



Summary

Desertification threatens significant areas of land around the globe, affecting more than 100 countries, including the United States. Threats to the land also threaten our ability to produce food and fiber on these lands as well as human health. The History Channel video “Black Blizzard” documents the Dust Bowl of the 1930s in the United States. The following discussion will center on desertification, including causes, effects, impacts on human health, and solutions.

Ages of Audience

- Middle School High School
- Adults

Learning Objectives

- the importance of agriculture management in preventing desertification
- some of the impacts we may face if desertification is not kept in check

Materials Needed

- a copy of the “Black Blizzard” DVD, which is available from the History Channel and other online video outlets

Desertification and the American Dust Bowl

Method

1. Show the video “Black Blizzard”
2. Lead a discussion of desertification and the lessons learned from the video

Discussion questions:

Q: What combination of circumstances caused the Dust Bowl?

A: *Over-tillage of the land and lack of vegetative cover coupled with an intense drought.*

Q: What was the “signature” event of the Dust Bowl?

A: *The “black blizzards” that occurred during the Dust Bowl, which were storms composed of wind-borne dust.*

Q: Were the effects of the Dust Bowl limited to the midwestern United States?

A: *Absolutely not. Some “black blizzards” made it all the way to the East Coast, darkening the skies over cities like Washington, DC, and New York. The social impacts included the mass exodus of people from the Midwest moving to places like California in an attempt to escape the drought and dust and to find work.*

Q: Did the “black blizzards” affect human health?

A: *Inhalation of large amounts of dust can cause respiratory problems, up to and including death.*

Q: What steps were taken by people to bring an end to the Dust Bowl?

A: *Techniques that were introduced—such as reduced tillage, leaving crop residues on the fields, strip cropping, crop rotations, and the planting of shelter belts—were developed or promoted through the work of the USDA Soil Erosion Service (later the Soil Conservation Service) under Hugh Hammond Bennett.*

Q: What were some of the ways that the Dust Bowl influenced American culture?

A: *John Steinbeck’s novels “The Grapes of Wrath” and “Of Mice and Men” and some of the music of Woody Guthrie were inspired by the Dust Bowl.*

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