

Imaginary Island Studies

By Tim Seldin

An excerpt from the Second Edition of *The World In The Palm Of Her Hand*

The Imaginary Island Project was developed by my friend, Harvey Hallenberg, and introduced to the Montessori community in the 1980s through the Institute for Advanced Montessori Studies in Silver Spring, Maryland, which we co-founded.

In the Montessori curriculum, children in the early childhood and elementary classes are of course introduced to an extensive set of land and water forms. They first see them as three-dimensional models and three-part cards, learning the vocabulary and definitions of not only the introductory land and water forms taught in most Montessori classrooms.

In the elementary classes, older children go beyond the basic land and water forms to learn many more land features in Physical geography, such as foothills, summit, river delta, marshlands, tributary, archipelago, lagoon and many more. Children construct models of these land forms out of clay and in combinations on sand and water tables.

As the extension of all this work, we invite interested children to create an entire island from their imagination.

The Areas of the Curriculum: Physical and Cultural Geography

Materials That You Will Need:

The children will be creating both two-dimensional drawing and three-dimensional dioramas of their imaginary islands, and will need a wide-range of art supplies: large sheets of paper, drawing pencils or charcoal, pastels or paints to create pictures of their islands, and clay or some other modeling media for constructing their dioramas (which will then be painted). They will also need various materials like sawdust dyed green to simulate grass, lichen and small twigs to simulate trees, and materials from which they can construct small model houses, such as small rectangular blocks of balsa wood.

Our Aims: To help the children to integrate their present level of understanding about physical geography, biomes, how human beings meet their needs in different settings, and cultural geography through the creative development of imaginary island placed somewhere on the globe.

Preparation: Children can participate in this activity at many different levels of understanding, depending on their interest and grasp of the many concepts involved in physical geography, earth science, biomes, and how human societies may be organized. A good basic level of preparation would include work with the land and water forms, land features, an introduction to biomes, the needs of human beings, and experiences in cultural geography.

Age: This activity has been used with children from as young as age five through early adolescence. In some schools it will be reintroduced in the upper elementary of junior high school levels. We might recall that books like Frank Herbert's *Dune* are based on an entire planet—its climate, ecology and human civilization—created

from the author's imagination.

Presentation:

The First Activity:

Invite the children to imagine an island somewhere in the oceans of the world, where they can decide everything from its size and shape, rivers and lakes, cities and villages, as well as the plants, animals, and people who live there.

To get the children started, you might want to make a first crude drawing of an island yourself with charcoal. Now invite the children to prepare a drawing of their own imaginary island, coloring it in with paints or pastels, and showing anything on it that they wish. Challenge them to place their lakes, rivers, mountains and cities carefully, because once there, they would be very hard to move, no?

You might want to give the children a paper like this to remind them of points to consider:

The name of my island is _____

Are there any mountains?

Are there any lakes?

Are there any rivers?

Are there any roads?

What is the name of the capitol city?

How many people live in the capitol city?

Are there any other cities and villages?

Are there any beaches?

Are there any forests on your island?

Is there an isthmus on your island?

Is there a peninsula on your island?

Is there a cape on your island?

Is there a bay on your island?

Is your island part of an archipelago?

Is your island an atoll?

Are there any valleys on your island?

Does your picture of your imaginary island show them? Have you given them names and labeled them on your picture?

When the children are done, invite them to share with you and their friends anything they wish to tell about their island. Some will say little; others will most likely come up with involved explanations and stories. Ask them if they have thought of a name for their island. Some will have named their island, others may prefer to wait until the right name comes to mind.

The Second Activity:

Ask the children if any would be interested in making a new drawing/painting of their islands. This time invite them to label their drawing with a name for their island, and to think about what sort of animals and plants live there. As the children complete their work, and share with their friend, continue to ask them new questions, like the ones below, and invite them to either prepare still another drawing of their island showing these things, or add them on to the drawing that they've made.

Are there any people on the island? Show what their houses look like. Do they live alone, in villages, or in cities? Invite the children to begin to name these cities and villages, as well as any major

What is the weather like on the island? What sort of clothes do they wear?

How do they get from place to place? Do they walk everywhere, ride horses, or drive cars?

What food do they eat on the island? Where does it come from? Is it grown there or brought in by ship or airplane? Where do ships dock and where do airplanes land, if they do stop at the island?

How many people are on the island? How did they come to be there?

Are there any children on the island? Where do they go to school? What is their school like? Is it shown on the map yet? What do the children do for fun on the island?

What natural resources are there on the island? How have people used them to make things for their own use or to export to other places?

Continue to gather informally with individual children or small groups who finish, to discuss what they found in their imagination. This process normally goes on over many days or weeks, and sometimes, over many years.

The Third Activity:

Prepare a three-dimensional model showing the island to scale, with land features, cities, road etc. depicted in as realistically as the child can using art and craft materials.

Hold a geography fair in which all of the children's imaginary islands are displayed in the school's halls or All Purpose room.

An Optional Introductory Activity: The Imaginary Island Puzzle

This material was developed by Judy Martell and is available from Mandala Classroom Resources. As an elementary teacher, Judy found that while many students loved the imaginary island project, others found the project "too huge, too open-ended, too full of possibilities; they needed the door cracked open a little rather than flung wide." * To meet their needs, Judy designed a new classroom material to bridge this gap.

Judy wanted to create something that could act as a springboard to the Imaginary Island Project without limiting it; a way for students to be invited naturally to use the vocabulary of the land and water forms as they moved toward the Imaginary Island Project, gaining confidence in their own imagination and exploring without inhibition.

The Imaginary Island Puzzle is a set of 84 square cards showing various individual land and land and water features that can be combined in many different ways to depict an imaginary island. Students use them to create

an infinite variety of islands, modifying them at will and using the vocabulary words easily in conversation in the process.

Judy found that the puzzle acted as a springboard for the Imaginary Island Project. "Children who had been overwhelmed at first, could more easily visualize their personal island after shaping it with the pieces of the Imaginary Island Puzzle. They could then elaborate on their islands and move into greater and greater detail as Harvey Hallenberg's project invited them to, eventually putting their creations on paper, writing their reports, and presenting them to others."

* Please Pass the Peninsula: A Recipe for a New Montessori Material, Judy Martell, Tomorrow's Child Magazine, May, 1997/Vol 5/Number 3

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Points of Interest: The combination of various land and water features. The creative and intellectual activities blended together to construct the island in one's imagination.

Points of Consciousness: The idea that an island is a complete and independent system of land, plants, animals, climate, natural resources, and people's impact on the environment.

Control of Error: There really is none in this activity, except that ideas proposed by the children can be challenged or confirmed by research into various areas of geography, climate, ecology, and cultural patterns found in islands located in that general area of the Earth.

Extensions:

Locate the imaginary islands precisely on the globe in terms of degrees of longitude and latitude.

Determine the distance from given points of the Earth to this location in terms of miles and kilometers.

Determine the course one would have to follow by boat or airplane, in terms of degrees on the compass rose, to travel from given points of the Earth to this location.

Identify the nearest points of land within 500 miles of this location, if applicable. Research one or more of these nearby islands to see what can be learned by comparing the climate, rainfall, biomes, and life style of the people who inhabit those islands.

Study wind patterns and ocean currents to see how they might influence the climate and weather patterns on the imaginary island.

Prepare a more precise scale map of the island, and calculate the distances between given points by both direct point to point measurement and by following the routes made practical because of the islands geography.

Prepare a topographical map of the island.

Prepare an illustrated history of the people who inhabit your imaginary island.