

Science and slavery teacher notes

Developing Cultural Understanding and cross-curricula study at Key Stage 3

The Natural History Museum has found many links between science and the history of the transatlantic slave trade. A series of chapters on topics such as commercial plants, everyday life, diet and nutrition, fevers and medicines is online at www.nhm.ac.uk/slavery.

This lesson plan for Key Stage 3 has a particular focus on diet, nutrition and disease, comparing conditions around the world 300 years ago with today. It covers the impact of slavery on diet and its legacy on health.

It can be used to deliver an innovative approach to the Cultural Understanding concept in the Key Stage 3 science programme of study:

Recognising that modern science has its roots in many different societies and cultures, and draws on a variety of valid approaches to scientific practice.

The activities also contribute to the cross-curriculum dimensions: identity and cultural diversity, healthy lifestyles, global dimension and sustainable development, creativity and critical thinking. They encourage connections between science and other subjects especially history and citizenship.

Context

To understand the significance of slavery and its legacies, pupils need some background information and context. The downloadable PDF presentation provides a good introduction to the subject.

Many of the plants, foods and medicines we use today originated in Caribbean, American and Asian countries colonised by Europeans. Many enslaved African people contributed to the development of science by collecting specimens that were sent back to Europe for study. Some of these specimens, especially those collected by Hans Sloane in Jamaica, formed the basis of the Natural History Museum.

History

The transatlantic slave trade lasted more than 300 years, from 1500s to 1800s (although slavery was practiced throughout history at different times and places, and human trafficking continues today). Slavery was a global trade, but one where Europeans (using the power of guns) dominated and exploited other countries and areas especially west Africa, the Caribbean and North and South America.

The 'triangular' trade meant ships sailed full from Europe to Africa (with goods to trade such as metals, guns and alcohol), carried enslaved Africans across the Atlantic, and returned with tropical goods that were in great demand and changed the diet in Europe. This trade generated huge amounts of profit for European countries and fuelled the industrial revolution as raw products such as cotton, sugar, tobacco, coffee and cocoa were imported from the tropics and processed for mass consumption.

Why slavery?

There were not enough European settlers and indigenous people in the Americas for the labour intensive cultivation of the land. Many died as a result of disease, wars and over work. Africa was seen as a continent with an abundant supply of labour. Some traders justified enslaving Africans claiming that they were offering them better opportunities in the Americas, 'civilizing barbarians', and even converting them to Christianity. However, slave traders operated a system of trade and capture with African middlemen to take men, women and children from west Africa against their will. This devastated the population of Africa.

Scale

The scale of the transatlantic slave trade is unprecedented. Historians estimate at least 10 to 12 million African people were forcibly displaced, perhaps many more. Statistics show 1.25 million more died on the six- to eight-week Atlantic crossing. Up to one in three Africans died in the first three years of hard labour on plantations.

Sensitivities

The history of slavery is sensitive and challenging because of the appalling suffering and dehumanisation of African people, who were treated as possessions and who experienced cruel punishments and high death rates.

Useful support for dealing with the challenges and sensitivities, potentially racist perspectives, appropriate language to use and managing questions and emotional responses from pupils is available at www.understandingslavery.com.