



Mercy Education
Educación de la Misericordia

Courageous Action. Selfless Spirit.™
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Classroom Guide: *Berta Saves the River*

Written by Suzanne Llewellyn, illustrated by Luis Chávez

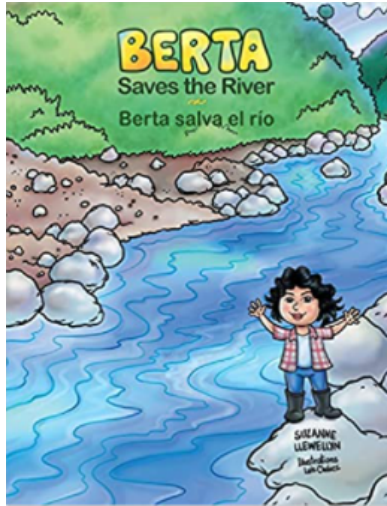
This resource guide was created by [Mercy Education](#) and is intended for use in Mercy Education schools. Suggested grade levels are 4-7.

This is a dynamic document, and we welcome contributions and perspectives from our schools.

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Summary



From Amazon.com

Berta Saves the River portrays real-life indigenous heroine, Berta Cáceres, in Honduras. Through the eyes of Ana, a young girl living in a beautiful, mountainous, and remote Lenca village, we see a drama of courage unfold. Against powerful odds, the villagers save their life-sustaining river from being dammed for the profit of others. *Berta Saves the River* is a much-needed bi-lingual addition to children's literature featuring a Central American heroine.

Ana adores Berta Cáceres, a beloved human rights and environmental activist, who works hard for the Lenca people.

This inspirational story of Berta gives hope to people across the globe who want to protect their lives from environmental disaster, so they are not forced to migrate.

It explains why even women with babies make the life-threatening journey north to the United States if their livelihoods are destroyed. This universal story of courage helps readers understand that they can participate in shaping their own futures.

From Justice Tales Press, this is a story that inspires activism. All profits from this book are sent to grassroots organizations in Honduras who are fighting for justice.

Background Information: Berta Cáceres



From [Berta Cáceres | Transformational Change Leadership \(tcleadership.org\)](https://tcleadership.org/)

Berta Cáceres co-founded The Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) in 1993. COPINH works to ensure the rights of the Lenca people, particularly environmental rights. Cáceres worked through COPINH to protect the land and natural resources of the Lenca. The organization has stopped

logging and deforestation projects as well as plans for building hydroelectric dams. Under Cáceres' leadership, the Lenca were able to force the builders and investors to abandon plans

for a series of dams to be built along the Gualcarque River, a place in western Honduras which is inhabited by many Lenca people.

In 2016, a day before her 45th birthday, Cáceres was killed by gunmen in her home, targeted by those threatened by her effective organizing, activism, commitment and success in stopping the dam. Cáceres was one of a hundred environmental and human rights activists in Honduras killed for defense of their lands and rivers in Honduras. An extraordinary and inspiring leader, she was [invited by Pope Francis](#) to participate in the Vatican's First World Meeting of Popular Movements in 2014 and won the prestigious [Goldman Environmental Prize](#) in 2015.

For more information on the life of Berta Cáceres, please visit:

<https://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/berta-caceres/>.

Background Information: Honduras

Geography



Honduras, also known as the Republic of Honduras, is a country located in Central America. By land, it is bordered by Guatemala to the west, Nicaragua to the southeast, and El Salvador to the southwest. By water, it is bordered by the Caribbean Sea to the north and the Pacific Ocean to the south. The Bay Islands to the north are also part of Honduras.

There are four geographic regions:

- Central highlands – Most of the people live in this region. There are mountains and valleys. The soil is fertile and good for growing coffee.

- Pacific lowlands – The soil is fertile, and the land is good for raising cattle.
- Eastern Caribbean lowlands – There are mountains and dense forests. Lumber is an important industry.
- Northern coastal plains and mountains – The soil is best for growing bananas. Cattle, pigs, and poultry are raised in this region.

The climate in the regions is generally hot and humid. There are cool winds that blow in the north in certain months. The rainy season lasts for seven months in some of the regions. The climate allows for a variety of plant and animal life.

The Gualcarque River

This river is located in western Honduras. The Lenca consider this sacred space. They believe that the river is home for the spirits of women and children. This river gives the Lenca people access to water for drinking, irrigation, and space for them to gather.

History: In the 16th century, the Maya and other indigenous people lived in Honduras when Christopher Columbus discovered the land. The Spanish came in soon after and conquered the land. Early in the 19th century, Honduras gained its independence from Spain. The traditions and customs of the indigenous people and the Spanish influence have shaped the culture of Honduras today. The primary language is Spanish.

