

Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center's
Wilderness Investigations
High School

Wilderness 101/Lesson 7
Wilderness: Part of the American Commons

Goal: Students will gain historical background about the concept of *The Commons* and see where wilderness fits into it.

Investigation Objectives

Audience: 9th – 12th grades

- Students will understand *The Commons* concept as it relates to rights, privileges, and responsibilities of citizens. (Behavior)
- Students will receive printed information and art supplies for their project. (Condition)
- Students will create an *Our Rights, Privileges and Responsibilities as Wilderness Shareholders* mural. (Degree)

Common Core Standard Connections

NOTE: See Common Core Standards sections to see listed objectives for this and other lessons/activities.

Time Requirement: Two 50 minute periods

Location: Classroom

Materials/Resources Needed and Pre-Investigation Tasks

- One copy of *Guidelines for the School Commons* for each student group (as organized by the teacher).
- A roll of paper (24" - 36" wide) and appropriate art supplies for students to create their wilderness murals.

Teacher Background

In the United States of America we have historically agreed that:

- Some places are public or *common* areas (streets, parks, National Forests for example);
- Some things (air and water for instance) are *commonly* used;
- Some actions should be taken for the *common good* (establishment of public libraries and schools are two familiar actions);

- Some decisions are made for the benefit of present *and* future generations (natural resource management on public lands, open space preservation through land trusts, and designated wilderness come to mind).
- There are many more parts of *the commons* or those things that are for the good of all.

When discussions turn to something that is for the common good the emphasis always shifts from *me* to *we*. Decisions are made for the common good. Those places that are of *the commons* belong to all of us. They are places or things *we share*.

- Rarely does anyone argue with the placement of stop signs or reduced speed limits at busy street or highway intersections. We tend to see this as a wise logistical decision that allows a variety of safe and organized uses of a community *commons* area--an area that belongs to all of us.
- It has recently been written, "Anyone can use the commons, so long as there is enough left for everyone else." (Jay Walljasper; [All That We Share](#); Chapter 1)
- The ability to own private property is a cherished element of our society. Setting aside public lands and places (of which we all are shareholders) allows every citizen to enjoy the rights of shareholding, of the privileges that go with that right, and to grow through the responsibilities that come with being a shareholder.

This classroom Wilderness Investigation explores the many ways designated wilderness allow each U.S. citizen to be an equal shareholder of these precious places. The emphasis is on the rights, the privileges, and the responsibilities of being a wilderness shareholder. Students will creatively explore other aspects of *the commons* in our country and look closely at how the common good is served by establishment and protection of wilderness *for the American people of present and future generations* (italicized words from the Wilderness Act).

Finally, students will be introduced to and have an opportunity to investigate what Aldo Leopold called the *Land Ethic*. He wrote (in *A Sand County Almanac*; essay--The Land Ethic): "All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts... The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land... In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such."

Step-by-Step Presentation Instructions

Prompt students by stating the following: “Make a list of things around the school (including our classroom) that are or could be shared or used by all of us?”

- Help students get started by starting a list where all can see: restrooms, drinking fountains, hallways are a few to begin with.

Ask students to share items from their list and add to the master list that everyone can see.

Suggest that the items listed are part of the school *commons*.

- Help students define *commons* and bring them around to the idea that those things that belong to us all are part of that commons.

Pose the following questions:

- “If I owned the drinking fountains who would be responsible for keeping them working and clean?” (I would be.)
- “If we own them in common who is responsible?” (We all are although we might compensate others to do that for us.)
- “What rights do every user of one of these common elements share?” (Equal access)
- “What privileges does each common shareholder have?” (Pride of ownership, ability to use, etc.)
- “What responsibilities does each common shareholder have?” (Upkeep, careful use, not using more than their share, etc.)

Follow-up with the idea that *common* ownership or shareholding shifts the focus from *me* (or *I*) to *we* (or *us*).

- It’s a little like a business partnership where all of the owners have certain rights, privileges, and responsibilities.

Choose one of the *common* school items (preferably one that many students listed) and organize small groups to come up with a statement which outlines the RIGHTS, PRIVILEGES, and RESPONSIBILITIES each member of the school community (students, teachers, administrators, staff) have towards that item (OR have each group choose their own item so that you end up with a focus on many common school things and/or places).

- Use the *Guidelines for the School Commons* sheet.

Share *Guidelines for the School Commons*.

