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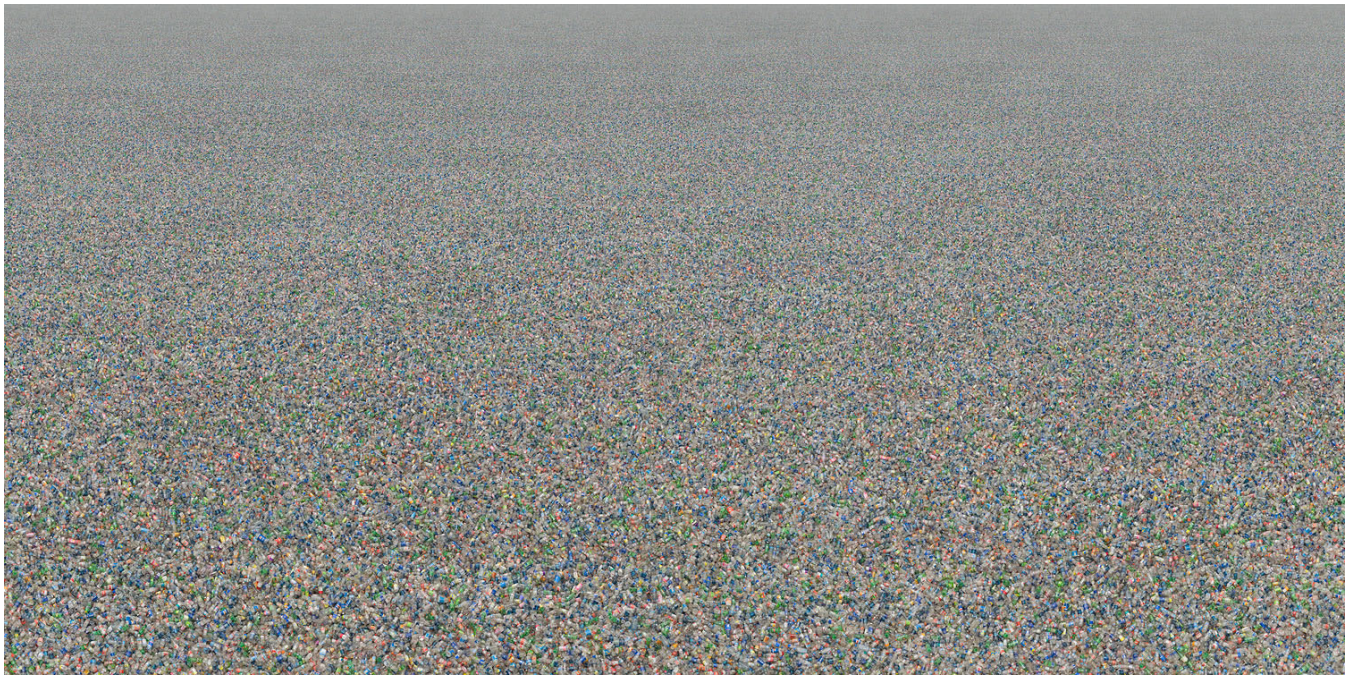
Building a Just and Sustainable World

EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LITERACY

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).



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: plastic water bottles, a huge pile of plastic bottles, Coke and Pepsi plastic bottles, sports drink bottles, a lot of plastic.

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 (Where did these bottles come from? Where is that giant pile of bottles right now? Do we really drink that much bottled water?). That's curiosity or wonder—the intermixing of observations and questions. 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: Plastic Bottles, 2007, 60x120" from Running the Numbers: An American Self-Portrait. Photo by Chris Jordan
Depicts two million plastic beverage bottles, the number used in the U.S. every five minutes.

Photo facts: The U.S. is the largest consumer market for bottled water in the world, followed by Mexico, China, and Brazil. In 2008, U.S. bottled water sales topped 8.6 billion gallons, comprising 28.9% of the U.S. liquid refreshment beverage market, exceeding sales of all other beverages except carbonated soft drinks. Fruit juices and sports drinks were the next most popular.

Water bottling is a very water-intensive endeavor. According to the Pacific Institute, it takes three liters of water to produce one liter of bottled water.

40% of bottled water is tap water, not spring water.

In 2006, the production of 31.2 billion liters of water for the U.S. bottled water market took roughly 17.6 million barrels of oil (energy to produce the water bottle, cap, and packaging), enough oil to run 1.5 million cars on U.S. roadways for an entire year.

Plastic bottles made from PET (polyethylene terephthalate) can be recycled into many products, including beverage bottles, plastic strapping, fleece jackets, sleeping bags, and carpets. However, less than a fifth of all plastic beverage bottles in the U.S. are recycled.

Plastic bottles take 700 years to begin composting.

Instead of being recycled domestically, plastic bottles collected near the West Coast often wind up in China, because it is cheaper for US companies. Bottles travel to China on container ships that have delivered imports to West Coast ports.

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

Learning more about a photo leads to bigger questions and an opportunity to discuss broader issues and perspectives.
What do you do with a plastic bottle when you've finished drinking from it? Where do you think your plastic bottle goes after you put it in the recycling bin or trash can?
Do you need to drink your water or soda from a disposable plastic bottle? What are alternatives to bottled water?
Do you think it's more effective to recycle or to cut down on what we consume?
Is bottled water better for you than your local tap water?
How willlling are you to use a reusable water bottle?

More resources around the image

Chris Jordan Photo Essay :: *www.yesmagazine.org/chrisjordan*
Bottled Water Pledge :: http://water.newdream.org/

Thank you to educator Barry Hoonan for contributing to and shaping this lesson.