People of Honduras, The Lenca

Today, the largest indigenous group in Honduras is the Lenca. They have their own language, but speak Spanish, too. Their culture is unique as it is a blend of their ancestral beliefs and the Catholic faith. They are an agrarian community, growing coffee and corn. They are also known for hand-making colorful scarves and ponchos on looms and creating pottery with intricate designs. The Lenca people bring their goods to sell on Sundays, popular market days within the center of towns. One of the traditions of the Lenca people is the “Guancasco” ceremony. This is a celebration of peace and renewal of friendships with people in different communities. The Lenca wish to preserve their culture, so the elder Lenca hold gatherings to teach the younger generations about the practices, customs, and traditions of their people.

[Honduras: The Lenca Culture - Bing video](#)

Suggested video resource (in Spanish with English subtitles) on preserving the cultural practices, customs, and traditions of the Lenca people – an intergenerational gathering

where the elders of the community teach the younger generations about the customs and traditions of the Lenca.

Government

The citizens of Honduras elect a president who has a four-year term. The president appoints governors to oversee departments. The departments are broken down further into localities. Citizens of Honduras are able to elect mayors of these smaller localities.

Please note: There has been much violence and unrest with government and gangs in Honduras over the years. Many of the sites that provide information on Honduras speak to the violence in great detail. As this resource is developed for grades 4 – 7, we recommend that teachers use judgment, knowing the age and maturity of your students, and limit open searching on the internet as some of the images and information could be disturbing to the students.

Resources on Honduras for Educators

1. Sisters of Mercy in Honduras

[Honduras | Mercy World](#)

[Advocating for Human Rights in Honduras - Sisters of Mercy](#)

In 1959, the Sisters of Mercy from the USA and Belize established the first foundation in Honduras. The sisters have several sponsored ministries for children and women. Other important work of the sisters includes advocating for peace and responding to human rights abuses in the country. This involvement began in response to a coup in June 2009, which deposed a democratically-elected president and opened the door to rampant corruption of state institutions, destruction of the rule of law, gang violence and drug trafficking. Protests against the government and human rights violators were met with repression by the Honduran military and police.

The Sisters of Mercy led a number of human rights delegations to Honduras since the coup, including delegations to examine the root causes of migration ([report](#), [blog](#)). They have also sponsored speaking tours in the U.S. and advocated for ending U.S. support for the Honduran government and its security forces until the rights of the people are restored and the violence ends.

2. Current background information on Honduras

In January 2022, a new president, and the first woman president, was inaugurated in Honduras, Xiomara Castro. After 12 years of a narco-dictatorship in which courageous human rights defenders and social movements protested in the streets, the new administration has pledged to prioritize the plight of the poor, as well as ending corruption and human rights violations by state security forces. Maritza Isabel Paredes Gámez, a Honduran Mercy Associate, writes that “Hope has a woman’s face.” (Link to blog)

These sites are not recommended for young students.

[World Report 2022: Honduras | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](#) – Human Rights Watch is a web site which may help provide current, background information to teachers regarding the investigations and abuses happening around the world.

[Information about the murder of Berta Cáceres was recently reported on Human Rights Watch in December 2021:](#) “In August, a former director of the Honduran hydroelectric company DESA was convicted of organizing the 2016 assassination of environmental and Indigenous rights defender Berta Cáceres, who opposed construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Gualcarque River. In 2019, seven others were convicted for carrying out the killing. The trial has been marred by irregularities.”

[Peace Brigades International](#) - Human Rights Reports from Honduras.

Resources on Honduras for Students

[Honduras Facts for Kids \(kiddle.co\)](#)

[Honduras Country Profile - National Geographic Kids](#)

[World Map / World Atlas / Atlas of the World Including Geography Facts and Flags - WorldAtlas.com](#)

[Bay Islands | islands, Honduras | Britannica](#)

[Honduras | History, Geography, & Culture | Britannica](#)

[Who are the Lenca People? - Honduras Travel](#)

[Lenca - Honduras | InterReligious Task Force on Central America \(irtfcleveland.org\)](#)

[Wildlife in Honduras - Types of Honduran Animals - AZ Animals \(a-z-animals.com\)](#)

Integrating *Berta Saves the River* into the Classroom

Guest Speakers

Enhance your students' engagement with the book by setting up a guest reader/speaker. Speakers are available:

- To read the book aloud in English, Spanish or both
- To share about their experiences in Honduras
- To converse with your students about the topics covered in the book

Please email mercyedu@sistersofmercy.org for more information.

Religion

The story emphasizes four Critical Concerns of the Sisters of Mercy, Earth, Nonviolence, Immigration, and Racism. [Learn more about the Critical Concerns.](#)

Earth – In the story, the Gualcarque River is described as a sacred place to the Lenca people. They believe spirits of young girls live in the river. Anna plays, bathes, and talks to the spirits in the river. One day, Anna is scared because giant machines come and destroy trees and corn and bean fields in the valley. A powerful company wants to steal their sacred river. The Lenca people have always been good stewards of Earth! Berta Cáceres steps in and protects the rights of the Lenca people, speaking on their behalf to protect the river and surrounding land, which is an important resource for them.