Go through the following elements of the *Wilderness Act* (and clarification questions) that have to do with Wilderness Investigation #2:

- From Section 2(a): ...it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.
 - Question: Who sets aside wilderness under the Wilderness Act? (Congress)
 - Question: Who is the wilderness for? (present and future generations of the American people)
 - What is added to the American *commons*? (an enduring resource of wilderness)

VOCABULARY/CONCEPT CHECK-IN

Don't let a lack of word or concept understanding hold students back.
Check in to see if they understand the following:

ENDURING: Long-lasting, durable, permanent.

RESOURCE OF WILDERNESS: A *reserve, supply, source* or *store* of Federally protected wilderness (as defined in the Wilderness Act of 1964).

So, let's take another look at what *an enduring resource of wilderness* means in student-friendly terms:

Congress secured for the American people (as a result of the Wilderness Act of 1964) a *long-lasting, durable and permanent reserve or store of lands protected as wilderness.*

- From Section 2(a): *These shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people...*
 - What *right* do we have when it comes to designated wilderness? (To use and enjoy)
- From Section 2(a): (continued from previous point) *...in such a way as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character.*
 - If I want to go in and build a house in designated wilderness, can I? (No, we do have certain *privileges* but building a house there would not be one of them.)
 - Why not? Check out Section 2(c) of The Wilderness Act.
 - Can you give an example of a human privilege that would allow the area to remain protected and preserved as wilderness? (Solitude, the opportunity to observe the natural world in a pristine environment, etc.)
 - Compare student ideas about wilderness privileges to what the Wilderness Act says in Sections 2(c) and 4(b).

- What *responsibilities* do we as wilderness stakeholders share? (To do things that support wilderness protection and preservation and avoid things that would destroy those attributes.)

Brainstorm appropriate actions (rights, privileges, responsibilities) in our wilderness commons.

- Examples: Hiking, leave-no-trace camping, picking up and carrying out garbage, observing wild animals, sleeping out where the night sky can be seen because light pollution doesn't get in the way, knowledge and satisfaction in knowing that there are wild places that are protected by law, etc.

Read the following quote and ask students what they think Aldo Leopold meant:

I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?

Teacher note: Aldo Leopold (scientist, writer, naturalist) often celebrated the notion that he was pleased that he had been born when there were still a reasonable amount of wild landscapes for him to explore as he grew and developed. He was willing to give up certain things (*freedoms*) in order to keep those areas wild.

Share a second quote from Leopold and ask students what connection the things he's writing about have to do with the *wilderness commons*.

- Let students know that this quote is what is known as Mr. Leopold's *Land Ethic*.

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts... The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land... In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.

Teacher note: Many Leopold scholars believe this to be one of his most important contributions to the modern-day conservation and preservation movement. In this *Land Ethic* Leopold expands the members of the *commons* community to include *the land* (meaning all that naturally and collectively make-up a particular landscape). He clearly sees humans (as stated by David Orr many years later in his book *Earth in Mind*) as *part of not apart from the natural world*. Certain rights are implied for all of these community members and not just humans. Leopold would certainly extend his land ethic to what are now designated wilderness and, in reality, this ethic is a fine definition of the *wilderness commons*.

Tell students that they are now going to create an *Our Rights, Privileges and Responsibilities as Wilderness Shareholders* mural.

- Each student will choose something (and write a statement that goes with it) that falls into one of the three categories. Examples:
 - RIGHT: As a U.S. citizen I am co-owner of designated wilderness.
 - PRIVILEGE: I enjoy the solitude of wilderness settings.
 - RESPONSIBILITY: I will stay on designated trails in fragile places.

NOTE: It may require a lively class discussion to help students to be clear about examples of wilderness rights, privileges and/or responsibilities.

- They will create a rough sketch of what they will draw, paint, or sketch that illustrates their choice.
- In their designated mural space, each student will write their statement at the top or bottom and then illustrate their segment.

Provide materials for rough drafts and for mural work.

Post the mural in the classroom or a school hallway.

- Refer to the mural often to re-emphasize wilderness rights, privileges and responsibilities.

Extension Ideas

Arrange for students to *go on tour* with their wilderness mural. Have them teach about the wilderness commons as they display their work.

- Meetings, banquets, conferences and so forth of organizations/agencies that deal with wilderness would be a good place for students to share their knowledge and creative work.
- They would be welcome in many classrooms consisting of younger students. Team-up with an elementary school and turn your students into teachers.

Resources for a More In-depth Topic Exploration

- All That We Share; Jay Walljasper; 2010 (Book about the commons concept).
- A Sand County Almanac; Aldo Leopold; 1949 (Classic book of essays on the land ethic and other topics including wilderness by one of the nation's strongest early voices for wilderness).

