

# BEYOND WILDLIFE:

## Teaching about Africa and Stereotypes

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Bring primary sources and authentic images into the classroom when you are teaching about Africa and Africans. Here are some recommendations and lesson plans to help you do that.

### African Perspectives

Reading a book by a Nigerian author or responding to an e-mail message posted by a boy from Zomba, Malawi, can make the everyday lives of Africans—at home, at school, in their community—vivid and real for your students. Too often, students hear broad generalizations about Africa as though it were a country, not a continent with over 50 nations with different histories, societies, and landscapes. And too often, Africans are viewed only as recipients of American aid and not as creators of their own lives.

Listening to people from across the continent helps students develop open-mindedness and appreciation for the complexity of other cultures. For example, it was a Kenyan woman, Wangari Maathai, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her contribution to sustainable development and peace.<sup>1</sup>

### Visual Images and Thinking Strategies

Students need to broaden their images of Africa to combat media stereotypes and tourist websites. Each nation has its own diversity of lifestyles, range in socio-economic levels, mix of economic activity, and set of differences between rural areas and big cities.

Photographs from a sampling of regions can demonstrate the wide variety of climate and landforms (from deserts and grasslands, to the Rift Valley and snow covered mountains). By analyzing images from diverse settings, students can counter the distorted information often seen in American movies and news clips.

### Connections with Your Students' Lives

Students tend to think of Africa as far away and irrelevant to their lives. Cultural, economic, religious, linguistic and environmental connections encourage students to build from their knowledge, interests and experiences in the world. Many global issues (global warming, health care, religious or ethnic conflict,



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In a classroom in Bamako, the capital of Mali.

biodiversity, refugees, rising costs of energy, for example) face young Americans as well as young Zimbabweans, Congolese, Malians, and Sudanese.

The teaching strategies described here are a hook that teachers can use to motivate students. “Wow, I didn’t know that!” is a statement we often hear as we challenge students with new information. Then they want to learn more.



In the Sudan.



In Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe.



On a farm in Tanzania.



Maputo, the capital of Mozambique.

## LESSON The Power of African Voices

### Level

This lesson could be taught in grades 3 through 8.

### Materials

Use the full-color poster on pages 16 and 17 of this issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner*. (It can be removed after you loosen the center staples and remove the Pullout.)

### Overview

Americans are often surprised to learn that the majority of Africans have never seen large wildlife, such as giraffes, lions, elephants, or leopards. The five people featured on the color poster offer a typical range of responses to the question: "Do Africans See Wildlife?" when it is asked of residents of that continent.

The goals of this lesson are for students to

- Learn from people from several African countries,
- Identify stereotypes about the pervasiveness of wildlife, and
- Inquire into the origins of Americans' perceptions of Africa.

### Viewing the Poster

Start by reading aloud the poster's title, "Do Africans See Wildlife?" You might ask students to remark on the apparent strangeness of the question—i.e., that the answer should be obvious—that "of course" Africans see (the big) wildlife in the normal course of their lives. Then invite five students up to the front of the room to read aloud what the five Africans have said.

- How many of these people saw (or heard) wildlife in Africa?
- Of those who did see wildlife, how many sightings were near their own home?
- How many people had to go to special places to see wildlife?

Students will probably be surprised by the answers. Or to put the emphasis differently, *the experiences of these Africans* will likely surprise students. Your students' reactions create an important teachable moment. Encourage them to recognize and then to challenge misinformation they have heard or stereotypes they have adhered to.

This is an appropriate time for students to think back, and then share how they had expected Africans to answer the question, "Do Africans See Wildlife?" Be sure to point out the disjuncture. (See sidebar on the next page with cautions about using the KWL method).

