

Public Lands: Hidden Histories

A lesson by the National Geographic Society

Find it online at:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/lessons/17/g68/hiddenhistory.html>

Overview:

In the United States there are more than 600 million acres of public land that belong to all Americans. This includes parks, monuments, refuges, wilderness areas, underground mineral reserves, marine sanctuaries, historic and scenic trails, forests, and seashores. Each of these public lands has its own story to tell: about wildlife, cultures, governments, and people who have lived on, enjoyed, protected, or influenced them. Some of these stories are well known and others are “hidden histories.” Throughout this lesson, students will explore and share with others the “hidden histories” of some of America’s public lands.

Connections to the Curriculum:

geography, social studies, language arts, visual arts

Connections to the National Geography Standards:

Standard 10: “The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of Earth’s cultural mosaics”

Standard 12: “The processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement”

Standard 17: “How to apply geography to interpret the past”

Standard 18: “How to Apply Geography to Interpret the Present and Plan for the Future”

Time:

two to three class periods

Materials Required:

- Internet access
- print resources about the history of public lands
- art materials

Objectives:

Students will:

- Identify the economic, scientific, recreational, and spiritual values of public lands
- Interpret Native American quotes that demonstrate the unique relationship between Native Americans and the land
- Identify important historic facts about select public lands
- Develop a creative way to share information with others about a select public land

Geographic Skills:

Asking Geographic Questions
Acquiring Geographic Information
Organizing Geographic Information
Analyzing Geographic Information

Suggested Procedure

Opening:

Introduce to students the concept of public lands from the overview above. Have them guess the amount of land they “own.” Do students have a sense of the benefits of public lands? Can they also think of benefits that are economic, scientific, recreational, and spiritual? Do they recall a public land near them or one they have visited? There’s at least one public land in every state, with the majority located in the contiguous western states and in Alaska. Share with students that in this lesson they will learn some “hidden histories” of these public lands.

Development:

Part One: Lessons learned from Native Americans

If there are any Native Americans in the class or if any students are familiar with Native American cultures, ask them to share what they know about the traditional relationship between Native Americans and the land.

Many public lands were once the home of Native American tribes, which had a unique relationship with the land. Land ownership was an unfamiliar concept to them. They were taught to respect the Earth as they would respect a loved one. If they respected the land, they could obtain food, clothing, and shelter—and grow spiritually. For example, when they used an animal for food, they offered something back to the land such as a song or a prayer so that the balance was not upset. They rarely wasted natural items and took only what they needed, so there could be gifts of life for the future.

Ask students how this view of the land compares with their own. Do they view the land in such a spiritual way? Individually or in groups, have students interpret a quote about the land from a Native American (you can find quotes at the Texins Outdoor Club Web site, in Related Links below). Have students share their interpretations with the class. Are they similar or different? How? Discuss the lessons we can learn from Native Americans and how our lives might be different if all American citizens viewed the Earth this way.

Part Two: Hidden Histories

The histories of public lands are much like the history of America: filled with battles, victories, hopes, injustices, and stories of bravery. Every public land has a story to tell. Some are told by Native American legends, others by historical documents, still other by artifacts or artwork.

Ask students if they know the answers to the following questions about three public lands:

- Which national park had hundreds of African American soldiers protecting it at the beginning of the 19th century? (*Answer: Yosemite National Park.*)
- Which national monument was a gift from France to the United States? (*Answer: The Statue of Liberty.*)
- Which national wildlife refuge was established to stop the decimation of birds due to women wearing plumes in their hats? (*Answer: Pelican Island, in Florida.*)

In this part of the lesson, students will have a chance to learn about other “hidden histories” of public lands.

- Divide students into groups of three or four.
- Have each group select a public land to research, choosing from the list at the end of this section or one of the Web sites found in the Related Links section.

- Challenge each group to try to find the following information about its public land:
 - Its geographic location
 - Its first human inhabitants and/or first wildlife
 - Its history, including when, why, and how it became a public land
 - Its economic, scientific, recreational, or spiritual benefits
 - Three things that make it special or unique

Once students have gathered this information, have them produce a creative way to tell the story of their public lands to others. They might want to develop a storybook or coloring book for younger students; act out a skit, song, rap, or poem; or prepare a memory book of photographs and artwork. They can share their stories with other classes, younger students, or as part of a “parent night.”

Suggested Public Lands from Which to Choose:

Arctic National Wildlife Reserve
 Ellis Island National Monument
 Grand Canyon National Park
 The Sierra Nevada Wilderness
 Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge
 President’s Park (The White House)
 Statue of Liberty National Monument
 Yellowstone National Park
 Yosemite National Park

Closing:

Ask the students what they learned about public lands through their research and the presentations of their classmates. How did finding out this information alter their opinions about preserving public lands?

Suggested Student Assessment:

After producing and watching the presentations, students should be able to generate a list of characteristics that all public lands share.

Extending the Lesson:

- Have students create a travel brochure to describe and persuade others to visit their public lands.
- Choose one public land to research as a class and create a timeline covering the history of its designation as a public land.
- As a class, investigate the Shadow Soldiers, the African-American soldiers who protected Yosemite National Park at the turn of the 20th century.

Related Links:

[National Park Service](#)
[Shadow Soldiers](#)
[Texins Outdoor Club](#)
[U.S. Bureau of Land Management](#)
[U.S. Department of the Interior](#)
[U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#)