

Discovering Alabama

Teacher's Guide

Alabama Black Belt

Suggested Curriculum Areas

History
Social Studies
Earth Science

Suggested Grade Levels

4–12

Key Concepts

Natural Heritage
Cultural Heritage
Native Landscapes

Key Skills

Listening
Comprehending
Reflective Thinking

Synopsis

The southern region known as the “Black Belt” is a unique zone of dark, rich soils that stretches from Georgia across Alabama and Mississippi. The history of the Black Belt is often identified with the infamous period of cotton plantations and slave labor in the decades before the Civil War. However, the full story of the Black Belt begins with ancient periods of geological history that formed the basis for the region’s uniquely fertile soils, and extends to present challenges confronting the future of the Black Belt and its residents.



Cotton Blossoms and Bolls

Discovering Alabama highlights this story of time and change in the Black Belt, giving particular attention to the relationship between the natural history and the human and cultural history of the region. Also featured are local residents, historians, and others concerned or involved with present issues regarding the future of the Black Belt.



THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA



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Before Viewing

1. Ask your students if they have heard of the Black Belt region of Alabama. Conduct a brainstorm session to list various information (facts, impressions, rumors, hearsay, guesses, etc.) the students can offer reflecting their ideas and understanding of the Black Belt region. If your class is knowledgeable about this region, you should soon compile an interesting list of information. If many in your class are not familiar with this region, you will probably compile an even more interesting and likely humorous listing of assorted strange descriptions.

For example, don't be surprised if someone guesses that the region is the home of the sport of karate (as in black belt karate). And don't be shocked if someone suggests that the region is "where most black people live." In fact, don't fret if students supply more wrong ideas than correct information because the purpose of this activity is to simply prime student interest for the video. Accept the class's brainstorm input without criticism or correction.

2. Arrange students in small groups and a) have them discuss the brainstorm list (which items they believe to be accurate, which inaccurate, etc.) and b) develop a list of questions pertaining to any curiosity they have about the topic of the Black Belt region.

While Viewing

Have students watch to learn answers to their questions and to determine the accuracy of their brainstorm responses.

Video Mystery Question: Surprising to visitors, landscapes of the Black Belt region often appear to be white. Why? (Answer: A defining geological feature for much of the Black Belt region is the underlying layer of chalk-colored marine sediments deposited during ancient periods when this part of Alabama was covered by shallow seas. Where these sediments are exposed, through erosion or other means, the land's surface appears very light gray to almost white in color.)

After Viewing

1. Have students return to small groups, discuss what they learned, and compare this new information to the items and impressions elicited in the earlier brainstorm session.

2. Have students continue working in small groups to consider video segments highlighting various viewpoints and perspectives regarding the future of the Black Belt region. Ask each group to develop its own ideas and recommendations for the future of the Black Belt. Allow each group to report their respective conclusions. Discuss.

3. You will note that, listed as "Key Skills" for emphasis (see front page), are "listening," "comprehending," and "reflective thinking." The challenges facing the future of the Black Belt are often complex and can involve conflicting perspectives on a host of issues, economic, social, and environmental. In discussing the Black Belt, help students consider the need to develop and apply the targeted skills.

Extensions

1. View other *Discovering Alabama* programs that are helpful to understanding the state's geological regions and rural values. Such programs include "Geological History of Alabama," "Alabama's Natural Diversity," "Alabama Forests," "Alabama Soils," "Alabama Rivers," "Alabama Wetlands," "Wildlife History," and "A Walk in the Woods."