# LESSON The Power of African Voices *continued*

## Inquiring about Where Ideas Come From

The next question for your students is key: ask them where they have seen, heard, or read about African animals. The range of answers can be enormous, illustrating how ubiquitous American interest in African wildlife is. Students' responses are likely to include **movies**, like *Madagascar* or *The Lion King*; **public service efforts** to protect elephants and other wildlife; **television shows** such as *Wild Kingdom*, *Big Cat Diary*, or *Nature*; **amusement parks** such as Disney World, Busch Gardens, the zoo or a circus; **books** such as *George and Martha*, *Curious George*, and *Babar*;<sup>2</sup> not to mention folktales such as Anansi; **jigsaw puzzles** and **lotto games** with wild animal pictures; **stuffed animals**; the **song** "Wimoweh" (the lion sleeps tonight); **animal posters** and **wallpaper** in kids' bedrooms; **safari trips**; and even **icons** or representations such as the MGM lion symbol. It is ironic that many Americans may feel more connected to African wildlife than to African people.

## Listening to African Voices

Pose some final questions to your students:

- Have you had the chance to listen to people from different African nations?
- What might you learn from such people about environmental issues, history, or other subjects you are studying this year?
- How might people from Uganda or Botswana perceive world events?<sup>3</sup>

Have your students brainstorm some of the ways they could hear from Africans, such as through books, DVDs, people visiting your class, music, online newspapers and magazines, etc. For music, the variety among countries and styles is inviting—from children's songs, to rap and reggae, Afro pop, and a range of traditional styles.

## A Caution Light for K-W-L

A traditional approach to teaching with a poster or photograph might be to start with a KWL discussion (What I *know*, What I *want to know*, What I have *learned*). We recommend using caution with this approach in this situation.

One of us (A.C.) found that using KWL in introducing a topic where her kids held stereotypes inadvertently reinforced the stereotypes and hurt children from that culture.

The question was asked, "What do you know about China?" Immediately the ethnically Chinese students in her class "shut down." The topic of Africa presents even greater risks. Both of us have seen how discussion what students ostensibly "know" about Africa often produces responses such as "Black people" and "poor" and "hungry," in addition to a litany of wild animals.

## OTHER TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

### Read Literature by African Authors

Stories are one of the most powerful ways to learn about another culture. Africans have authored many award-winning children's books. Each year, the Children's Africana Book Award (CABA) honors the best books published in the U.S. about Africa. This year's award for younger readers went to *I Lost My Tooth in Africa* by the Malian father-daughter team Penda and Baba Wague Diakite. Previous winners from the continent include writers from South Africa, Nigeria, Cameroon, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Ghana.

The Nigerian author I. Onyefulu won the award for *Here Comes the Bride*, part of a vivid series of enticing books of photos and stories about her family and community. South African Niki Daly is the author of a series about an impish little girl named Jamela. These books contain topics relevant to the elementary social studies curriculum: the experience of moving to a big city, voting for the first time, and aspects of family and community life. To find other CABA award winners, visit Africa Access at [www.africaaccessreview.org](http://www.africaaccessreview.org).

The CABA winners include many non-African authors as well, writers with enough experience in specific cultures to create accurate and compelling characters and situations. Standouts among such authors are Jane Kurtz, Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen, Margy Burns Knight, Margot Raven, and Satomi Ichikawa.

### Keep It in Mind

We have three suggestions about selecting books. First, be wary of reliance on folktales. While they have a place as good stories that demonstrate cultural beliefs and values, they can mislead children because of their reliance on animals to tell the all-too-human stories of laziness, kindness, and other vices and virtues.

Second, after reading some CABA award books, ask your students to make a list of what animals they have heard mentioned. Students will list a lot more chickens, goats, and cows than lions and elephants.

Third, Africa is too large and complex to teach easily. Selecting books from one or two countries can provide some depth. To find such books, search (by country) the online Africa Access database.



## The Power of Visuals

Some time ago, at the beginning of a unit on Africa, one of my students asked “Ms. Brown, if Africa has cities, what do they look like?” His use of the word “if” was telling. He needed to see cities. Not only do American students typically imagine animals living everywhere in Africa, they also imagine a continent where everyone lives in villages and is desperately poor.

Today, almost 40 percent of Africans live in cities, yet American students typically encounter few urban images from that continent. Be careful, as many textbooks and non-fiction books on Africa provide misleading photos of the continent by highlighting what they believe Americans want to see—wildlife and people in traditional clothing.

