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**Flood Control—Environmental History**

**Writer:** Zoe Voigt, Humanities Teacher

**Grade Level:** 9–12

**Related Big Picture Concepts:** Environment, Place

**Subject Areas:** United States History, Social Studies, Visual Arts

**Essential Question:** How does Thomas Hart Benton’s *Spring on the Missouri* help us understand the impact of flooding on the lives of Midwesterners in the 20th century? What are some of the policy issues around flooding?

**Abstract:** Students will learn about the history of flood control as well as flood control practices today. They will also experience the difficulty in deciding upon the best solutions for environmental policies in a debate format.

**Duration:** 3–5 class periods

**Focus Works of Art:**

[](http://68.169.57.134/sites/default/files/Benton,%20Spring%20on%20the%20Missouri,%2077_1_3_0.jpg)

Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889-1975)

***Spring on the Missouri*, 1945**

Oil and tempera on Masonite panel

30 1/4 x 40 1/4 in. (76.8 x 102.2 cm)  
[www.artnc.org/node/317](http://www.artnc.org/node/317)

**North Carolina Standards Correlations:**

Visual Arts: I.V.1, I.CX.1, I.CX.2, I.CR.1, A.CX.1, A.CR.1, A.CR.2

United States History: USH.H.1, USH.H.2, USH.H.3, USH.H.8

Student Learning Objectives

* Students will interpret visual and verbal descriptions of the Missouri Flood of 1937 and assess the impact this event had on Midwesterners’ lives.
* Students will assess the costs and benefits of flood control in the 20th and 21st century.

Activities

1. Assign the class to examine *Spring on the Missouri.*
2. Hold a brief class discussion focusing on the following themes:  
   Biographical details of the artist Thomas Hart Benton, specifically his role as a documentary artist.  
   Depiction of the Missouri River in the painting.  
   Association of the painting with the Flood of 1937.
3. Divide the class into three groups and assign each group an identity:  
   United States senators, farmers living in the flood plain, or environmental lobbyists.
4. Assign each student to examine the maps and images of Midwestern floods and flood control programs in the United States from 1927 to 1993.  
   *[After the Flood of 1927](http://www.classzone.com/books/earth_science/terc/content/investigations/es1308/es1308page06.cfm" \t "_blank)  
   [The Flood of 1937](http://www.classzone.com/books/earth_science/terc/content/investigations/es1308/es1308page07.cfm" \t "_blank)  
   [The Flood of 1993](http://www.classzone.com/books/earth_science/terc/content/investigations/es1308/es1308page08.cfm" \t "_blank)  
   [Landsat Images of the Tri-River Area](http://www.classzone.com/books/earth_science/terc/content/investigations/es1308/es1308page09.cfm" \t "_blank)  
   [New Approaches to Flood Control](http://www.classzone.com/books/earth_science/terc/content/investigations/es1308/es1308page10.cfm" \t "_blank)*
5. Hold a brief whole-class discussion focused on the students' opinions on floods and flood control formed from examining the maps and images.
6. Assign each student to read the article ["Flood Plain Development: A Curse, Not a Blessing"](http://www.greatriverslaw.org/environmental_concerns_water.htm" \t "_blank) and the [congressional testimony of Jim Robinson Jr.](http://epw.senate.gov/107th/Robinson_061802.htm" \t "_blank)
7. Assign both the farmer and the environmental lobbyist groups to write a one-page petition to be presented to the United States senator group requesting some flood control action consistent with the perspective of the groups' constituents. Each group should also select one member to present the petition to the senators.
8. Prepare a Senate Committee setting with desks and chairs at the front of the classroom to seat the members of the Senate group. Provide a lectern or podium as a presentation point. Assign the spokespersons for both the farmer and the environmental lobbyist groups to present the group petition to the senators.
9. Once both petitions have been presented, assign the senators to deliberate among themselves for about 10 minutes and to reach a decision on the fate of the respective petitions. The Senate group should select one member to present the Senate response to the petitions. Assign the Senate spokesperson to present the Senate findings on the petitions.
10. Hold a class discussion focused on the following question: *Which needs are more critical, those of the human population or those of the nonhuman environment? Have these needs and considerations changed in the floods of 2011?*

**Assessments:**

* The teacher will use class discussion to evaluate the students’ analysis of the painting, maps, and photographs and their understanding of the impact of the 1937 flood.
* The petition, Senate presentation, and deliberation will be used to evaluate the students’ assessment of the costs and benefits of flood control.

**Resources:**

Vocabulary:

biographical

deliberate

deliberation

environmental lobbyists

flood control

petition

Links:

Maps and images of Midwestern floods and flood control programs in the United States from 1927 to 1993

After the Flood of 1927

<http://www.classzone.com/books/earth_science/terc/content/investigations/es1308/es1308page06.cfm>

The Flood of 1937

<http://www.classzone.com/books/earth_science/terc/content/investigations/es1308/es1308page07.cfm>

The Flood of 1993

<http://www.classzone.com/books/earth_science/terc/content/investigations/es1308/es1308page08.cfm>

Landsat Images of the Tri-River Area

<http://www.classzone.com/books/earth_science/terc/content/investigations/es1308/es1308page09.cfm>

New Approaches to Flood Control

<http://www.classzone.com/books/earth_science/terc/content/investigations/es1308/es1308page10.cfm>

Article titled “Flood Plain Development: A Curse, Not a Blessing”

<http://www.greatriverslaw.org/environmental_concerns_water.htm>

Testimony of Jim Robinson Jr., a farmer from Pinhook, Missouri, during his appearance before the United States Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works (S. 1987) on June 18, 2002

<http://epw.senate.gov/107th/Robinson_061802.htm>

Additional Resources

Fairbrother, Trevor, and Potts, Kathryn. *In and Out of Place: Contemporary Art and the American Social Landscape.* Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1993.

Hughes, Robert. *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

Menkes, Diana, ed. *Of Time and Place: American Figurative Art from the Corcoran Gallery.* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985.

Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1980.