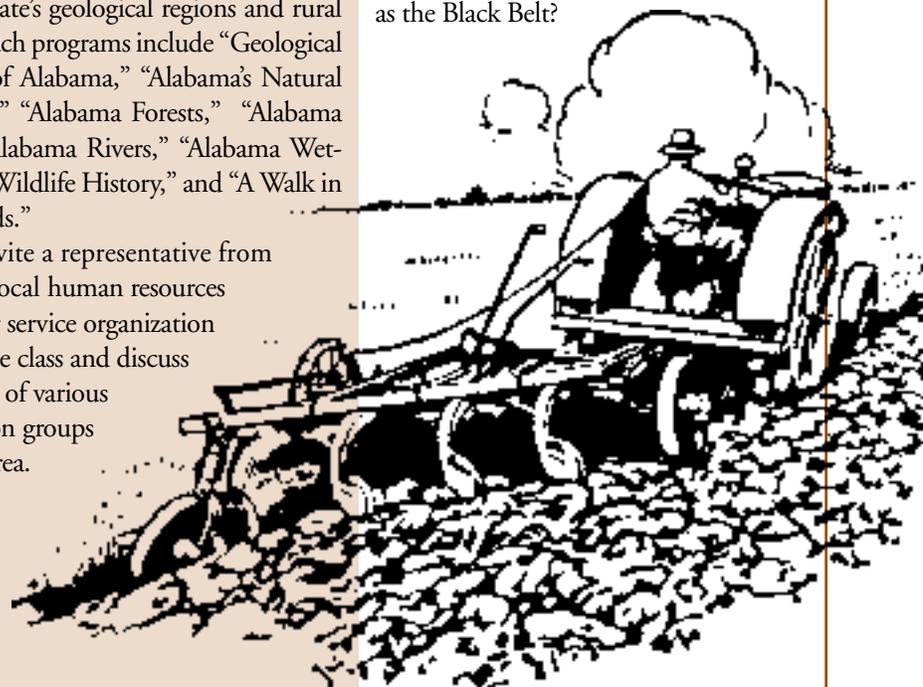
2. Invite a representative from a local human resources agency or service organization to visit the class and discuss the needs of various population groups in your area.

Philosophical Reflections

The doctrinal beliefs of most religious denominations are inspired by the moral example of spiritual figures who lived by simple means, disinterested in material riches and selflessly devoted to helping others. However, a glaring reality of our world today is the fact that millions of people enjoy great material wealth while millions more suffer hunger and deprivation.

Social critics suggest that this phenomenon is related to a popular sentiment standing in contrast to the example of selfless love exhibited by such spiritual leaders as Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, and Mother Theresa. These critics contend that, in some circles, including among those with great wealth, there often is a firm belief that impoverished, "lower class" people are entirely responsible for their own fate, and that these individuals must themselves take full, personal responsibility for improving their own status in life.

What reasoning might be offered by those seeking to justify this belief? How does this view differ from the example of spiritual leaders mentioned above? How might such contrasting perspectives apply in considering the needs of such regions as the Black Belt?



Nature in Art

Invite student teams to compile photo essays comparing artistic/appealing features and landscapes found in local urban settings with those found in local rural settings. Have the teams present their respective photo essays to the class and explain their perceptions of how selected photos qualify as especially appealing/artistic or otherwise significant.

Community Connections

1. Assign group research projects to a) identify local urban settings and local rural areas, and b) compare the pros and cons of living in the two different types of settings.
2. Have students do volunteer work with local organizations to assist the needy in your area.

Complementary Aids and Activities

Project Learning Tree: activities: “Planning the Ideal Community” and “Field, Forest, and Stream.” Contact: Alabama Forestry Association, 555 Alabama Street, Montgomery AL 36104; also visit: www.plt.org.

Project WILD: activities: “Philosophical Differences” and “Planning for People and for Wildlife.” Contact: Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, 64 N. Union Street, Montgomery AL 36130; also visit their site: www.projectwild.org.

Geological Map of Alabama, available from the Geological Survey of Alabama, Box 869999, Tuscaloosa AL 35486-9999, or visit: www.gsa.state.al.us.

Additional References and Resources

Links to articles about the Black Belt:

www.al.com/specialreport/birminghamnews/?blackbelt.html

www.datelinealabama.com/article/2002/06/07/2365_news_art.php3

<http://irhr.ua.edu/blackbelt/intro.html>

U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce

www.census.gov/

Center for Business and Economic Research, Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration, The University of Alabama

<http://cber.cba.ua.edu>

Letters from Alabama, (U.S.): Chiefly Relating to Natural History, by Philip Henry Gosse (1859, reprinted 1993).

Farmland or Wasteland: A Time to Choose by R. Neil Sampson (1981).

Poor But Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites by J. Wayne Flynt (1989).

A History of the South, Vols. I–XI edited by Wendell Holmes Stephenson and E. Merton Coulter (1949–1995).

Soil and Civilization by Edward S. Hyams (1976).

Alabama Heritage Magazine, various articles pertaining to the Black Belt, visit website and search “Black Belt”: www.alabamaheritage.com/search.htm

Parting Thoughts

Dire economic assessments of the rural Black Belt have evoked lamentations that the people of the region are “going nowhere.” Indeed, much of the rural South is often assailed as being “behind” and “backward,” compared to more developed regions elsewhere in the nation. However, today a number of additional factors are gaining new attention as part of a more complete picture of rural conditions.

