

Lesson Plan **“Lemmings”** **False Beliefs Perpetuated by the Media**

Overview

Students discuss what they know or have heard about lemmings, including the popular belief that lemmings follow each other blindly and commit suicide by jumping off cliffs into the sea. They then view a short video clip from the 1957 nature documentary “White Wilderness” in which a group of lemmings are shown traveling across the land to a cliff overlooking the sea, and then jumping off the cliff into the water. The teacher leads a discussion about this “evidence” that lemmings commit suicide by jumping off cliffs, and then tells the students that lemmings actually DON’T do this – it’s an urban legend. Students discuss this fact in the context of the credibility of information from media sources and the perpetuation of false beliefs over time, as well as issues of ethics in media production.

Curriculum Areas

- Biology
- Zoology
- Communications
- Media Studies
- Information Literacy

Grade Levels

- Middle School through College

Suggested Frameworks (Curriculum Context)

- Animal Behavior
- Geography
- Media Production Techniques
- Credibility of Information
- Urban Legends
- Ethics

Learning Objectives

- Learn about lemmings, including where they live and their behaviors
- Introduce the concept of “urban legends” and ways to check out their validity (through scientific investigation, logical thinking and common sense, and resources like snopes.com)
- Practice detailed observation and providing evidence-based answers
- Practice analyzing audiovisual media messages
- Build awareness of techniques used in film and television (including nature documentaries) to create action sequences and portray animal behavior
- Develop understanding of and appreciation for different production techniques used in audiovisual messages (voiceover, music, lighting, pace, camera angles, etc.)
- Reflect on the influence of the media on people’s beliefs about science and about the real world

Vocabulary

lemmings, tundra, arctic, migration, precipice, avalanche, urban legends, snopes.com

Preparation and Prerequisites

- None

Time Needed

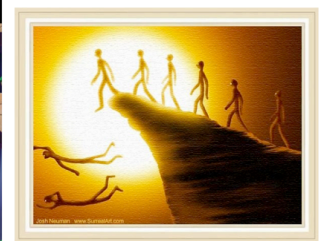
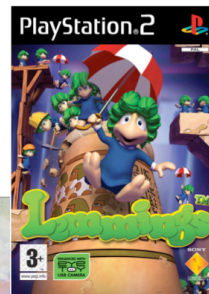
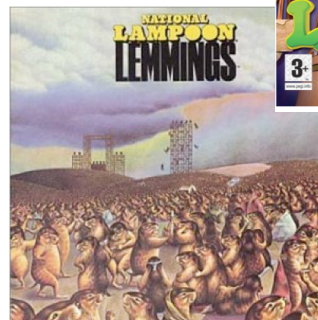
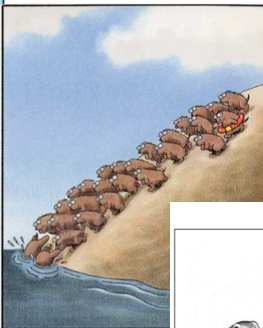
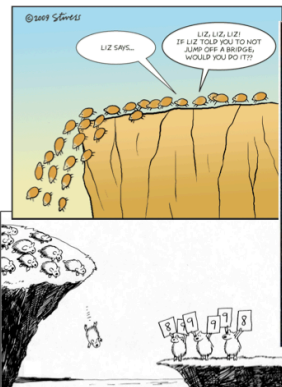
- 15-30 minutes, depending on the optional activities.

Materials

- Power Point slides or print examples of media showing beliefs about lemmings as suicidal and pages from snopes.com
- Video clip from "White Wilderness" on YouTube or DVD
- LCD Projector and Screen (or large TV set with DVD player)
- (Preferably) Internet Access (for snopes.com and other websites)
- (Optional) Student access to computers for investigation about lemmings and exploration of snopes.com

Step-by-Step Procedures

1. Ask students if they have ever heard of lemmings, which are small animals that look a little like guinea pigs. Probe to find out what they have heard about lemmings, and where they think they heard it (what was their source of information).
2. Show examples of popular media portrayals of lemmings as blindly following each other, committing suicide by jumping off cliffs into the sea (on Power Point slides or printed handouts). Ask the students if they think this is really true, and how they might be able to find out.



Follow the Lemmings

3. Explain that in 1958, Disney made a nature documentary about animals and birds in the arctic tundra. It was called "A True-Life Adventure: White Wilderness." That documentary won an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. It included a segment about lemmings, showing their behavior during migration.

4. Show the 2-minute video clip, asking students to carefully listen to the voiceover and the music, as well as to observe the behaviors of the lemmings that are shown.

Voiceover

(accompanied by dramatic music)

By now the lemmings have forgotten the original idea of food. They've become victims of an obsession, a one track thought: move on, move on, keep moving on.

If they come to a tiny stream, they plunge right in; water doesn't phase them.

Indeed they will swim sizable rivers and even lakes in their determination to push on.

Ahead lies the arctic shore, and beyond the sea, and still the little animals surge forward.

