

The Tortoise Shell

Grade: 3 – 5

Time: 1 week

Subject: History, Social Studies

An alabara tortoise, such as Mzee, can have a shell that is 4 feet in length and 3 feet in width and live for over 200 years. Mzee is a middle-aged 130 year-old and has seen a great deal of change in his life.

In this activity, the class will work together to make a tortoise shell for Mzee. Each section of the shell, called a scute, will represent a decade of Mzee's life. When finished, the class should be able to assemble a life sized quilt of the shell that shows major events in human history and the class's history that Mzee has lived through.

To prepare, the teacher should draw out an outline of a shell on several large sheets of poster board put together. Then draw 13 scutes (5 central and 8 costal). The marginal scutes, or the ones that outline the shell, should have enough spots for each class member's name and the supracaudal, or bottom 2 marginal scutes, can be reserved for the teacher and class names.

The students should be broken into 13 groups and given a stack of colored scrap paper. Their first assignment is to trace and cut out their scute in whichever color they choose. Having a good deal of variety will increase the aesthetic value of this project. The decades should be delivered in some random way, so as to keep the task fair.

The premise of the assignment is that the tortoise shell bears the weight of every year of that tortoise's life. Each event, good or bad, affects the shell. The class is going to work in groups to create Mzee's shell, as if it were a timeline of human history. Each scute represents a decade of his life, from 1880 – 2000. Each group should symbolize the major events from their decade using only the space provided on the scute. As long as the size of the scute is not compromised, students are free to be creative with the materials and content.

Very Different

Grade: 3 – 5

Time: ½ day

Subject: Writing, Social Studies, Science

One of the reasons that the relationship between Owen and Mzee is intriguing and captivating is the fact that they are very different. When Owen first met Mzee, some attributes about the giant tortoise comforted Owen, but now, when their differences are more apparent, they are as close as ever. This type of behavior would be unusual for either animal and the fact that they both rely on one another is the biggest surprise of all.

In this project, half of the class will work on identifying the similarities between the two and the other half will work to identify the differences. They should be split into smaller groups and challenged to list every small detail on a large sheet of paper that can then be presented to the class.

This activity is aimed at finding the true nature of friendship. Once everyone has presented, a good writing prompt would be to define friendship and parallel the class study with their own life.

Haller Park

Grade: 5 – 7

Time: 1 week

Subject: Science, World Studies

This story brings a good deal of attention to Haller Park, the reservation where Owen and Mzee live. Many other animals live there as well as Kenya in general. This project will help the class learn more about the ecosystem at Haller Park and the country of Kenya.

In preparation the teacher will make a large map of Haller Park on the floor or on a table in the classroom. There do not need to be many details, beyond borders, a few ponds and a river. Those landmarks can be distributed throughout the map as desired (an *accurate* map of Haller Park is not necessary). The students will then each be assigned different plants and animals that inhabit the area (see list below).

The class will then have the epic job of creating a 3-dimensional representation of Haller Park. Each student will be in charge of finding materials either supplied in class (magazines, scrap paper, cardboard, etc.) or at home to make their particular plant or animal for the map. Actual figurines or real plant life is not allowed.

Before an object is moved onto the map, the student will make a short oral presentation about that plant or animal. The following questions should be answered:

What is the Swahili name for this plant or animal?

Is this plant or animal endangered?

Where in Kenya can one find this organism outside of Haller Park?

How does this organism fit into the ecosystem?

Once the last organism is placed, the teacher should take a photo of the map with the students standing around the back – they'd love a copy in Kenya!