



SSHEAN

*Social Studies & History Education
in the Anthropocene Network*

The “Golden Spike”:

Outdoor Extension

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Lesson Challenge

This lesson is an extension of *The “Golden Spike”: Thinking Critically about the Anthropocene*, inviting students to explore this activity on the land instead of in a classroom.

In the activity, learners look for local evidence and representations of human impacts on the Earth, as they unpack the concept of the Anthropocene.

There are no correct answers for this lesson; rather, we encourage you to discuss what it means to determine the periodization of the Anthropocene.

This lesson can be adapted to fit with outdoor learning venues, opportunities, and histories in your local contexts.



Golden Spike - Outdoor Extension

Lesson Activity

This activity asks students to analyze possible dates that represent the Golden Spike (starting point) of the geological epoch known as the Anthropocene. They collect evidence by photographing items that represent each spike, while outdoors interacting with the land.

The Activity

1. Begin by asking students to gather in a circle outside, if possible, around a fire (or symbolic “fire”), to talk about the lesson.
2. Define the term “Anthropocene” based on the Evidence sheet provided.
3. Define the term “Golden Spike.” Review the graph of human influence on the planet, and the five possible Golden Spikes for the Anthropocene on the Evidence sheet provided.
4. Ask students to break into pairs or groups. Explain that their challenge is to “become” a historian or geologist who is seeking evidence of human influence on the Earth. Together, students will explore the designated outdoor area and use a device to take photographs of items that could represent evidence of each Golden Spike. Set a time limit for their search. See the chart below for examples.
5. Ask students to gather back around the circle and share what evidence of the Golden Spikes they found through photos and verbal descriptions.
6. Ask students to reflect on the evidence gathered by the group. Guide discussion using a selection of the following questions:
 - a. Which Golden Spike was easiest to locate or most common?
 - b. Which Golden Spike was the most difficult to locate or the least common?
Note: Students may have difficulty finding evidence of a Golden Spike for Colonization, if they associate it with “finding” Indigenous people or presence on the land. However, place names, flags, and even the presence of Settler-descended people (including the students themselves) are possibilities. It may be useful to share the following information: “...the arrival of Europeans in the Americas also led to a large decline in human numbers. Regional population estimates sum to a total of 54 million in the Americas in 1492, with recent population modelling estimates of 61 million people. Numbers rapidly declined to a minimum of about 6 million by 1650 via exposure to diseases carried by Europeans, plus war, enslavement, and famine (Lewis & Maslin, 2015, p. 175).” Help students consider that absences tell a story, too.
 - c. On what basis (or how) will you form an opinion on which Golden Spike indicates the beginning of the Anthropocene?
 - d. Is it important to select only one Golden Spike to designate the beginning of the Anthropocene? Why or why not?

Estimated Time

- 1-1.5 Hours

Required Materials

- Evidence Sheet
- Outdoor location (preferably a conservation area or land that has been reclaimed from industry)
- Devices that can take pictures



Golden Spike	Examples
Human Control Over Fire	fire pits, ashes, forest fire precautions sign
Beginnings of Agriculture	landscaping, planting edible plants, student snacks/lunch
Colonization	flags, place names, land acknowledgement sign
Industrialization	road, railway tracks, industrial site remains
The Great Acceleration	plastic objects, cellphones and other devices, power lines

Helpful tips

- Location is the most important aspect of this lesson. It helps to choose a place with lots of biodiversity and previous or contemporary human activity. (For example, one class visited a conservation area that was a former mica mine).

Safety Considerations

- Be sure to discuss the boundaries of the location where students can safely explore during this activity.
- Highlight any areas of risk (roads, waterways, equipment).
- Direct students to remain in groups when exploring the land, and brief them on what signal will be used to recall them.

