Life imitating art (Foundation/key stage 1)

What the photo says
This beautifully composed photo shows a tranquil scene on the Li River in China. The fisherman is using cormorants to catch fish. The cormorant is trained to return to the boat with the fish; a cord around its neck prevents the bird from swallowing its catch.

The scene contrasts in most respects with the likely environment of the children, and should also provoke an ‘awe and wonder’ reaction when shown – particularly to very young children – for the first time.

Lesson idea
Context: Place and space – introducing children to contrasting places, asking them to think about the messages the photograph gives us about what a place is like and what it can mean to us.
Reflection and thinking: absorbing the impact of a picture of a very different place.

Other resources
- a copy of the Willow Pattern story and a picture of a Willow Pattern plate, both of which can be found at http://www.thepotteries.org/patterns/willow.html.
- examples of paintings, particularly from the Impressionist period – see ‘Links to art’ below.
- a copy of the story book Linnea in Monet’s Garden¹
- music to help reflective thinking about the picture, e.g. Erik Satie’s Gymnopédie No 1.

Suggested activities
Create an atmosphere of calm and peace by settling the children down before showing the picture on the IWB.
You might want to play some music while they look at it.

Ask them for their first impressions:
- Which words which come into their minds as they look at it (calm, quiet, blue, etc.)?
- What can they see?
- Can they tell what time of day it is? What are the clues?
- What is the man doing? What is the bird for?
- Is it a photograph or a painting? What are their reasons for saying that?

• How many layers of blue can they find?
• Where will the fisherman’s family be? What will they be doing?
• If the children were suddenly to find themselves in the picture, what would they feel and hear? What would they want to ask the fisherman?
• Can they think of a title for the picture?

Then link forward to the children’s own locality by asking questions such as:
• Do they know any where like this?
• Have they visited a river? How did it compare with this one?
• Do they or anyone in their family go fishing?
• Why do fishermen like to fish at night?
• Do they know of any places they can visit which will be peaceful and quiet?

Follow-up activities
1 Read the Willow Pattern story to the children and ask them to create/paint a story for this picture. They can add typical willow pattern features such as a willow tree, pagoda, bridge, etc.
2 Ask them to paint a river picture of their own using a limited number of colours to create the layers they have seen in the picture.
3. Research information about the Li River in China and fishing with cormorants.

Curriculum opportunities
How might this place change in the future?
Children will recognise the serene quality of this place. The mountains and river are beautiful, it is very peaceful, and there is an absence of buildings and human activity. However, these factors make it just the sort of place people would love to experience! This is an opportunity to discuss what would happen if this became a major tourist area:
• How would the place change and would the magic of the river be lost if many visitors came to see it?
• Is it right to open up all these beautiful places so everyone can visit them, or should be left as they are?
• How would the life of the fisherman change with huge numbers of visitors? Would he become wealthy or would he hate the changes? How might they affect his family?

Links to art
You can invite the children to look at paintings from different times but of a similar nature, for example Morning on the Seine, Mist (Claude Monet: http://www.claudemonetgallery.org/Morning-On-The-Seine--Mist-large.html); The Golden Isles (Henri-Edmond Cross: http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/full.php?ID=9151) and The Red Buoy (Paul Signac: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_Signac_La_bouee_rouge.jpg) are all excellent examples of how artists have played with colour and tones to create wonderful images for the viewer.

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