

history coordinators' dilemmas

Planning For History And Environmental Education

dilemma

Our headteacher has become aware that history is being linked with environmental history rather more in the future and has asked me to think about making the links stronger. As far as I can see there is a long way to go. In any case, surely this is much more relevant to geography than history. Wont it ruin history in the school? I'm rather proud of what we do in history.

Hopefully no good history will be ruined. The new proposals are not aimed at eliminating effective history and a historical awareness remains part of the primary curriculum for the future. Effective history seeks links across the curriculum. Whilst there needs to be some coherence and relevance to the history being covered, it does not exist in a vacuum divorced from literacy, mathematics, art, music, citizenship, ICT, geography and other curriculum areas.

In many respects, a reminder that history is central to an understanding of the environment, its issues and how it has developed can only be of benefit to its study. History is not just about people operating in isolation. They interact constantly with their environment, attempt to shape and exploit it and it has a tremendous influence on the way that communities develop. To ignore it is to open up the danger of leaving pupils with the impression that people in the past operated independently of natural factors.

Without realising it, I bet you already cover much of relevance. The following represent just some of the ways in which the environment might impinge on some of the history being covered in your school:

- why your local community developed where it did and in the way it did;
- the problems faced by explorers in overcoming environmental hurdles at different times in the past;
- how the environment played a key role in the development of Ancient Egyptian society including the importance of the Nile;
- why the Ancient Greeks developed as they did;
- the challenges faced by the Romans, Saxons and Vikings in attempting to settle in Britain and how they tried to address physical difficulties such as making use of rivers, Roman roads, taking advantage of natural features to improve their protection;
- how the weather and climate has played its part in shaping events such as farming, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the development of the cotton industry in the north west;
- how the Tudors altered the landscape such as through the stately homes and estates of wealthy landowners and enclosure;
- how Victorian Britain exploited the natural resources such as coal and iron and how these influenced the growth of settlement;
- how the economic and social benefits were often matched by negative environmental impact such as the ruination of the landscape; the depletion of natural resources; the development of leisure facilities especially in more recent times;
- how technology has enabled the landscape to be conquered in a way that would not have been possible years ago such as transport systems;
- how war has affected the landscape such as the building of airfields;
- how the past influence is all around us in the landscape today such as field systems, towns, transport, wartime remains;
- the way in which environmental factors caused the decline of some communities such as the over fishing or extraction of minerals, the decline of settlements that were poorly sited or lacked good resources such as water;
- how and why different people had different views about the exploitation of the environment such as rich and poor or those who argued from the perspective of the



wealth against those who argued in favour of preserving past heritage;

- a visit from someone associated with preserving past environments such as from English Heritage, the National Trust, a community archaeologist to talk about their work.

Many of these issues would already form a natural part of a history curriculum and help give pupils a much more rounded explanation of why and how things developed in the way they did.

An environmental perspective also helps act as a reminder that history should not just be classroom-based. The curricular requirements for history have long included the use of visits to historic buildings, museums, galleries and sites. This gives pupils an opportunity to see the way the landscape has developed. The study of local history provides especially good opportunities to consider the way their communities have been affected by the environment.

Environmental matters can also help develop understanding and competence of key skills and concepts. For example, pupils could:

- undertake an investigation as to how their local environment has changed over a period of time using sources such as historical maps, photographs, paintings, descriptions producing timelines to show the main developments to the local landscape;
- examine the idea of change in a particular landscape and why the changes have occurred. In some parts of the country, it might be possible to show dramatic examples such as coastal erosion or deposit where settlements have been lost to the sea or where former settlements have been left far from the coast. Alternatively there may be ghost communities caused by the exhaustion of an industry or loss of a transport network;
- examine the way that different societies have left their mark on the landscape such as Romans, Saxons, Vikings, Victorians, 20th century;
- devise a class debate or group activity where pupils have to argue the positive and negative benefits of the past development of the landscape or whether a landscape should be developed or preserved;
- discuss why some societies have been able to prosper because of favourable environmental factors such as climate, mineral wealth and rivers, others that have always struggled and others that have succeeded for part of the time;

- take part in a fieldwork activity where pupils examine the main reasons why a particular landscape has developed as it has such as farming patterns, the development of a settlement, the rise and decline of a form of transport;
- discuss why some societies have respected their landscape more than others allowing pupils to compare examples across different themes covered;
- investigate how we can find out what landscapes might have been like in the past and the reliability of the sources available;
- discuss what lessons we can learn from the past to manage present and future environments sustainably.

On one level, therefore, there is a good chance that environmental issues are already being covered in history. In such cases, there may be little need to change much except perhaps to highlight these opportunities. Other schools may want to make rather more explicit the interaction of people and their environments in the past without altering fundamentally their approach to history. This may involve ensuring that the teaching makes clearer such environmental links and that questioning approaches draw out more the significance of the environmental on shaping the past.

Others may want to go a little further and devise some longer activities that link history, geography, environment and citizenship in a specific investigation. For example, there could be a specific enquiry looking at how a particular past event such as developments in Victorian times affected the landscape and people, the benefits and problems that occurred at the time and the legacy left today. This could lead to a debate on how things should develop in the future and how to balance preservation with development. For example, there are financial benefits in heritage tourism but are there better ways to develop their community?

Making clear the link between history and the environment thus helps pupils understand the forces of history more. It also helps make relevant the role of history in the curriculum by showing that the legacy of the past is all around us and that it has and will continue to influence the world in which the pupils live.

Tim Lomas is Principal School Improvement Adviser, Lincolnshire School Improvement Service and Deputy President of the HA