Nonviolence – Berta Cáceres led peaceful protests to block the machines from getting to the river. Berta was imprisoned for her peaceful actions. She was brave and continued to speak for the rights of the Lenca people. Because Berta was successful in blocking the company from building a series of dams along the river, major funders of this project dropped out. Many people were angry and threatened Berta's life. Although Berta led a peaceful resistance, those she angered committed violence by taking her life.



Photo: The Lenca people forming a human barrier to protect the Gualcarque River.

Source: change.org

While the story does not directly engage with Immigration and Racism in detail, there is a connection that could be further explored.

Immigration - People have been fleeing Honduras since the coup because of violence, inequality and corruption. (see the illustration on pages 11 and 12 as a connection between the story of Berta and Immigration)

Racism - The indigenous people, such as the Lencas, have been mistreated by the government who have also brought damage to many of the indigenous communities. Often Black, Indigenous and Communities of People of Color are the communities who are most impacted by the damage inflicted by mining corporations.

Classroom Activities:

Berta met with the Pope. Students can write prayer intentions to the Pope that they would want to share after reading this story. Ideas might include ongoing prayers for brave leaders such as Berta and her family and protection for all the world's natural resources.

The book references several aspects of Indigenous spirituality. Invite students to respectfully name some of the similarities and differences between Indigenous spirituality and the Catholic faith.

Literature

There are several examples of creative figures of speech to explore in the story.

Simile – The river is like blood flowing through their bodies and harbors the spirits of their ancestors.

Personification –

She (Berta) plants seeds of resistance and hope everywhere.

She (Ana) listens to the wind and birds playing music in their branches

The Honduran people call the Earth *Madre Tierra* because the Earth feeds and shelters them and shapes their lives like a good mother.

Creative language –

She (Ana) loves how her body awakens with joy at the touch of the clear, cold water.

Berta says (to Ana), I belong to the river, just like you do.

She (Ana) cannot imagine life without the rhythm of the river.

Berta realized when she was a child that it isn't fair for people to be poor in a country that is rich in resources.

Ana goes to river and hears Berta whispering to her in the gentle breeze. *Do not be afraid. I am with you.* Ana closes her eyes at night and hears Berta tell her, *You are strong, Ana. Protect Mother Earth, for she knows what is right.*

Writing ideas/ Classroom Activities

- Create a haiku about Berta's work, the Lenca people, or the Gualcarque river.
- Take ideas learned from story and create an acrostic poem - Use Berta, Lenca or Mother Earth as possible words.
- Talk about local issues with water and write a letter to local or federal government officials about protecting water sources, local resources or indigenous people such as the Lenca.
- Re-write part of this story from the perspective of the river.

Science

Natural Resources and Agriculture

The book mentions a diversity of resources from inside the Earth and agriculture:

- Natural resources – gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc, iron ore, antimony (used to make electronics), coal, hydropower
- From the sea – shrimp and varieties of fish
- Gualcarque River – Lenca people use the river for fishing and irrigation
- Agriculture: Coffee (country's leading export), tropical fruit, sugar cane



Photo: Coffee farms in Honduras

Source:

littlecoffeeplace.com/Honduran-coffee-guide

Wildlife and Plants

Honduras is home to many types of wildlife and plants. The people are trying to be good stewards of the Earth, but the lands have been threatened by deforestation and ranching.

Students could investigate some of the wildlife below while studying habitats. They could compare/contrast local habitats to the habitats in Honduras.

- Birds - The quetzal and wine-throated hummingbird are two rare species. The Honduran Emerald can only be found in Honduras. The scarlet macaw, the national bird, is endangered.
- Reptiles – home to the basilisk.
- Mammals – Yucatan white-tailed deer (national animal of Honduras), jaguar and puma, 50 different types of bats.
- Plants – There are over 6,000 species of plants in Honduras including 630 varieties of orchids.

Honduras is home to rainforests, a unique habitat, in the northeast region of the country. There are also cloud forests. They look like fog and are low-hanging clouds that hover around the upper canopy of the forest before condensing onto the leaves of trees and dripping onto the plants below.



Photo: National flower, Rhyncholaelia digbyana
Source: nationalflower.info

Natural Disasters

Hurricane Mitch hit Honduras in 1998. It was a very deadly hurricane in which over 7,000 people in Honduras passed away. The hurricane also destroyed most agriculture and dramatically hurt the economy. The production of bananas was hit the hardest, with capacity to produce only 57% of what they did before Hurricane Mitch. In November 2020, causing even greater damage, [two devastating hurricanes hit](#), causing nearly \$2 billion in destruction and affecting 4 million people.

Classroom Activities

- Have students create their own rivers and create dams that will stop their flow.
- Brainstorm a list of all uses of water. What happens when the water stops being available or is contaminated?

Activities for other subjects:

- **Art:** Have students draw a before and after the dam picture with one of the landscapes described in the book (river, farm, fields, mountain)
- **Art:** Have students design a poster like described in the book and share with the class.
- **Social Studies:** Who does Berta remind students of from the history they have learned? What characteristics do they have in common?