

EARTH

ED BURTYNSKY

CLEARCUT #1, PALM OIL PLANTATION,
BORNEO, MALASIA, 2016



VINCENT VAN GOGH

A WOMAN WITH A SPADE,
SEEN FROM BEHIND, 1885



Humans have long been fascinated with the natural world. The Earth provides the resources that sustain human life—from the air we breathe to the food we consume—and now more than ever we are aware of the vital need to protect it. Nature has also inspired art in all forms throughout human history.

The works selected for this resource focus on our complex relationship to the Earth. Edward Burtynsky's compelling photographs draw attention to the irreversible human impact on the planet, while Van Gogh's painting of a woman working the field invites viewers to connect to the social conditions of his time.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What about the natural world most inspires us?

Why are artists inspired by nature? How do they use this inspiration to create their artworks?

What does nature look like in urban contexts? If you live in a city, what aspects of nature do you see or interact with?

What does it look like in a rural setting?

What are some issues that affect the natural world? Why are these issues important?

Compare Eurocentric perspectives on nature with Indigenous perspectives on nature. How are they the same?

Where do they diverge?



SPOTLIGHT I

VINCENT VAN GOGH, *A WOMAN WITH A SPADE SEEN FROM BEHIND*
1885



Vincent van Gogh, *A woman with a spade, seen from behind*, 1885. Oil on canvas on wood panel. Overall: 41.7 x 32.3 cm. Gift of Ann and Lawrence Heisey, 1997. © Art Gallery of Ontario. 97/156.

Vincent van Gogh painted this rural scene during the Industrial Revolution in Europe in the late 1800s. This was a period of great mechanical and technological advances, which were celebrated because they allowed human industries to operate more efficiently, and they represented significant scientific progress. The degree to which many of these machines would affect and even harm the natural world was not fully understood at the time.



GUIDED OBSERVATION

ELEMENTARY

- Take a few minutes to look at the painting. What is happening in this work? How do you know? Who and what do you see?
- What can you tell about the woman in this painting, based on her appearance and the setting around her?
- If there were a thought bubble above the woman's head, what do you think she might be thinking about?

SECONDARY

- Describe the mood or atmosphere of this painting. How does it make you feel? What techniques does the artist use to evoke such feelings?
- What can we tell about this woman's identity? What clues tell us about her life and social position?
- Why do you think the artist chose to depict this particular person from this particular point of view?

CONTEXT

Vincent van Gogh is one of the most famous European artists from the 1800s. Between 1883 and 1885 Van Gogh was particularly interested in Dutch and French artists who focused on rural life. From the many letters he wrote to his brother Theo, we know that he strongly identified with people working on the land.

In this painting Van Gogh has chosen to show the woman from behind. Her awkward position, twisted round with the spade, shows us how hard her labour is and invites us to empathize with her. The artist has also chosen colours that blend the woman in with the land, suggesting that she is part of the natural world. This is not a romantic view of the human relationship with the earth but a rather realistic depiction of this woman's difficult life.

Listen to Interpretive Planner Gillian McIntyre speak about this work within the context of the Impression exhibition that was held at the AGO in 2019:

https://es-la.facebook.com/AGOToronto/videos/1125529257585982/?comment_tracking=%7B%22t-n%22%3A%220%22%7D