Boston University’s African Studies Center has more guidelines about using images.<sup>4</sup>

Photos of contemporary Africa can be found in many places. To select appropriate images, bear these points in mind:

- Avoid stereotypical photos, such as of atypical peoples (Maasai, San, and Tuaregs represent less than 1 percent of Africa’s people).
- Use a mix of panorama and close-up shots. Close-ups of people, especially children, help our students feel connected with Africa.
- Be cautious with material provided by embassies, as they often cater to tourists wanting to see animals and to enjoy what is different or “exotic.”

A few sources for photos include

- The “Sights and Sounds from Africa,” [digicoll.library.wisc.edu/AfricaFocus/](http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/AfricaFocus/), is a large database searchable by country and topic, with free materials for classroom use.
- Many middle school-level books are helpful, especially the country studies. The Oxfam Country Profiles series is especially good.
- *National Geographic* magazine.

Following this lesson, one could teach about life in one specific African country, to provide concrete examples that children will remember. The Boston Children’s Museum has two traveling kits for this purpose, The Kenyan Kids Kit and the Ghana Culture Kit, available for rent nationally. Each kit contains artifacts from Kenyan and Ghanaian kids’ lives today, as well as a detailed curriculum. Teaching tips, annotated bibliographies by grade level and country, lesson plans, links to other useful websites are at the Boston Children’s Museum website.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

It is exciting to teach about Africa because it helps students develop critical thinking “habits of mind,” which form the basis for inquiry and lifelong learning.<sup>6</sup> Here are some questions that students can grapple with in this activity:

**Evidence:** *What is the evidence, and is it credible? What do people from different countries say about seeing wildlife? How likely is it that they see wildlife? How many countries are in Africa? How many people live in cities?*

**Point of View:** *Where have your students seen pictures or movies about Africa? What stories have they heard about Africa? Who is the author of the books they read about Africa and what is the author’s knowledge of this continent?*

**Connections:** *How are the lives of your students similar to and different from the lives of students in, say, Nigeria or Kenya, especially in regard to wildlife, urbanization, and family life?*

**Significance:** *Why is studying this topic important or useful? Why are the experiences of people in, for example Ethiopia and Senegal, different from many Americans’ assumptions about African countries? What lessons can we draw about stereotypes and their sources and about ways to unlearn or avoid such stereotypes?*

A Ghanaian proverb reminds us that no single person can dictate what is true or accurate, especially when the subject of study is as huge as the continent of Africa and all of its people: *Knowledge is like a baobab tree— no two hands can encompass it.* 🌳

## Notes

1. Ifitikhar Ahmad, “Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai: Connecting Trees, Civic Education, and Peace,” *Social Education* 69, no. 1 (January/February 2005): 18-23.
2. The *Babar* series has been criticized for its gross caricatures of Africans in the early books, while the story of Curious George’s coming to America has been interpreted as an allegory about an African kidnapped into slavery and brought unwillingly to America. See discussions in Herbert Kohl, *Should We Burn Babar? Essays on Children’s Literature and the Power of Stories* (New York: The New Press, 1995).
3. Newspapers from these and other countries can be accessed at [www.africa.upenn.edu/Home\\_Page/Country.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Home_Page/Country.html).
4. For a detailed lesson plan on teaching with photos, including where to find a good mix of photos, visit the scaffolded lesson plan “Photos for Teaching about Africa” at the website of the Outreach Program at Boston University’s African Studies Center, [www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/tips/prek.htm](http://www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/tips/prek.htm).
5. The Boston Children’s Museum’s traveling kits and other resources are at [www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/](http://www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/).
6. See the interview with educator and author Deborah Meier, from *Leverage Points* no. 53 (2004), at [www.pegasus.com/levpoints/meierint.html](http://www.pegasus.com/levpoints/meierint.html).

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The poster “Do Africans See Wildlife?” on pages 16 and 17 can be removed from the journal after you loosen the center staples and remove the Pullout.