

CURRICULUM THEMES

Environment

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

GRADE 3 | CR3.2- Students will respond to an artwork by Edward Burtynsky that focus on a constructed environment. They will alter a map to expresses their own ideas about the interactions between nature and man-made technologies.

EDWARD BURTYNSKY: *THREE GORGES DAM PROJECT, WAN ZHOU #1, 2002*

In this image we get a glimpse of the social and environmental consequences of China's controversial \$180 billion Three Gorges project. This mammoth project is designed to stop the seasonal flooding of China's largest river, the Yangtze, and to provide hydro-electric power for the country's rapidly growing manufacturing industries.

Wan Zhou is a small city along the Yangtze that is affected by the project. In the image presented here, Burtynsky shows a few people picking through the rubble of buildings near the riverbank. The buildings have been demolished and the residents relocated in advance of the rising waters that will eventually cover this part of the city. The figures of the people are small in comparison by the rubble around them, and particularly by the single steel beam that rises out of the debris. The people's clothing provides the only colour in an otherwise drab scene. The rubble and the mist-shrouded river in the background that blend together, further emphasizing the immense scale of the project.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

What natural forces change an environment? What changes are caused by humans? Burtynsky takes great care to maintain an ambiguous standpoint in his photos; we cannot tell if he is an environmentalist who is worried about human changes to the landscape, or if he is an industrialist who believes that human development of natural landscapes is a positive step forward. Examine *Three Gorges Dam Project, Wan Zhou #1 2002* and discuss how the artist has explored both viewpoints.

Burtynsky says how a viewer interprets his photos tells a lot about that person. When you think about the environment, what ideas or themes come to mind? How are they reflected in or connected to this artwork?



Edward Burtynsky, *Three Gorges Dam Project, Wan Zhou #1, 2002*, chromogenic print, edition 1/5. Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, purchased with the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program.

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ACTIVITY

Burtynsky's photography focuses in on our impact on the environment and how we interact with it. Using these ideas create an artwork from an aerial perspective that conveys a message about our relationship to the environment.

- Using an electronic map like Google Maps or Google Earth, find an aerial view (a view from above looking down) of an interesting location that you could transform into an artwork. We recommend choosing the Satellite view in Google Maps for this activity. You can switch to this view by clicking the three lines in the top left corner, then selecting "Satellite".
- Once you have chosen your aerial view you can print out and trace or freehand draw the outline of the map. This could mean drawing/tracing any of the following map features that stand out: the roads you see, sidewalks or paths, the outlines of buildings, the outlines of natural formations like lakes or forests, or political boundaries like city limits and provincial borders.
- Alter your new map to show how the landscape could change with man-made technologies, or with changes caused by nature. For example, if a building from an aerial perspective resembled a lake, you can turn it into a natural scene, thinking about the animals, plants, and earth formations you might see from above. Or if you chose a natural landscape, you could show what it would look like if it turned into a city. Instead, you may even consider showing how the forces of nature and man-made technology could be balanced in your landscape, thinking about how we can interact with the environment in more considerate ways.

WHAT YOU NEED

- Electronic map, and possibly a printout of the map (Google maps, Google Earth)
- Pencils, erasers, pencil crayons
- Paper

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Edward Burtynsky was born in St. Catharines, Ontario in 1955. His interest in photography began at an early age; with the help of his father and sister he set up a darkroom in the basement of the family home when he was only 11. He studied Graphic Arts at Niagara College and received a bachelor's degree in Photography and Media Studies from Ryerson University in Toronto.

Early in his career Burtynsky made two trips to western Canada to focus his large-format view cameras on mines, rail cuts and homesteads. Burtynsky has also examined other industrial activities such as quarrying, recycling, oil refining and shipbreaking in his work.

"Nature transformed through industry is a predominant theme in my work...I set a course to intersect with a contemporary view of the great ages of man from stone, to minerals, oil, transportation, silicon, and so on. To make these ideas visible I search for subjects that are rich in detail and scale, yet open in their meaning. Recycling yards, mine tailings, quarries and refineries are all places that are outside of our normal experience, yet we partake of their output daily." (Burtynsky, 2004)

Burtynsky does not portray his subjects in a judgmental way, however. He notes that companies must decide whether to allow him onto their properties to take his photographs or not. Many companies agree, he suggests, because his images "...can be read in multiple ways. So, you could have the same image in a boardroom and, frankly, the image could also be used for a poster campaign for an environmental group. ... I try to place the work in that kind of ambiguous zone." (Dixon, 2005)

Burtynsky's photographs are not intended to alert us to the devastation caused by industry, nor are they meant to celebrate the achievements of technological progress. They serve to reconnect viewers to the aspects of manufacturing and technological production that are usually ignored or at least rarely considered. At the same time, those photographs challenge viewers to redefine their concept of what constitutes a landscape. (National Gallery of Canada media release, 2003)