearing profession?

Delving Deeper

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

- How long has Baltazar Ushca been working as an ice miner? (Answer: 52 years.)
- Using the film as evidence, make a list of the reasons why the fresh Mt. Chimborazo ice has become unpopular in the town. (Answers include: refrigeration allows people to make their own ice, and factory ice is cheaper than Chimborazo ice.)
- The Chimborazo area is part of a larger region that holds the poorest population in Ecuador and offers few new job opportunities. The film explores Baltazar and his two brothers'—Gregorio and Juan—perspectives. What decisions did Gregorio and Juan have to make in order to make a living?
- Baltazar has a unique relationship to his work, community, and to nature. If you were to choose three words to summarize his relationship to each, which words would you choose?
- Many indigenous cultures around the world are under threat due to climate change and technological advancements. Cultures like the nomads of Tibet, Alaska Eskimo, indigenous South Americans, and many Native North American people are losing their unique traditions that create community and connection to the land. In Ecuador, approximately 25 to 30 percent of the population belong to an indigenous group, where they maintain a close relationship with the land. How is this relationship depicted in the film?



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- In an interview, Baltazar describes, “I am happy when I walk. Father Chimborazo looks after me.” Is there a place in nature that you feel connected to? If so, describe this place.
- Patch describes Baltazar in an interview: “He’s this relic of an era that doesn’t exist anymore.”* A “relic” can be defined as “a trace of some past or outmoded practice, custom, or belief,” according to Merriam-Webster. Do you agree that Baltazar might be a “relic” of another era? Why or why not? What insights might Baltazar provide for future generations?
- Director Sandy Patch explains that the goal of the film “was to share a story of cultural change and indigenous lifestyle with people that would never otherwise have been introduced to it. It was important to me to portray the characters as the dignified people that they are and to show the very human story of their circumstances.”** Do you think it’s important for viewers around the world to learn about Baltazar, his culture, and his disappearing profession? Why or why not? What might be gained from learning about Baltazar’s life and culture?

*Mina Hochberg, “[Outside at Tribeca: The Last Ice Merchant of Chimborazo.](#)” *Outside Magazine*, April 23, 2012.

***(Blog)* Sandy Patch, “[Baltazar en Nueva York, Part 1.](#)” *Railroad in the Sky*, May 1, 2012.

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 film to justify their reasoning.)

1. Choose one of the disappearing professions from this [Time Magazine article](#). Imagine that this is your occupation. Your profession is now being phased out due to the technological advances described in the article. Describe the value of your job and why your profession should not be phased out. How does your job benefit you, the local community, the natural world, and the world, if appropriate? Include informa-



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tion about the technological advances that are replacing your job. Take note that you may also need to conduct additional online research about this profession. Write 2-3 paragraphs and make sure to document any outside sources, if used. (C3.D2.His.3.9-12)

2. In *The Last Ice Merchant*, Baltazar says, “People don’t miss something until it’s gone.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? Write an essay, 2-3 paragraphs, describing the meaning of this statement. Include an example from your own personal life, community, or world-at-large to support your point of view. Why do you think we don’t miss something, or value it, until it is gone? Is there an activity in your life that you would miss if it were no longer accessible to you? (CCSS.ELA.SL.11-12.1.c)
3. In the early 1970’s, historian and broadcaster Studs Terkel traveled around the United States and interviewed people about their jobs. [Listen to this 5-minute interview](#) Terkel conducted with Sharon Griggins, a 17-year-old telephone operator in Illinois. The interview jumps to Griggins later in her life. She said, “Automation is great in today’s world, but it’s hard to automate everyone’s wishes and wants. We’ve all had those situations where all you want to do is talk to somebody and all you have is a list of menu options.” First, what do you think about this interview? What comparisons/contrasts can you make from Griggins’s younger self to her older self? Next, what do you think about the above quote from Griggins? Describe from your own experience what can get lost when technology is overused, replacing human elements. In a short essay, describe your answers. (C3.D2.Geo.2.9-12)

Resources

Michael Blanding, “[The Value of Slow Journalism in the Age of Instant Information.](#)” Nieman Reports, August 19, 2015.

Alexander E.M. Hess, “[10 American Jobs that are Disappearing Now.](#)” *Time Magazine*, August 28, 2014.

Nelson D. Schwartz and Nick Wingfield, “[Amazon to Add 100,000 Jobs as Bricks-and Mortar Retail Crumbles.](#)” *The New York Times*, January 12, 2017.



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[“Teenage Telephone Operator Reveals Loneliness in Terkel’s ‘Working’.”](#)
NPR, September 27, 2016.

Karen Catchpole, [“The Iceman Goeth: An Ecuadorian Tradition is Down to its Last Man.”](#) Zozi, February 3, 2015.

Sandy Patch, [“The Last Ice Merchant of Ecuador.”](#) *The New York Times*, April 2, 2015.

Irene Caselli, [“How Ecuador’s last iceman perpetuates an ancient craft.”](#)
BBC News, June 1, 2012.

Mina Hochberg, [“Outside at Tribeca: The Last Ice Merchant at Chimborazo.”](#) *Outside Magazine*, April 23, 2012.

(Blog) Sandy Patch, [“Baltazar en Nueva York, Part 1.”](#) *Railroad in the Sky*, May 1, 2012.

Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures*, 3rd ed. (USA: Local Futures, 2016).