

# PLANET EARTH

## Background

Caring for the environment and understanding the causes and effects of the environmental crisis are issues of international concern which affect people of all ages and backgrounds. People all over the world create television programs, advertisements and public service announcements in response to their concerns about what has happened to destroy our environment. Many of these programs are directed specifically at children and teenagers.

Many different television genres (documentary, situation comedy, animated shorts, public service announcement) are being used as tools to share information, give warning, express differing points of view, propose solutions, and elicit young people's participation in solving the problem of environmental pollution. The three main roles that television plays in the environmental movement include 1) developing an awareness of issues, 2) enabling the public to take responsibility for pollution and the environment, and 3) encouraging the public to take action.

Through today's discussion and screenings, students will address the following questions:

- ***How are we part of the environmental problem? How can we be part of the solution?***
- ***What role does television play in the global environmental crisis?***
- ***What role can students play in the environmental movement and what can you do?***

## AWARENESS

- understanding the interdependence of life forms and ecosystems (air, water, land and inhabitants)
- understanding that the earth's resources are limited
- understanding causes and effects of pollution
- understanding what kind of environmental damage is reversible and what isn't

## Air

What kinds of atmospheric pollution are there?

Death of a Maple Tree  
Canada, 1987

Using only music and visuals, this program illustrates the interdependence of the eco-systems (or environment) -- land, water, air, and inhabitants. As the factory near the river gets bigger (more and more smokestacks) it creates more and more air pollution. The polluted air and polluted rain (acid rain) make the woods uninhabitable for the animals that live there, and eventually kill all trees and vegetation in the woods.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Describe the environment in the program.
- What happens to the environment during the program?
- As the man-made environment grows, what happens?
- What was the significance of the black rain? (A)
- What kind of environmental/health conditions/ problems were the factory employees, their families and other people who live in the area faced with? (B)
- Why did the animals leave when the woods appeared to be fine? (C)
- If the animals left because the air made them feel sick, or because their food sources, small plants and fish died first, can you imagine what is happening to the people? (D)

Be Kind to the Earth: I Want to See a Blue Sky

Japan, 1991

Ysamato-cho intersection in downtown Tokyo is the place with the most car exhaust in Japan. For 20 years people have suffered the effects of car exhaust. Trees have burned leaves that have fallen off. A group of concerned mothers collect vials of exhaust to inform the public of the amounts of pollution they are breathing.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Is the environmental problem a global one?
- Where did you learn more?
- What effects did the pollution have on people of Japan? (A)
- What effects did the pollution have on the plant environment? (A)
- What other parts of the world share this problem with Japan? (B)
- Why were the mothers so concerned about this problem? (C)
- When the mothers publish their findings what will happen? (C)
- How does air pollution affect other parts of the environment, the city, Japan and the world? (D)

### **Earth**

What kinds of environmental pollution are there?

Pirates of the Gutter, 1993

Germany, animation and live action

Pollution on a small scale. Within a microcosm of a city gutter, we encounter whimsical creatures who live in a paper boat. Observe their playful resourcefulness and the challenges and dangers they face in a polluted world.

### **Discussion Questions**

- What kind of environment does this program feature? (A)
- What kinds of pollution did you see? (B)
- Where did it come from? (B)
- What can be done to clean up this environment? (C)
- What are the little creatures that live in the gutter? (D)

3-2-1 Contact: The Rotten Truth, 1990

USA

Just because we throw it away doesn't mean it goes away.

This documentary featuring children, including a child host, takes a look at household garbage and what happens to it once it is thrown away. The program illustrates the process of designing and constructing a landfill.

### **Discussion Questions**

- How do landfills work?
- Think about the kinds of garbage we each create daily, weekly. What can be done to reduce our daily garbage?
- Where are landfills sited? Why aren't they located in certain areas? (A)
- Why do some states have more lenient environmental codes than others? (B)
- Why would a city or state want to have a chemical plant, a tire factory, toxic waste or nuclear waste dump? (C)
- Why is there a children's documentary television program about garbage? (D)
- Why do we have a government agency called the Environmental Protection Agency and what does it do?

### **Breakout Group Discussion**

*Break into groups to come up with 10 ways to take care of garbage:*

How would you feel if a landfill was going to be created in your neighborhood? If you don't want a landfill in your neighborhood, what do you propose as an alternative solution for responsibly taking care of household garbage? Make a list of 10 ways to deal with garbage.

