

Bananas on Trail: Inspiring Global Connections

by Charlotte Jacklein

Flecks of sunlight gleam on the windy lake, the autumn hills are a haze of gold and red, my group of students are navigating their canoes through the rocky islets of the Canadian shield — and I'm thinking about bananas. Banana chips, to be precise.

As an outdoor educator, I love the immediacy of my work and the sense of living fully in every moment. I value seeing the change in students as they step out of the complex framework of their home lives and experience themselves and their surroundings from a new perspective. Much of the power of this experience often comes from the sense of isolation and purity when travelling and working together in a wilderness or outdoor context. Yet in reality, even if we are travelling weeks away from visible signs of the "outside world," we remain closely connected to a multitude of other people and places.

Enter the banana chips. Here we are, paddling thousands of kilometres from the nearest plantation, yet our next trail snack is banana chips. Tasty stuff, but loaded with complexities rarely addressed on an average day.

An ongoing challenge for me as an outdoor educator is to connect students' outdoor experience to the greater global world around us — in a positive way that empowers and encourages discussion, and doesn't shatter their outdoor experience or leave them feeling hopeless in the face of the world's problems. Given the potential of outdoor education to have a powerful impact on students, it follows that we use it to explore social justice and global issues.

The following activities can be adapted to age group, time limitations and resources. Framed in a non-judgmental and open manner, these activities, in addition to being fun and lively, can lead to powerful discussions and realizations among the students.

Race Around the World

This activity can be a lightning-fast energizer with little discussion, or it can be turned into a lengthier activity with an extended debrief.

While outdoors, present the students with the challenge of, as quickly as possible, finding things made in as many different countries as possible (or specific countries, or three items from the same country, etc). Depending on group size, students can work individually, in pairs or in teams. Give students five minutes to fan out around the campsite and go through their bags. Clothing in particular is usually conveniently well labelled.

Once the students return, have them

- sort the items by continent (or dress someone up entirely in clothes from that continent or country)
- lay out the items by distance (closest country to furthest away).

Possible debrief questions:

1. Do you notice any patterns of where things are made?
2. What do you know about these countries?
3. Why do you think things are made there?

The World on our Table

Before a meal on trail, have each student or pair of students pick up an item of food that's about to be served (e.g., trail mix, crackers, bag of cookies, and so on). Give the students a few minutes to read any labels, figure out what's in the food and where the food came from, and to think about what resources and people were likely involved in producing the food item.

Form a circle, then go around and have each student or pair present their food item from beginning to end. Depending on the age group, the response might look something like this:

The label on these crackers says they were made in Canada. The wheat was probably grown on the Prairies. The wheat needed soil, sun and water to grow. Pesticides and fertilizer were probably applied to the wheat. A farmer used machines like tractors, which needed gas that might have come from Alberta. The wheat was likely transported by train and then perhaps ship from Thunder Bay. The grain was turned into flour and then baked into crackers in a factory. The wrappers are made of plastic, which uses petroleum products that might have come from Alberta, and cardboard, made from trees, perhaps from northern Ontario. The crackers were then shipped to a grocery store where we bought them and brought them here by bus and then canoe.

Even a simple trail meal will inevitably involve a large number of resources and people. Increased awareness of this use of resources will give students a new perspective on their food, even if it's a meal they've eaten many times before. During the debrief it's important that the facilitator be conscious not to create a sense of guilt, but rather foster a sense of thankfulness and awareness of the privilege to be eating good food.

The Great Banana Chain

This activity can take about 15 minutes, or with discussion and debrief can be expanded to take much longer. The banana is only an example, and could be changed to any number of products that we consume. Younger students in particular enjoy the role-playing and movements in this activity, while older students are able to go into more detail and also touch on related topics like fair trade.

1. Brainstorm what things we use or consume on a regular basis. The facilitator then says, "Wow, it's only 11 o'clock and we've already used a lot of things today. Often the things we use have travelled from

far away and many different people and resources were involved in making them. We're going to look at something simple like a banana, and try to find out how many different people and things were involved in getting the banana to our bellies."

2. Ask a volunteer to think of a motion and sound to represent eating a banana. Let them act this out, and then ask the class where this person got the banana from. The next volunteer can be a store clerk, making a sound and a motion. Ask how the banana got to the store. You'll have lots of volunteers to be truck drivers, airplane pilots, ship captains. You can go through the sound/motion sequence from beginning to end each time (if the setup is fast/concise), or simply let each new person do their sound and motion, and then do them all together at the end.

Possible roles: Store clerk – Shelf packer at store – Produce packers – Banana pickers – Pesticide sprayers – Waterers – River – Banana planters – Manager/owner – Burners – Loggers – Indigenous people – Wild animals affected by logging

Additional questions to consider: What does the machinery run on? – Where does the water come from for irrigation? – What are the impacts of clearcutting land? – Who lived on the land before it was logged?

Get everyone to act out the banana chain from beginning to end, complete with wild monkeys, falling trees, coughing pesticide sprayers, speeding trucks, and so on, and ending with the person taking a bite from the banana.

Possible debrief questions:

1. Do you have the power to change anything in the chain?
2. Do you think this system is fair?
3. How can we make systems like these more fair (or live more simply)?

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