



Smithsonian
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TEACHERS CORNER: DOES OUR BACKGROUND SHAPE OUR THINKING ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES?

by Torben C. Rick

For several years, I taught an undergraduate course called “Paradise Lost? The Archaeology and Ethics of Human Environmental Impacts,” which offered anthropology, biology, business, and economics majors an interdisciplinary look at contemporary environmental issues using the archaeological record. The activity and essay question offered here were developed for undergraduate students but could easily be adapted for high school students.

The course examined environmental crises facing our planet such as global warming, loss of biodiversity, and issues of water and air quality. We investigated these issues critically and came to the consensus that humans had caused dramatic and devastating alteration of the planet, especially during the last two centuries.

We then stepped back in time to investigate whether or not ancient peoples had also altered the environments they inhabited, what positive and negative impacts may have resulted, and ultimately what could be learned from these case studies. We reviewed famous examples. For example, students reviewed the collapse of the ancient Maya, the dramatic alterations seen in the Pacific Islands (e.g., Easter Island), and the extinction of New World megafauna at the end of the Pleistocene. We also included many less well-known examples, including success stories and cases of environmental management and enhancement. Finally, we came full circle and considered what could be learned from these case studies. During many class sessions, students led the discussions and shared their views, which were often quite provocative.

Class Activity

Before beginning the global archaeological survey, I spent a full course period talking about what I termed “human perceptions of the environment.” One of the texts I used was Charles Redman’s (1999) *Human Impact on Ancient Environments*. The second chapter of this book, “Attitudes Toward the Environment,” is an interesting look at human worldview, ideology, and environmental ethics. In reflecting on the theme of this chapter, I had my students think about their own perceptions of the environment by interviewing one another using a set of questions given below and then discussing them in class. Finally, I asked all the students to write an essay that incorporated how they viewed the environment and ultimately how their views compared to Redman’s discussion.

INTERVIEWING CLASSMATES

During class, “pair” the students so that each student has one classmate to interview using the following questions:

- 1) Where are you from? Did you live there all of your life? Where else have you lived?

- 2) What were people's attitudes towards the environment like in your hometown? For example, were people concerned about having natural spaces (e.g., parks), water and air quality, wildlife, etc.?
- 3) Was your hometown environmentally conscious? If so, were there recycling or other environmental outreach programs?
- 4) Were your personal views of the environment the same as most people in your hometown?
- 5) How do people's environmental attitudes in your hometown compare to any other area where you have lived or visited?

Together students can provide their answers to the questions, then briefly compare and contrast their own experiences. One of each pair can present their differing views to the rest of the class. These discussions in my classes were usually lively, and we kept score of their hometowns in terms of which seemed more environmentally friendly and which seemed less so. This gave us opportunities for debate and led to discussions about the differences between urban areas and more rural areas. Finally, we talked about how our own life experiences, family, friends, etc. can influence how we view the natural world and what we see as priorities for the sustainability of our planet.

After the "interview" exercise is complete, I assigned a written essay.

Essay Topic

Write an essay evaluating human attitudes, ethics, and opinions of the natural environment in your hometown. How do people view the natural environment both locally and nationally? Is the environment a source of concern for local residents? Are there recycling programs or other environmental outreach programs? Are your personal views the same as the majority of people in your hometown? How do the views of your hometown compare to those of others' home towns represented in the class?

After you have evaluated your own hometown, reflect on the discussions in the readings by Kline (2007, especially Chs. 1, 2, 11, and conclusion), Hughes (2002, Ch. 2), and Redman (1999, Ch. 2), and discussions on global attitudes towards the environment both past and present. How do your views compare to their descriptions of ancient environmental ethics?

This assignment has great utility for challenging students to think about their own biases when confronting human environmental relationships and the sustainability of our planet.

References

(For college students all three are useful; for high school students, Charles Redman's second chapter may suffice)

Hughes, J. Donald. 2002. *An Environmental History of the World*. Routledge, London.

Kline, Benjamin 2007. *First Along the River: A Brief History of the U.S. Environmental Movement*. 3rd ed. Rowman and Littlefield.

Redman, Charles L. 1999. *Human Impact on Ancient Environments*. University of Arizona.

[This activity by Smithsonian anthropologist Torben Rick was published in the fall 2009 issue of *AnthroNotes*, vol. 30, no. 2.]