A Modern, American Perspective on Wilderness


Primary Sources:
- American Views toward the Environment, a public opinion chart from the American Environmental Values Survey
- Political Views and Environmental Issues, a public opinion chart from the American Environmental Values Survey

Class Discussion/Analytical Questions

1) Why does Worster believe the Wilderness Act would be all but unpassable in today’s political climate? What implications does this have on the environment and increasingly disappearing wilderness?
2) Is wilderness disappearing? Should we take Worster’s argument at face value?
3) Compare and contrast neoconservative criticisms of preservationist policies over the past 50 years with leftist criticisms of those same policies. Think about the pros and cons of both of these criticisms in constructing your answer.
4) Can preservationists accommodate aspects of these criticisms? How might they go about doing this?
5) Should humans, as Worster states, “[protect] the autonomy of life beyond people?” Are we compelled to accommodate other forms of nature? To what extent?

Activities

1. American Perspectives on the Environment in the Modern Era

Break the class into small groups or partners and have them read and discuss the public opinion chart “American Views toward the Environment.”

Questions to Prompt Active Engagement
1) Which questions seem to elicit the highest degree of agreement, implying the most care towards the environment? Why?
2) According to this chart, what is the general American attitude toward the environment? Remember to look at the chart as a whole.
3) Look at how the questions are worded. Do any of them seem to be inherently biased?
4) What are the drawbacks of using polls as a source of information? What are the benefits of using polls as a source of information or as a source for historical analysis?

After the groups have finished discussing “American Views toward the Environment,” have them read and discuss “Political Views and Environmental Issues.”

Questions to Prompt Active Engagement

1) Overall, how would you characterize Republican views on environmental issues? How would you characterize Democratic views on environmental issues?
2) Compare and contrast Republican and Democratic views on environmental issues. Which issues seem to show the greatest division? Which issues seem to show the least division? Why do you think this dichotomy exists?
3) Do Independents seem to agree more with Republicans or Democrats? What does this say about America as a whole?
4) Solely paying attention to the “All” column, how would you characterize the overall American view on environmental issues? Which questions elicit the highest degree of agreement? Why do you think this is?

Have the class discuss the apparent bipartisan support for the environment, based upon the “Total Agree” column in “American Views toward the Environment.” Compare and contrast these findings with the “All” column in “Political Views and Environmental Issues.”

Questions to Prompt Active Engagement

1) If Americans overwhelmingly support the environment, and Americans agree that something must be done to fix the environment, why does the modern environmental movement face so many challenges to achieving its goals (if it does)?
2) What are the short-term implications for the environmental movement in an increasingly polarized society? How about the long-term implications?

After the class discussion, have the groups create a written response to Worster’s statement that “Many citizens might grant that the preservation of nature is a worthy ethic, but one that lacks clarity and asks too much.” Each response should analyze Worster’s dismissal of a pragmatic response, be based upon the two polls, and discuss whether Worster’s dismissal is justified. This can also be made into individual projects or assignments.
2. Road Trip with Annotated Maps

Break the class into small groups. Explain that each group has four tasks to complete:

Tasks

1) Plan a road trip that takes you through at least three designated wilderness areas in at least two states.
2) Research each wilderness area. When were they designated wilderness areas? What were some of the reasons for their designation? What makes this wilderness area special?
3) Create an annotated map of your road trip using Google Maps.
4) Be prepared to take the class on your virtual road trip while explaining the historical intricacies of the various wilderness areas.

As a follow-up assignment, have students research online newspaper archives for editorials, letters to the editor, or other primary sources regarding their designated wilderness area. In a page or two, the students should explain what controversies surrounded the designation of their wilderness area.