

Comparing Use of Land by Different Groups

Fast Facts

Curriculum Area: Social Studies
Grade Level: High School
Suggested Duration:

Stage 1 Desired Results

Established Goals

Social Studies Standard 3, Benchmark 7 Students will describe and compare how people create places that reflect culture, human needs, government policy, and current values and ideas.

Understandings

- The general differences regarding land use/ownership between American Indians and Europeans.

Essential Questions

- What common themes arise regarding how American Indians perceived the land?
- To what extent do you think differing cultural perspectives on the land led to conflict between American Indians and Europeans?

Students will be able to...

- read and react to a written description of differences in the ways American Indians and Europeans viewed land.

Students will know...

- in general, American Indian tribes shared a similar viewpoint regarding land and this was often different from European perspectives regarding land.

Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

Performance Tasks

1. Students will read and analyze issues regarding differences in how land is viewed and used. Students will write up a brief essay and also actively participate in class discussion.

Stage 3 Learning Plan

Learning Activities

For thousands of years before the Columbian voyages, American Indians had a variety of complex and rich societies. Most European societies were ruled by monarchies, most American Indian societies were egalitarian in nature and leadership was a shared responsibility. European and American Indian economic systems were based on fundamentally conflicting views of how land and natural resources should be used.

Introduce students to this topic by using the following quote in *A History and Foundation of American Indian Education Policy* by Stan Juneau, revised and updated by Walter Fleming and Lance Foster. Have them read the quote and discuss what they think it means. Ask them to pay particular attention the last paragraph regarding the amount of land lost.

Property is the Function of any Society

According to Fay and McNickle:

The Indian People, without a written language, were rated by early settlers as knowing little about property ownership. Europeans of impeccable moral behavior counted it no blotch upon their record to use their skill in writing to double-deal and overreach the Indians.

The prime source of misunderstanding between these representatives of two traditions resulted from their quite different attitudes toward land.... When the Europeans found that Indians had no proceedings for recording title, indeed had no titles, they readily assumed that there was no ownership. They assumed Indians ranged the land rather than occupied it.

Property is a function of any society. If the European settlers had been able to get the facts, and had been interested in the facts, they would have found that surface areas were recognized, boundaries were respected, user rights were sustained. But nothing in Indian practices required that land be divided up and parceled out under any system of titles. (Fey, Harold and D'Arcy McNickle. *Indians and Other Americans: Two Ways of Life Meet*, page 26.)

Between 1778 and 1871 Indian tribes lost the majority of their original territories and land between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mississippi River. Between 1887 and 1934, the U.S. government took more than 90 million acres - nearly two-thirds of reservation lands – from tribes and gave it to settlers, most often without compensation to tribes. Today, Indian tribes hold more than 50 million acres, or approximately 2 percent of the United States. (Johnson, Susan, et al, **Government to Government**, NCA/NCSL, June 2000)

Comparing Use of Land by Different Groups – High School

Tell students they will be reading an excerpt from the Office of Public Instruction document, *Connecting Cultures and Classrooms*. The selected passages all deal with issues and perspectives regarding land use and early interactions between American Indians and Europeans.

Have them answer the following questions as a result of their reading:

- What is the Bering Strait theory and why is it problematic from an American Indian perspective?
- What were some basic differences in how Europeans and American Indians viewed the land?
- Describe some specific examples of how American Indians were living prior to European contact.
- To what extent do you think these differing perspectives on the environment lead to misunderstanding and perhaps conflict?
- Have students write up a brief response for each of the questions and ask them to turn in at the end of the period.
- Facilitate a class discussion over the major points from the reading.
- Ask students to share new insights or knowledge gained as a result of the reading and class discussion.

Extension Activities

Have students research ways in which tribal nations today are using the land and incorporating traditional worldviews/practices into their use.

Students could interview current tribal representatives who work with land issues and ask them about traditional perspectives and values regarding the land and how the tribe incorporates these beliefs into current practices.

Materials/Resources needed

Have a printed copy of the following excerpt from *Connecting Cultures and Classrooms* (131-133) available for each student.

Fox, Sandra J. Ed.D. [*Connecting Cultures and Classrooms: Indian Education K-12 Curriculum Guide: Language Arts, Science, Social Studies*](#). Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction and National Indian School Board Association, 2006. (131-134)

Students should understand that American Indians believe that their origins are in the Americas and this belief is exemplified by the many and varied creation/origin stories of different tribes. This belief conflicts with anthropological theory. However, some scientists have found evidence of Indian people living here tens of thousands of years before the time that anthropological reports indicate. Humans were in the Americas at the time that humans and Neanderthal man were living in Europe.

