

People, Places and Environments Pre-Visit Activity

Works of art are powerful primary documents to explore issues and ideas about the land. Review the examples of contemporary environmental photography at the end of this resource and the background information about each. Then, choose one or more images to share with your class. To guide your students' looking and thinking about these photographs, consider the following questions:

What type of landscape has the artist chosen to photograph?

What elements are included in the landscape?

What can you tell about the climate or environment is shown?

Where in the world might this be?

What vantage point has the photographer chosen? How is the image cropped?

What impact does this type of framing have on the way we perceive this landscape?

How is the land being used?

What is the impact of this land use on the health and well-being of this environment? What might this landscape have looked like 20 years before? 100 years?

What does this image tell us about the relationship between people and the land?

What are the benefits and disadvantages of this type of thinking?

What impact will this type of thinking have on the land in the future?

What can we do to change this outcome?











Edward Burtynsky, Canadian, born 1955

Oxford Tire Pile No. 1, Westley, California

1999

Chromogenic print

This manmade landscape of hills and high mountains of tires visualizes the often forgotten afterlife of commercial production. It shows the largest tire pile on the planet, which held over forty million used and discarded tires at its peak capacity. What seems to be a graveyard of tires marks in fact only the penultimate stage in the life cycle of the oil product. They spend several years in this “temporary storage” as they await an energy-intensive recycling process and subsequent environmental cleanup.

A special concern in managing such tire piles is fire control. Tire fires are extremely difficult to extinguish, and even after they are extinguished externally, they may continue to undergo slow-burning pyrolysis inside for decades. Such fires release copious amounts of carbon monoxide, lead, and arsenic. In 1999, lightning struck a tire dump in Westley, causing it to burn for thirty days. Toxic pyrolitic oil then flowed into the nearby stream, damaging the local ecosystem.

Gift of Jane and Raphael Bernstein; 2010.84.62 © Edward Burtynsky

Subhankar Banerjee, American (born Calcutta, India),
born 1967

Known and Unknown Tracks

From the series *Oil and the Geese*

Negative 2006; print 2009

Chromogenic print face-mounted to Plexiglas

The wetlands surrounding the Teshekpuk Lake in north-central Alaska shown in this photograph are the resting grounds for molting geese returning from their winter migrations from locations as far away as Mexico. Cutting through the image are tracks made by large exploratory vehicles traveling across the Arctic tundra in search of oil. These straight, unnatural lines offer a stark contrast with the delicate and irregular threads marking the presence of wildlife that roam.

Subhankar Banerjee's work in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge during 2006 coincides with the push by oil companies and the George W. Bush administration to open up oil and gas reserves on the coastal plain of Alaska for drilling, despite its designation as protected "special area" by the U.S. Congress in 1977. Met with resistance by environmental activists, many of whom used Banerjee's works in their advocacy, the Bush administration ultimately abandoned its plans.

Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Wood W'18 Fund; 2009.42.1 ©

Subhankar Banerjee

Daniel Beltrá, Spanish, born 1964

Agua Boa, Mato Grosso (Brasil)

From the series *New Amazon Landscape*

August 2008

Epson Ultrachrome K3 pigment print on Hahnemuhle

William Turner paper

In traditional ranches, cattle raised for meat spend most of their lives grazing on rangeland before spending the last two to six months “finishing” in the feedlot. There, they are kept in dense pens and fed specialized, high-energy diets that increase flavor and tenderness to their meat. However, most cattle ranches in Brazil, like the one seen in this photograph, do not practice any grass-feeding at all. Cattle are raised in highly intensive factory-like feedlots that maximize growth rate but produce large amounts of waste per kilogram of beef.

Some 70 percent of illegal deforestation happening today in the Brazilian Amazon is caused by cattle ranching. The industry has grown exponentially in the past few decades, especially after the devaluation of the Brazilian real in 1999, which significantly increased the competitiveness of Brazilian beef in the world market. In addition to environmental damage, the industry also poses a threat to human rights, as many farms are known to employ slave labor and partake in violent clashes over land ownership. The outlook today remains bleak, as the Brazilian government intends to double its share in the beef export market over the next ten years.

Gift of the artist; 2009.26 © Daniel Beltrá

Alex MacLean, American, born 1947 (with Julie Campoli and Elizabeth Humstone)

Saint Albans, Vermont, Large Lot Subdivision

1995

Cibachrome print

The New England landscape that once served as a source of inspiration for nineteenth-century American painters has today become an index of human socio-economic growth and change. Alex MacLean's photographs explore this "history and evolution of land," as he traces the effects of profligate resource consumption and residential development on the landscape. The aerial perspective provides a literal and figural distance from the image, revealing the patterns of suburban/rural planning and the scale of human impact on the once familiar rural landscape.

Purchased through gifts from Peter A. Vogt, Class of 1947, and Robert Eckerson, Class of 1948; PH.998.35.6 © Alex MacLean

J Henry Fair, American, born 1959

Arsenic and Water, Canadys, South Carolina

From the series *Industrial Scars*

March 2009

Chromogenic print

Verging on the abstract, this photograph captures in J Henry Fair's characteristic fashion the ambivalent beauty of polluted landscapes. Seen here is one of the over 1,200 impoundment ponds in Canadys, South Carolina, where toxic slurry from coal power plants is dumped. Its vivid orange color is due to the high arsenic content.

Coal-burning power plants produce ashes that contain toxins including arsenic, mercury, chromium, and cadmium. But because coal ash management is not regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), they can be released as untreated slurry into locally built ponds. According to Fair, each year over 59,000 pounds of arsenic, along with 1,500 pounds of mercury and 229,000 pounds of lead, are released into industrial impoundments within 100 miles of Charleston. These often unlined waste ponds allow heavy chemicals to leach down and contaminate the ground water.

Purchased through a gift from the Krehbiel Foundation; selected by Dartmouth College students who participated in the Hood Museum of Art spring 2011 seminar Museum Collecting 101: Roxane Aflalo, Class of 2014, Stacey Derosier, Class of 2012, David Kamins, Class of 2014, Eleanor K. Killian, Class of 2011, Leigh Latimer, Class of 2011, Allie Lau, Class of 2011, Stephenie Lee, Class of 2011, Erin O'Flaherty, M.A.L.S., Class of 2012, Chanon Praepipatmongkol, Class of 2013, Virginia Ratliff, Class of 2014, Chris Sherman, Class of 2008, Anna Genevieve Winham, Class of 2014; 2001.26 © J Henry Fair