



LESSON PLAN

Exploring Cultural Sustainability



RELATED PHOTO ESSAY

Mongolia's Nomads

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Class: 60 minutes

Key Idea

Social changes can be affected by a variety of influences, including exposure to other cultures, available resources, and environmental conditions. Some changes may impact the sustainability of a society and the environment on which it depends.

Background

Mongolian herders make up one of the world's last remaining nomadic cultures. For 3,000 years they have lived on the steppes, grazing their livestock on the relatively lush grasslands, and moving their camps several times a year in search of the best pastures. Their traditional dwelling, the ger, is constructed of a wooden frame covered with felt, making it incredibly warm and also easy to dismantle and move. Horses play a prominent part in Mongolian culture; a good horse is a family's prized possession. Herders also raise sheep, cows or yaks, goats, camels, and reindeer.

For multiple reasons, the herders' traditional way of life is now at risk. A rapidly changing economy means extreme fluctuations in the wool market, making it difficult to earn a living. In addition, climate change and desertification of the land are causing more severe winters and poor pasture, and are literally killing herds. For example, brutal conditions during the winter of 2009–10 led to the deaths of over 9 million animals. As a result, many thousands of herders have moved to mining towns and urban areas—including the capital Ulaanbaatar—in search of employment.

Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 [or 11–12] topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- Anthropology
- Modern World Studies

COLLEGE

- Cultural Anthropology
- Environmental Studies
- Geography
- Sociology

THEMES

- Sustainability
- Change versus tradition

MATERIALS

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

PREPARATION

- (Optional) Make copies of the photo essay



Exploring Cultural Sustainability

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Geo.6.9-12. Evaluate the impact of human settlement activities on the environmental and cultural characteristics of specific places and regions.

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

Introduce the photo essay by showing Mongolia on a world map and asking students what they know about the people who live there or about their environment. Point out that students will be viewing a photo essay that portrays the present-day life of Mongolian pastoral herders, one of the world's last remaining nomadic cultures. Share the meaning of the word sustainability with students. One definition of sustainability is the capacity to endure or sustain, to keep in existence, or maintain. The UN defines sustainability as a call for “a decent standard of living for everyone today without compromising the needs of future generations.” Thinking about your typical day or week, what aspects of your way of life are sustainable and what might not be sustainable?

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Have students work in pairs or small groups to view the photo essay. Explain that students should jot down characteristics of the Mongolian nomads' way of life apparent in the photos (for example, their food and drink, how they make a living, their religion, and their forms of recreation). They should also note evidence from the photos of outside influences being integrated into or replacing the traditional way of life.



Delving Deeper

1. Ask students to share what they learned about the Mongolian nomad way of life from the photo essay. What outside influences did they observe in the photos?
2. Lead a discussion about the concept of sustainability, asking such questions as:
 - How would you define the term “sustainable”?
 - How is cultural sustainability the same or different from environmental sustainability?
 - Do you think outside influences are changing the traditional Mongolian herder way of life for the better?
3. Photographer Taylor Weidman says of the Mongolian people, “Most herders who stay on the steppe push their children to pursue education and get jobs in the cities, believing that pastoral nomadism is no longer a secure or sustainable way of life.” What evidence do you see in the photo essay that supports this view? What evidence might refute it?

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. What aspects of the nomadic way of life would be appealing to you? Is there any way you might incorporate one of those characteristics into your own life? (C3.D2.Geo.6.9-12)
2. Why do you think the photographer wants us to know about the Mongolian nomads’ way of life? What is the value of their way of life? What can we learn from them? (NGSS.HS-LS2-7)
3. If you were to develop a photo essay on your culture, what would you include? (C3.D2.Geo.6.9-12)



Resources

Nina Wegner, "[Last of the Nomads: How Mongolian Culture May Change Drastical-ly within a Generation.](#)" *Huffington Post*, April 5, 2012.

Nina Wegner, "[The Dark Side of Mongolia's Mineral Boom.](#)" *The Atlantic*, February 12, 2013.

Cultural Sustainability Institute of the Vermont Folklife Center, "[What Is Cultural Sustainability?](#)"