Thousands of years before the Columbian voyages, American Indian societies existed across a wide spectrum of cultural patterns, including small to large groups of hunter gatherers as well as small to large agricultural communities. Cultures were influenced by geographic and environmental resources. Indian communities were not static but changed as they adapted to new

Comparing Use of Land by Different Groups – High School

resources and technologies. Some of these new technologies were corn agriculture, ceramic pottery-making and stone/metal toolmaking. Although certain Indian cultures were small hunter-gatherer bands, their cultures were quite complex in terms of their languages, philosophies of ecological relationships, astronomical knowledge, and knowledge of plants/medicines. There were trade networks that stretched across America for thousands of miles. For example, turquoise from the Southwest was traded for shells and parrot feathers from the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. Great Lakes copper was traded for corn, conch shell and other goods from the Lower Mississippi River and Gulf area. Obsidian from the Rocky Mountains and pipestone from Minnesota were traded as far east as present-day Ohio.

While most European societies were ruled by monarchies, most Indian societies were egalitarian in nature. Although not all native governing systems were egalitarian, leadership within most Indian groups was a shared responsibility. In very few places in the Americas could a single leader speak for an entire tribe and expect their decision to be followed. Rather, the more typical form of Indian government embodied concepts such as decision by consensus, representative government, clan structures represented in government, separation of powers, and limited systems of checks and balances. Some tribes/cultures lived under governing systems that included women in roles as leaders.

By 750 A.D. there was an agricultural society of Indians along the Mississippi River valley and its tributaries. This culture is now known as the Mississippian Mound builder culture, so named for the earthen mounds they built and on which they constructed large ceremonial temples and rulers' residences. The culture reached its zenith in about 1200 A.D. – the large city known as Cahokia had a population of about 50,000. Located along the banks of the Mississippi near present-day St. Louis, Cahokia was dominated by a huge earthen mound standing over 100 feet in height, with a base 1,000 feet long and 700 feet wide. The people of the Mississippian culture had a highly developed ceremonial structure, and they farmed a wide variety of plants – amaranth, squash, maize, goose foot, and sunflowers. They also used copper in making blades and ornaments. The culture eventually died out, probably due to epidemics of diseases brought by Europeans.

Prior to 1492, there were at least 4.4 million — and perhaps even 10 million — Native Americans in North America (excluding Mexico) speaking over 200 languages. In Mexico and Central America there were at least 27 million — and perhaps even 50 million — people speaking at least 350 languages. In the Caribbean area and South America there were at least 20 million – and perhaps as many as 45 million – people speaking over 1,000 languages. For the Western Hemisphere as a whole, there were probably over 57 million people — and possibly as many as 90 million — in contrast with 60 to 70 million people in Europe at that time. European societies lacked waste disposal, had higher densities of people and were affected by widespread plagues for centuries. This is a great contrast to the standard of living in most Indian societies in North America at that time (excluding Mexico) where, for the most part, people lived in small towns (of about 2,000 people) and smaller farming villages. These small towns and villages were much healthier places in which to live than their European counterparts due to the fact that fewer people living in a larger space have much less of an impact on the environment. Famines were rampant in Europe as opposed to the Americas where native peoples enjoyed an abundance of natural resources as well as cultivated foodstuffs that were the result of healthy ecological



Comparing Use of Land by Different Groups – High School

practices. Additionally, in Europe most natural resources (e.g., wood) and most land was held by an aristocracy; therefore, the majority of people were peasants and serfs.

Several large urban centers in the Americas rivaled 15th century European cities in population size; for example, Cahokia (where St. Louis is today) was about the size of Rome (population: 55,000); Tenochtitlan in Mexico was about the size of London (population: 75,000). Before that time there were other large cities in Mexico – such as Teotihuacan, which at its peak in 400-600 A.D. had around 200,000 inhabitants. These cities were important centers of large complex societies. Such societies flourished across the Americas during different periods. Indian societies were built upon large extended family networks that were organized into other social units, e.g., clans, matriarchal/patriarchal systems, and moiety systems.

European and American Indian economic systems were based on fundamentally conflicting views of how land and natural resources should be exploited. Following biblical injunction, European economic systems were based on “dominion over nature.” American Indian economic systems, on the other hand, were based upon building an awareness of ecological relationships and managing natural resources without depleting them. The European world view feared the natural world (including man’s nature) and viewed it as something to be subdued. Thus, forests with their wild animals were cleared for farmlands and quickly over-harvested to near depletion. For example, by 1086, England was only 20 percent forested – of that, only 2 percent was virgin forest. There were enormous alterations in the European landscape by the 15th century. European attitudes toward animals were markedly different from those of American Indians. For example, Europeans pursued activities such as sport hunting, bear baiting, cockfights and bullfights – some of which are considered barbaric today. In contrast, hunting practices among Indian societies involved respect for the life of the animal being hunted. American Indian societies viewed natural resources – including wildlife – as sacred.

