

History and sustainable palm oil

It can be useful to look back at how the world became so dependent upon Palm Oil and its links with the British Empire and those areas of the world known as 'British colonies.'

We need to go back to the 16th Century to understand the origins of the British Empire. The 'Age of Discovery' where new thinking about the world and better shipbuilding led to more exploration and the discovery of "new" lands. Britain wanted more land overseas where it could build new communities, known as colonies. These colonies would provide England with valuable materials, like metals, sugar and tobacco, which they could also sell to other countries.

At its height in 1922, the British Empire was the largest empire the world had ever seen, covering around a quarter of Earth's land surface and ruling over 450 million people.

But it wasn't just Britain. Other European countries were also exploring the world, discovering new lands and building empires of their own.

A book by Max Haiven, published in 2022, is entitled "Palm Oil: the grease of the Empire" so let's think more about the role of palm oil in terms of The (British) Empire.

Who benefitted from Empire?

Source A.

Taken from the Gardeners Chronicle, published in 1877, is a short description of the plant and its origins. The Gardeners Chronicle founded in 1841, took the form of a traditional newspaper, with both national and foreign news, but also with vast amounts of material sent in by gardeners and scientists, covering every conceivable aspect of gardening. Charles Darwin was a regular contributor.

Source B.

Is an article published online by www.ChinaDialogue.net China Dialogue describes itself as an independent organisation dedicated to promoting a common understanding of China's urgent environmental challenges. It identifies, promotes and supports the unique voices that increase understanding, share precious experiences and inspire a higher awareness of the planet's challenges, whether they come from inside China or elsewhere.

The full article can be viewed here, An illustrated history of industrial palm oil | China Dialogue (CC BY NC ND) but we have also provided an abbreviated and simplified version of the text in the article below (and we are grateful to colleagues at ChinaDialogue in particular the author of the original piece, Josie Phillips, for granting us permission to do this).

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Using source inference skills, what does the source suggest about....

- the economic benefits of Empire for Britain?
- relations between Britain and countries of the Empire?
- attitudes to women?
- early-stages in the development of multi-national companies?

Make links to the broader context of the Industrial Revolution and its impact on Britain, including social developments like growing understanding of public health (eg. widespread use of soap). Identify 3 themes that are common to many other examples of the development of the Empire in India & Australia for example.

Starting at the centre, create your Evidence Frame with a box in which you

write all the information that you can gather from the Source (whether its text or an image) – what does it definitely tell you?

Then move outwards and create a second frame around the inner one, in which you present your inferences – more than a guess! It is something you can work out from the picture or text, even if it is not explicitly written. Its all about ‘reading between the lines’ or ‘scratching below the surface.’ Students need to extrapolate information that is not stated in the source – perhaps about emotions or attitudes, or the significance of the situation – which can then be supported by specific details in the source.

The outside frame or box is for your remaining questions; further things you would like to know. So for the question about Economic benefits of Empire:

I would like to know if the trading was done fairly? I would like to know how much money was paid for these goods. What was the value of Palm Oil.

In stating that traders from Manchester and Birmingham saw the most benefit of Palm Oil, implies its use was focused on manufacturing goods using the product, as these are major manufacturing centres in Britain at the time. The article implies there are different grades of quality for the oil (*“the best”*).

Information:

Source A, tells me that Palm Oil was exported from West Africa and sold to British traders. It was highly valued “one of the most valuable products imported into this country”. Source A tells me that much of the trading was done through exchange of goods at this time (1877). Source A gives examples of its use for both domestic and industrial purposes which are different from its use in its native country