For example, the rural South is characteristically blessed with abundant natural assets—woodlands, streams, wildlife, open space—that are increasingly prized in today’s crowding world. These features serve as important ecological infrastructure providing a wealth of free environmental services and benefits no longer available to sprawling urban communities.

Likewise, rural areas offer a number of social and economic amenities such as lower crime rates, less pollution, and lower costs of living compared to most major urban areas. The lack of sprawling growth also means the absence of heavy and continuously rising tax burdens to pay for expanding community services.

We should be wary of the tendency by some analysts to discount or ignore these positive aspects of rural life. Those who foster images of the rural South as “backward” sometimes have a biased impression of rural settings and rural life ways. This is reflected, for example, in the attitude of pseudo-sophisticates who equate ruralness with ugliness, who see backwoods as backwards. Such an attitude is crudely condescending, not to mention sadly lacking in appreciation for the importance of natural systems.

Certainly, we are justified in our concern that present economic realities suggest the Black Belt may be “going nowhere,” but we should take great care in determining where we might wish the region to go. Alabama’s vast rural areas represent many important values that distinguish the state as uniquely special. The challenge of addressing prevailing economic needs in areas such as the Black Belt also presents the opportunity to develop innovative strategies that enhance rather than diminish these qualities.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Rural Alabama, especially the Black Belt region, contains some of the world’s most productive agricultural lands. People who are ashamed of ruralness, who have little appreciation for farming as a way of life, are terribly out of touch with reality. Agriculture is essential to human culture! Alabamians should be proud of the state’s abundant ruralness and should proudly promote agriculture as a major facet of the state’s economic future.



Happy outings,

[Signature]



Discovering Alabama

Activity/Information Sheet

Alabama Black Belt

Socioeconomic Indicators for Certain Black Belt Counties

	<u>Population Change</u> 1940–2002			<u>Median Family Income</u> 2003		
	1940	2002	Difference	2003	% of Ala.	% of US
United States	132.2M	288.4M	156.2M	\$56,500		
Alabama	2.8M	4.5M	1.7M	46,900	100	83
1. Choctaw	20,195	15,418	-4,777	35,500	76	63
2. Clarke	27,636	27,557	-79	38,800	83	69
3. Conecuh	25,489	13,687	-11,802	34,500	74	61
4. Dallas	55,245	45,653	-9,592	34,600	74	61
5. Greene	19,185	10,035	-9,150	27,400	58	48
6. Hale	25,533	17,067	-8,466	36,200	77	64
7. Marengo	35,736	22,475	-13,261	39,400	84	70
8. Monroe	29,465	24,043	-5,422	38,500	82	68
9. Perry	26,610	11,637	-14,973	28,800	61	51
10. Sumter	27,321	14,376	-12,945	26,500	57	47
11. Washington	16,188	17,927	-1,739	43,400	93	77
12. Wilcox	26,279	13,137	-13,142	23,600	50	42

	<u>Poverty Status</u>		<u>Educational Attainment</u>	<u>Unemployment</u>		<u>Civilian Labor Force</u>
	people of all ages in poverty 1999	% of all in poverty 1999	% persons 25 and older, high school graduates or higher 2000	% rate of 2002	number of 2002	number of 2002
United States		12.4	80.4	5.8	8.4M	144.9M
Alabama	698,097	16.1	75.3	5.9	124,400	2.1M
1. Choctaw	3,858	24.5	65.0	11.2	560	4,980
2. Clarke	6,207	22.6	70.8	9.3	1,140	12,290
3. Conecuh	3,719	26.6	67.7	8.3	460	5,550
4. Dallas	14,243	31.1	70.3	13.9	2,560	18,490
5. Greene	3,391	34.3	64.8	11.9	340	2,850
6. Hale	4,531	26.9	65.2	10.7	740	6,890
7. Marengo	5,805	25.9	71.9	5.3	580	10,990
8. Monroe	5,131	21.3	67.9	10.8	970	9,000
9. Perry	4,026	35.4	62.4	13.6	540	3,950
10. Sumter	5,611	38.7	64.8	10.6	520	4,870
11. Washington	3,329	18.5	72.3	17.1	920	5,380
12. Wilcox	5,133	39.9	59.5	13.9	500	3,620

The Black Belt region is sometimes defined differently for different purposes. The video description is based on the geological presence of Selma chalk and related blackland prairie, which includes a number of counties more than listed above. Other descriptions are based on socioeconomic or demographic factors, which, depending upon the source, can reduce or expand the number of counties included. The sources for the above information are the U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce and the Center for Business and Economic Research, Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration, The University of Alabama.