Their frenzy takes them tumbling down the terraced cliffs, creating tiny avalanches of soil and rocks and the seemingly indestructible lemmings.

They reach the final precipice.

This is the last chance to turn back.

Yet over they go, casting themselves bodily out into space...

5. Ask the students what they think about this as evidence. Is there any way that it could be untrue? How could they find out the truth about lemmings?

6. (Optional) Have the students work in small groups, going online to research whether lemmings actually commit suicide by jumping off cliffs, as the media examples and the nature documentary showed. Give them 10 minutes to investigate, and then have the groups report back on what they found. As part of their report-out, they should include the search terms they used to investigate and which websites they used for information. Have the class as a whole discuss the credibility of those sources (compared to the documentary). See **Extensions** below for more information and suggestions for how to discuss the credibility of Internet websites.

7. Explain that lemmings actually do not follow each other blindly or commit suicide by jumping off cliffs. This is an example of an "urban legend" – a widely held belief that is based on rumor without actual

evidence that it is true (and often it is not). Ask if they know how to check on whether an urban legend is true or not.

- 8.** Introduce snopes.com as a source of information about urban legends. Show the snopes page about lemmings and the Disney movie "White Wilderness" (by going online on the website or using the still images on the Power Point slides).
- 9.** Discuss the filmmakers' decision to push the lemmings off the cliff in terms of both ethics and media production techniques. Show the last section of the video clip, having the students notice how the filmmakers made it look like the lemmings were jumping off the cliff by themselves when they really weren't. Note the role of the music and voiceover in making the actions seem more melodramatic.
- 10.** Show other examples of urban legends reported on snopes (by going online on the website or using the still images on the Power Point slides), including other examples of inaccurate beliefs about animals (e.g., opossums hanging by their tails) and urban legends that are actually true (e.g., the Marlboro Man died of lung cancer). Encourage students to use snopes.com to investigate urban legends they hear, and to bring in what they find for future class discussions.

Extensions and Adaptations

- This lesson can be tied to a broader investigation into how to judge the credibility of information from different types of sources, especially websites. Emphasize that simply looking at the domain name on the URL (.com, .edu, .org, .gov, .net) isn't enough, although it does provide some information. Students should always be able to identify who made the website (and probably who sponsored it, if that is a different source), their credentials, their purpose, the target audience, how current the information is, and other relevant information that may help to judge the accuracy or biases in the information presented.

There are many resources available to help with this exploration (depending on the grade level), including those found on the Project Look Sharp website at:

http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp/?action=webresources_websites#criteria

- One section of the snopes.com website is called "Lost Legends," which is quite different from the rest of the site. Students can explore what

snopes says about the urban legends reported on that site, starting with the one about Mister Ed (the talking horse on the TV show in the 1960s).

The "Lost Legends" section of the *snopes.com* website is cleverly devoted to presenting "the truth" in misleading ways, so that what snopes says is actually wrong – but there are lots of clues in their explanation that should indicate that the information is wrong, if the reader applies common sense or critical thinking skills. At the bottom of each explanation there is an attachment that says "Additional Information" and if you open it and read it, it says that you should never blindly believe anything you read and accept it as truth without question, even if it's on this website.

This is a brilliant and important lesson – but be cautious in how you use it. You don't want to make students who "fall for" the wrong answer feel stupid or wrong. If you ask students to look at this site in class or as a homework assignment, begin the discussion by asking:

What did snopes say about Mister Ed?

Do you think that is true?


*Probe for specific clues in the explanation that are questionable, like the claim that because the TV show was in black & white, viewers couldn't tell that it was a zebra, or the picture you can click on to show how the zebra would look in black & white (which is identical to the picture of the horse).

Could snopes be wrong about this?

Did anyone read the attachment at the bottom? What did it say?

What was snopes' purpose in creating this section of their website?

What's the lesson about trusting sources?




How a zebra appears on color TV

How Mister Ed appears on black-and-white TV

Click the button below to contrast the appearance of a Grevy's zebra on black-and-white televisions with its appearance on color televisions.

[Black and white](#)

Zebbras are noticeably smaller than horses, so the set used for Mister Ed's stable was constructed using forced perspective (the same technique employed on Disneyland's Main Street) to make it appear larger than it really was (and thus make Mister Ed appear larger than he really was as well). This gimmick also helped to mask the fact that Alan Young, the series' star, was only a diminutive 5'4" tall. Since a zebra's gait is distinctively different than a horse's, the rare episodes that called for scenes of Mister Ed running were filmed in long shots using real horses, a practice which has led to the mistaken claim (cited in several fan-related publications and web sites) that a zebra was occasionally used on the show as a "stunt double." (In later years a Palomino horse named Bamboo Harvester would often be erroneously identified as having been *the* Mister Ed, but this horse was in fact only used for promotional appearances and publicity stills; it never actually appeared in the TV series.)



How a zebra appears on black-and-white TV

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