

DO WE CONTROL NATURE, OR DOES NATURE CONTROL US?

In 1970, 20 million people celebrated the first Earth Day. At that time, only about a third of the nation's streams were for fishing or swimming, and major cities across the United States were often hidden under clouds of smoke. Since then, the successes and challenges represented by Earth Day have centered on one question: Do we control nature, or does nature control us?



Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, 1892 and 1908
Thomas Moran, American
Oil on canvas
53 x 94 inches (134.6 x 238.8 cm)
Framed: 74 1/8 x 112 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches
(188.3 x 285.8 x 19.1 cm)
Gift of Graeme Lorimer, 1975
1975-182-1

Curricular Areas

Science & Technology, Earth Sciences, History

Grade Level

For grades 7–9, easily modified for elementary and high school

Common Core Academic Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RST.6-8.8](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RST.9-10.2](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RST.9-10.6](#)

PA Academic Standards for Art

- 3.8.7.A,B,C: Science, Technology, and Human Endeavors
- 3.5.7.B: Earth Sciences
- 9.2: Art, Historical, and Cultural Contexts

Art Images Required

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Images that are available in the ARTstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase. Entering that number or phrase into the ARTstor search bar will direct you to the corresponding image in that database.

- [Landscape, the Seat of Mr. Featherstonehaugh in the Distance](#), 1826, by Thomas Cole
ARTstor search: 2004-115-4
- [A Huntsman and Dogs](#), 1891, by Winslow Homer
ARTstor search: E1924-3-8

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- [Winter Coast](#), 1890, by Winslow Homer
ARTstor search: Homer, Winter Coast, Philadelphia
- [Grand Canyon of the Colorado River](#), 1892 and 1908, by Thomas Moran
ARTstor search: 1975-182-1
- [Chilly Observation](#), 1889, by Charles Sidney Raleigh
ARTstor search: 1965-209-6

Lesson Process

1. Ask students for examples of stories that center on the conflict between man and nature. (This is a central theme in literature, so there should be several examples from their Reading or English classes.)
 - Is this an important theme for life today? Why or why not?
2. Have students examine the painting, *Landscape, the Seat of Mr. Featherstonehaugh in the Distance* by Thomas Cole.
 - Where are the people in the painting?
 - What role do people and civilizations seem to have here?
 - Is nature ours to control?
3. Next, have students examine the painting *A Huntsman and Dogs* by Winslow Homer.
 - Is this young man triumphant? In what way? Triumphant over what?
 - Is there evidence of exploitation of nature here?
 - Do we control nature, or does nature control us? (Note the significance of such details as the tree stumps, the boy's facial expression and posture, and even the way he holds his gun.)
4. Now examine this painting by Winslow Homer, also of a hunter: *Winter Coast*.
 - How do the two Homer paintings compare?
 - Is the man in *Winter Coast* triumphant? Does he control his environment or is he at the mercy of it? (Note such details as the relative size of the man in the setting and the ominous clouds.)
5. CONSIDER: If Winslow Homer were alive today, how might he paint the scene of a lone hunter? How would it be similar and how would it be different from these two examples?
6. After this discussion, supplement your students' information with a current article or two involving this year's Earth Day events and challenges. Note how even today's news often relates to central themes, such as the conflict between man and nature.
7. On the board or on poster paper, set up two columns, labeled "How we control nature" and "How nature controls us;" select two students to be the recorders for each column. Have the class generate current examples for each column, and discuss. ASSESSMENT: Initiate a writing assignment from the topics generated here.
8. Use a series of images to coalesce ideas for students. Begin with *Grand Canyon of the Colorado River*, by Thomas Moran. Add a selection of images of industrial pollution, recycling projects, endangered habitats and species, etc., pulled from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) website or from any image search engine. Focus the discussion on the central theme, and perhaps add to the board or poster paper columns as new ideas arise.
9. To summarize the day's discussion, display the image *Chilly Observation* by Charles Sidney Raleigh. You might try to mention that this is often called "folk art," art typically from talented painters with little or no academic training.

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Assessment

1. WRITING ASSIGNMENT: Select one of the topics from the list generated by the class and research issues and events related to that topic. After organizing and summarizing the information you have found, determine how your topic is an example of man controlling nature or nature controlling man.
2. ORAL PRESENTATION: Review recent Earth Day events and issues (from the EPA website) and speak to persuade: Has Earth Day been a success?

Enrichment

1. Have students either individually or in pairs, look for other works of art that seem to center on the themes of man and nature. Use PowerPoint (or the ARTstor Offline Image Viewer, if available) to lead the class in a discussion of the selected works.
2. The EPA hosts an Earth Day website in both English and Spanish, with links to Earth Day history, current news items and challenges, volunteer opportunities and events nationwide, a variety of lesson plans, and more: <http://www.epa.gov/earthday/>.