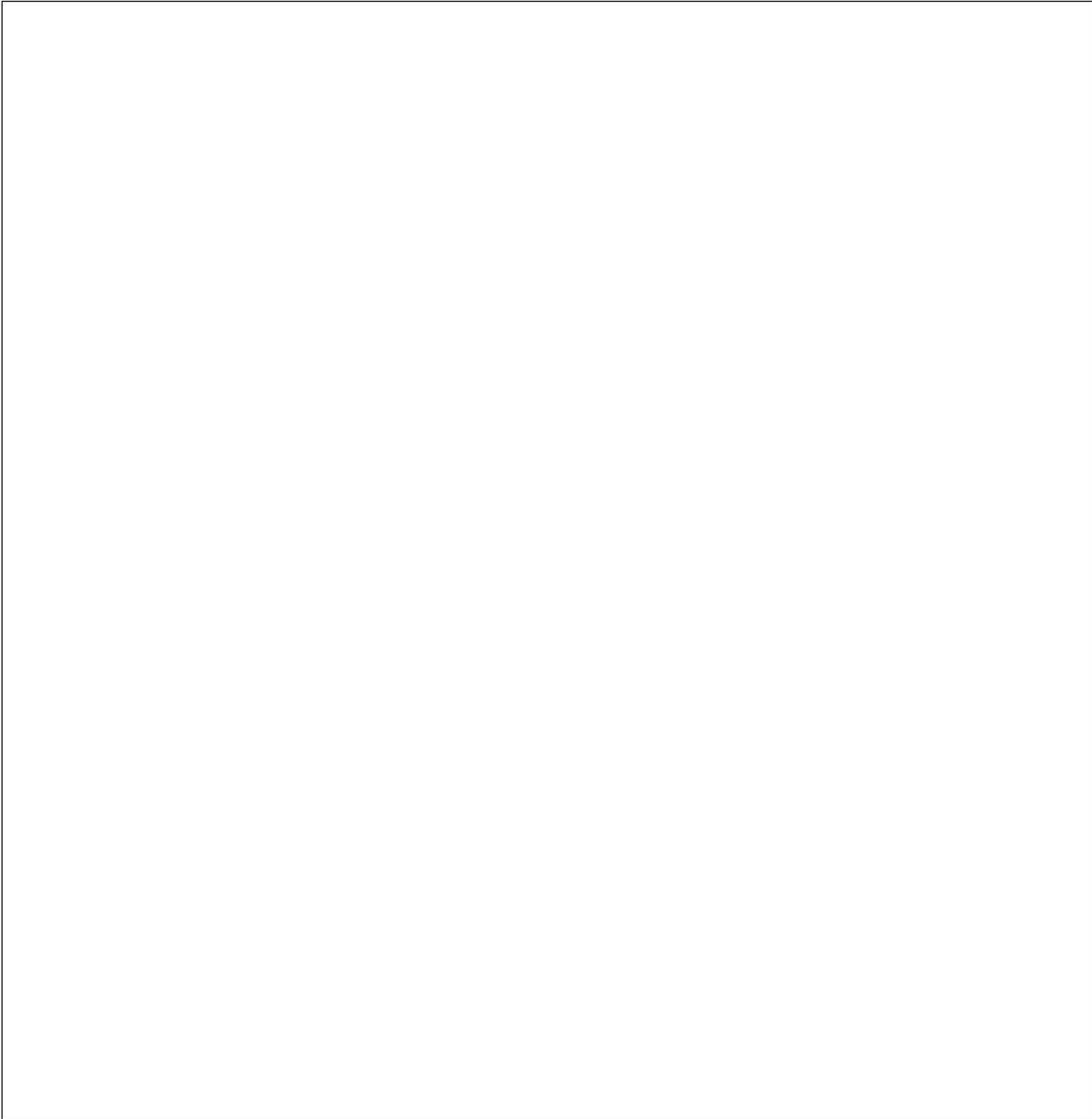


CREATIVE RESPONSE

Imagine stepping into this image. Stand in the position as the woman in the painting. How does it feel? Look around you. What do you see, smell, and hear? Who else is with you in the scene?

Use the template below to fill in the image:

Imagine standing like the woman. How does it feel? If you stepped inside this painting, sketch what would you see, smell, and hear?



SPOTLIGHT 2

EDWARD BURTYNSKY, *CLEARCUT #1, PALM OIL PLANTATION, BORNEO, MALASIA* 2016

Burtynsky's photographs illustrate the stark reality of the physical impact of human activity on the surface of the earth.



Edward Burtynsky, *Clearcut #1, Palm Oil Plantation, Borneo, Malaysia*, 2016. Pigment inkjet print, 148.6 x 198.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto. © Edward Burtynsky, 2017.

GUIDED OBSERVATION

ELEMENTARY

- How would you describe this image to someone who has not seen it?
- What does this photograph remind you of?
- How does this photograph make you feel?
- What do you think about when you look at it?

SECONDARY

- When you hear the term “landscape,” what comes to mind?
- How does Edward Burtynsky challenge the traditional idea of “landscape” in this photograph?
- What does the term “clearcut” mean?
- What effect does this term have on your reaction to the landscape?



CONTEXT

Edward Burtynsky is a contemporary photographer whose work focuses on the human impact on the planet. From his early Burtynsky was exposed to images of old shipping canals and the General Motors plant in his hometown of St. Catharines, Ontario, to his later photographs of global industrial landscapes, Burtynsky explores the evidence of humans reshaping the land.

In *Clearcut #1*, which was taken in Borneo, Malaysia, we see an area that has undergone clearcutting—which is when all or almost all the trees are removed from a given area—as part of the process of palm oil production. Palm oil is one of the most profitable crops to grow in the tropics. We use it in many products, from food like chocolate and pizza, to cosmetics like deodorant, lipstick, shampoo, and toothpaste. Clearcutting has a devastating effect on the environment, but it is more cost-efficient than sustainable methods of farming. Scientists estimate that 18 million acres of land are cleared each year, often illegally.

What are the consequences of clearcutting? What impact would it have on the environment? On animal and plant habitats?

What might be some more sustainable alternatives to clear-cutting?

In 2018, Edward Burtynsky, along with filmmakers Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier, created an exhibition of new photographs, large-scale murals, film installations, and augmented reality installations. Titled *Anthropocene*, this exhibition dramatically illustrated how humans leave an indelible signature on the natural world. The artists travelled to countries around the world to document the irreversible mark and massive scale of our impact on the planet.

In partnership with the Royal Canadian Geographical Society and Canadian Geographic Education, Burtynsky, Baichwal and de Pencier recently launched an educational program—the *Anthropocene Education Project (AEP)*—to encourage teachers and students to continue the conversation around the human impact on the planet. Teacher guides and lesson plans have been created for grades 4 to 12. The *Anthropocene Education Project* is available in both English and French.

<https://theanthropocene.org/education/>

CREATIVE RESPONSE

ELEMENTARY

Observe the landscape around your neighbourhood. What do you see? Are there any natural elements or are there mainly houses and buildings?

Imagine your neighbourhood 10 years from now, or even 20 years from now. What would it look like? What do you think would change? What would remain the same?

Make a present-day sketch and a future sketch.

SECONDARY

As you explore your neighbourhood, what evidence can you see of human impact on the environment? Document this through a series of photographs.

What story do your photographs tell? How would you choose to curate them? More specifically, what story do your photographs tell about the effects that humans have had on your neighbourhood?

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