## **RESPONSIBILITY**

The environmental crisis has personal and political aspects. Individuals, businesses and the government are responsible for the pollution of our environment. Why do we pollute?

- our economic reliance on products and services that cause pollution
- our social reliance on modern conveniences and habits that cause pollution

### **Water/Oceans**

- What are some examples of water or oceanic pollution?
- What effects do they have?

The Simpsons: 2 Cars in Every Garage and 3 Eyes on Every Fish  
USA, 1990

Blatant abuses of safety and environmental protection codes at the nuclear power plant cause pollution in the river (Bart and Lisa's local fishing hole) and genetic mutation in the fish Bart catches. The media zooms in to cover the story. The government inspectors come to investigate and warn the plant owner, Mr. Burns to make changes estimated at \$56 million. The virtuous government inspector refuses a cash bribe offered by greedy and evil Mr. Burns.

Here we see industrial pollution on a bigger scale, as we saw in *Death of a Maple Tree*, but there are personal connections that complicate things. While our first impulse may be to shut down the plant, we need sources of power, and we need jobs to support our families. Homer and almost everyone else in Springfield works at the plant.

The New Explorers: Children of the River  
USA, 1993

An investigation of the polluted St. Clair River in Canada, north of Detroit near Lake Huron. Interviews with Native Americans who inhabit Walpole Island on the St. Clair and fish and live on the river. Life imitates art, there are genetically mutated fish. Pollution contaminates the Earth and its inhabitants.

### **Discussion Questions**

- What are some of the effects of contamination on Walpole Island? What are some examples of environmental pollution in your area? (A)
- Mr. Burns represents greed, selfishness and evil, but if he were a good person, how would he solve the problems at the plant? (B)
- What are some possible ways to raise the money needed to make the plant safe?(B)
- Which of these programs on pollution and contaminating the world and its inhabitants would you rather watch, *Simpsons* or *The New Explorers* and why? Which do you feel will inform more people about this serious issue? (C)

- If the *Simpsons*, a comedy, is supposed to be entertaining, why did its creators produce an episode on matters as serious as industrial pollution and contaminated wildlife? (D)

### **Creatures**

- How does human intervention and pollution affect the animal world?

Return of the Wolves

USA, documentary, 1989

In this documentary narrated by Peter Coyote, we will see how wolves were exterminated in lower 48 states of America. Although this documentary dates from before the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park, it explores the two sides of the issue. These polar points of view continue today and are what you will have to take a stand on in the post visit website activity.

### **Discussion Questions**

- How did the wolves become extinct in the lower 48 states? Why?
- Why are farmers against reintroduction?
- Why are scientists in favor of reintroduction?

### **CALL TO ACTION**

- What can we do?
- What role does television have in relationship to environmental issues?
- What can be done by an organized group and by individuals?

50 Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth

USA, 1992

In this segment we see examples of pro-active environmental projects by urban and suburban youth. Young people in Philadelphia who take over an abandoned lot to create and manage a community garden and recycling center. And students in Dodgeville, Wisconsin who started a network of 10,000 schools who raise money to educate people about the devastation of rain forests, and buy up acres of rain forest.

Public Service Announcements:

Put Trash in its Place, Puerto Rico

Environmental Defense Fund

MTV montage

Earth Communications Office

### **Discussion Questions**

- Did you see any celebrities in any of these public service announcements and ads? Why are celebrities asked to make these PSAs? (A)

- Almost every one of these programs from Canada, Germany, the United States, on pollution and the environment, from cartoons to science documentaries to MTV, all either feature children and young people, or were created especially for young people. Why? (B)
- Who is the target audience? Why are young people the target audience?(B)
- What roles does and can television have in the global environmental crisis? (C)
- Do you think television could do more, be more active in addressing this public issue? If so, how? (C)
- Are there other public health, safety or social issues which you think television should address? What are they? What role do you propose television could have in dealing with these issues? (D)

**Breakout Group Discussion**

*Break into groups to come up with 3 issues in which your group wants to get involved: What can you do? Make a list of three environmental issues which are of interest to your group. How will you become involved in dealing with them and affecting positive change?*