



LESSON PLAN

# Reclaiming Rivers



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**[“Rivers and Stories”](#)**

BY ROBERT HASS



### Key Idea

Rivers are woven into cultural history. With rising pollution and climate change, the health of many rivers around the world are in danger.

### Background

In this article, author and Pulitzer prize-winning poet Robert Hass writes about the physical state of rivers around the globe. He points to the historical significance of rivers as well as to their cultural and environmental importance. Events throughout history have occurred by the banks of rivers, including the development of life and civilization, exploration, communication and commerce. Hass describes that one is confronted with “the human history of rivers” as one travels the world. He recounts his experiences on the banks of three rivers from his worldly travels: the Danube River in Europe, the Huangpu in China, and the Nile in Africa. Hass deepens his argument through his environmental observations, cultural stories of various regions, and poetry from Czeslaw Milosz, T.S. Eliot, and Vasko Popa. Rivers illustrate and symbolize our ancestral connection to the earth, which Hass urges us to reclaim.

The protection of global rivers, including water conservation and river restoration, is critical to the health of humans and ecosystems. Ecologists and scientists have warned for years that the flow of rivers, which provides fresh water supplies, will severely decrease due to the impact of climate change. With the construction of hydropower dams and other development projects, river ecosystems are at risk. River pollution, as a result of runoff and sewage dumping, is a health and safety concern, and the increase in waterborne diseases poses threats to human lives and natural wildlife.

Hass is dedicated to the advocacy of healthy rivers and watersheds. He co-founded River of Words, an environmental education project that was founded to give new life to the teaching of art and poetry through watershed exploration. The project hosts an annual international contest for K-12 students.



**Class:** 60 minutes

### SUBJECT AREAS

#### HIGH SCHOOL

- Environmental Science
- English Language Arts
- Geography
- History

#### COLLEGE

- Creative Writing
- Environmental Studies
- Geography
- History
- Poetry

### THEMES

- Power of storytelling
- Consequences of development
- Effects of climate change
- Human connection to the environment

### MATERIALS

- Printed copies of the story, one per student (or access to story online)
- Highlighter pens

### PREPARATION

- Make copies of the story. Students will read the article as homework.



### Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. W.11-12.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

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

Ask students to think about their relationship to water. What would they do without access to running water? What do you think would happen if a major city, like New York City, lacked access to water? What do you think people would do? Do you think this could be possible? Why or why not?

Introduce the story by telling students that they will be reading an article written by a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet who believes that humans need to reclaim the world's rivers at this time in history. Explain to students that due to pollution and development, including hydroelectric dams, the world's rivers are in danger. The U.S. alone contains over 250,000 rivers. A recent report by the United States Environmental Protection Agency concluded that 55 percent of U.S. rivers and streams are in poor condition.

#### ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Assign students to read the article as homework, pointing out that they will be talking about it in class the next day. Encourage students to pay attention to the following three rivers in the essay: the Danube River in Europe, the Huangpu River in China, and the Nile River in Africa.



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Explain that students will be analyzing the article and responding to questions in small groups in class. The author writes, “...the rivers themselves have almost disappeared from consciousness in the modern world.” Ask students to note what could cause a river to become endangered. What are some ways the author indicates that rivers have “disappeared from consciousness”? What could this phrase mean?

### Delving Deeper

1. Divide the class in small groups, and assign each group one of the three rivers described in the essay—the Danube River in Europe, the Huangpu in China, and the Nile in Africa.
2. Ask students in each group to respond to the following questions:
  - How are geography, history, culture, and the environment incorporated into the river’s description in the article?
  - What are the signs that the river could be in danger?
  - Do you think Hass’s first person travel narrative is an effective use of writing for this article? Why or why not?
3. Invite the groups to read the article with these questions in mind, using highlighter pens to mark the appropriate phrases or sentences.
4. Pair up groups that focused on different rivers and have them identify connections between the two groups’ findings.
5. Call the class together to discuss the article, asking such questions as:
  - In the beginning of the article, Hass describes that human life most likely developed within easy range of lakes and rivers. Hass points to the fact that river systems have endured stress over the last hundred years due to the actions of human beings. Which statements in the article support this?
  - What was the government’s reaction when a plan to dam the Danube River became controversial? Do you think this was a good solution? Why or why not?



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- The author was amazed by what he didn't see at the Huangpu River. What was it? Why was this “unsettling” to the author?
- “Under various names I have praised only you, rivers. You are milk and honey and love and death and dance.” What could this line, written by Czeslaw Milosz, signify? Do you think Hass's use of poetry is effective in this essay? Why or why not?
- At the end of the article, Hass compares a dam to something in popular culture. What is it? What, according to Hass, are the similarities between the two? Do you agree? Why or why not?
- In the final paragraph of the article, the author makes a statement about how to address the problem of unhealthy rivers. How would you state or interpret this into your own words?
- If you could rename the title of this article, what name would you give it? Why?

### Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story.

1. Hass writes, “The technology and the understanding of flood dynamics and of the need for water conservation have begun to make the twenty-first-century work of river restoration seem a possibility. A starting place for this work would be to recover an elder imagination of the earth.” What do you think he means by “an elder imagination of the earth”? What other descriptions from the article back up this statement? (CCSS.ELA.W.11-12.2)
2. Hass is a co-founder of [River of Words](#), an environmental education project that hosts an international poetry and art contest annually. About the project, he says, “Learning about our own watersheds gets to the essence of how we have to understand our homegrounds.” Think of a body of water near your home—a watershed, ocean, river, or stream. Create a piece of artwork or poetry for this contest, illustrating the state of water (for example a river, stream, watershed, or ocean, etc.) in your local area. What did you choose to write or draw? What data was used to create this piece of artwork? Does your artwork illustrate a positive or negative outlook? (C3.D2.Geo.6.9-12)



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3. In 2013, the Upper Colorado River was listed as one of the most endangered rivers by the organization American Rivers, which maps out the most endangered U.S. Rivers. Outdated water management is a major threat to the health and future of this river. Proper water management ensures a reliable water supply for the human population and supports a healthy river. What do you think is the best solution from the following options? Why?
  - a. Increase water efficiency and conservation in cities and towns
  - b. Ban recreation activities such as boating and wild-life watchers
  - c. Prohibit the use of household hazardous wastes such as pesticides

Cross-check your answer by visiting the Upper Colorado River page on the [American Rivers](#) website. Read the “What Must Be Done” section. Which of the above solutions is recommended as an action for this river? (NGSS.HS-LS2-7)

### Resources

Pamela Michael, *The Gift of Rivers: True Stories of Life on the Water* (San Francisco: Travelers’ Tales, 2000).

[American Rivers: Rivers Connect Us.](#)

[International Rivers.](#)

[River of Words](#), St. Mary’s College: Center for Environmental Literacy.