

Environmental Protection for Social Equality

The UN declared 2005-2015 the decade of Education for Sustainable Development as a matter of urgency. It has reported that growth of the human population reaching 6 billion and expansion of the economy have strained the planet's ecosystems over the past half century. Stress to the environment includes such things as a fall in the varieties of animal and plant species, increase in floods and fires and increase in carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere effecting climates and the ozone layer.

Environmental degradation and depletion of natural resources risk more poverty and disease in the world. For example, climate change and ozone depletion diminish important agricultural land and fresh water reserves which, in turn, place demographic and economic pressures on societies, particularly effecting impoverished communities. People are forced to leave their land. They migrate to regions that are ecologically fragile, such as steep upland slopes, areas at risk of desertification and tropical rain forests. Environmental damage and poverty are common consequences of such forced migration.¹

Care and protection of the environment is necessary. Humans deplete 60% of the world's land and waterways. Of the earth's population, 18% emit 51% of carbon dioxide into the air.² These figures urge us to question the roots of disparity and marginalization. Disparity and marginalization are forms of cultural violence that gravely affect people's ability to

¹ Environmental Scarcities and Violent Conflict: Evidence from Cases, [Thomas F. Homer-Dixon](#): Peace and Conflict Studies Program, University of Toronto International Security, Vol. 19, No. I (Summer 1994), pp.5-40: <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/pes/evidence/evid1.htm>

² Human Development Report 2004: <http://www.hdr.undp.org>

survive or to live well. They violate the rights of people to meet their basic needs i.e., water, fish and land and have been known to cause strife over these needs.

The roots of these disparities can be linked to unequal and excessive consumption.³

Inequalities in consumption can be shocking: 20% of the world's population in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures, while the poorest 20% account for only 1.3%.⁴ Reducing waste and shifting consciousness to meet basic needs can help alleviate unequal consumption and support human development.

The author of this lesson, *Environmental Protection for Social Equality*, and her colleagues shared concerns and experiences in developed and developing countries. Indigenous peoples living in harmony with the land wholly dependent on it for survival contrast starkly with those who have access to the abundance of supermarkets and shopping centers. Inequality exists in both places. Globally we share the responsibility to promote environmental and social justice in our local communities and within our growing interdependent world.

In order to raise consciousness about consumption habits, encourage healthy alternatives, demonstrate commitment to nonviolence, and promote equality, the lesson, *Environmental Protection for Social Equality*, introduces students to the idea of creating a peace quilt⁵ made out

³ This lesson does not claim that all consumption is bad. It advocates that people consume wisely and in a conscientious manner.

⁴ Human Development Report 2004: <http://www.hdr.undp.org> and *Behind Consumption and Consumerism*, Global Issues: <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Consumption.asp>

⁵ Quilts have been known to use symbolism to support justice. Before the American Civil War in the southern US, slaves often drew images on quilts to share secret messages for escape. As an ordinary part of their daily labor, they would leave these quilts out to dry on a clothes line where another slave could receive the message. Illustrations such as a flock of birds flying pointed to a safe direction or a bear claw implied the trail of the bear would lead to water.

of recycled materials. This lesson motivates students to take action to reduce waste and uses artwork to restore beauty and pay respect to people and the earth.

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Age range: Secondary school students (15-18)

Subjects: Science (measure of gas emissions effect on the environment, people and animals), Social Studies (demography), Math (calculate resourcefulness through percentage of social impact and savings), Language Arts (poetry, storytelling), Fine Arts

Materials: Copies of the summary of the Earth Charter, blackboard or large pieces of paper, pens, pencils, colored markers or crayons, sheets of scrap paper (with a clean back page), newspaper, recycled items, scissors, safety pins, glue, and string.

Duration: A series of classes (about 5 or more 60 minute classes)

Learning objectives:

- Make connections with the environment and social issues i.e., consumption, inequality and poverty
- Recognize how to prevent violence and promote social justice through protection of the environment;
- Practice respect and cooperation for nature and others;
- Express concerns and hopes (and potentially build public awareness) through art.

Procedure: Brainstorming, Information Gathering, Research, Collaborative Group Work

Step One: Write “Environment” and “Society” on the blackboard or on a large piece of paper in front of the class. Brainstorm with students how these terms are connected: *how are these two words related? How can their relationship be negative and how can it be positive?*

Step Two: Working Together

A warm up exercise motivates students to think about the importance of collaboration to reflect both the theme of the lesson and their ability to effectively work together. The exercise asks the class to help an individual who is blindfolded to perform a particular task. In this example, the task is to wrap an object.

Each student is randomly assigned a different role to participate in the task: Wrapper, Instructor or Observer. Teachers handout folded slips of paper to each student designating their role in the exercise. There can only be 1 Wrapper and no more than 5 Instructors. The rest of the students are Observers and take notes of their observations.

Ask the Wrapper to leave the room while discussing the rules of and appropriate language for the exercise with the class. Next, place the tape, wrapping paper (can be newspaper, notebook paper, a scarf, etc.) and an object i.e., a box on a table in the center of the group. Blindfold the Wrapper, bring her/ him back to the class to sit at the table with the materials. Tell her/ him generally that the class will be telling her/ him to complete a task and s/he is to do EXACTLY as s/he is told.

Without using the names of any specific item or material i.e., tape or paper, Instructors tell the Wrapper how to wrap the object. Instructors can ONLY describe the item and/ or where it is placed. For example, an Instructor might say, “Move your hand to your right, pick up a corner, and pull it to your left” in folding parts of the paper over the object. The Wrapper does not know the assignment and will ONLY do what s/he is told. Observers note what happens.

Usually this exercise is somewhat chaotic making a plea for good communication in teamwork. After about 10 minutes, call the exercise to a close. (Observation of the group dynamic is the most important aspect of the task, more important than wrapping the object completely).

Step Three: Engage students in discussion about the exercise: Ask the following questions:

- *What did the Observers notice?*
- *How did the Wrapper feel? What was the experience like?*
- *How did the Instructors feel? What was challenging for them?*

- Discuss working together as a group: *what is important about the way we communicate with and act toward each other in order to work as a team?*

Recommendation: keep these notes visible in the classroom, reviewing them every now and then with the class.

Step Four: Ask students to gather in small groups of 4-5 and handout the full document or summaries of the Earth Charter (see below) to each student. Ask students to read the summary and then discuss the following question: *How does the Earth Charter link the environment and society? How does it emphasize teamwork in living together and with the earth?*

Step Five: Illustrate the Point

Ask students to research the issues of Consumption, Waste and Recycling in their country. (Teachers and students are encouraged to choose any issues that concern them. This lesson is one example based on the US). Ask students to observe how well their country performs, both positively and negatively, with respect to these issues. *What impact does your country have on the environment and what methods does it employ for the protection of it? What personal action can you take in the light of your learning?* Suggested websites for research include:

- **UN Environment Programme:** <http://www.unep.org/themes/consumption/>
 - Conducted research and assessment with youth on sustainable development and consumption, including highlights youth campaigns to help the environment.
- **UN Development Program:** <http://www.undp.org/>
 - Emphasizes poverty elimination and environmental regeneration.
- **World Resources Institute:** <http://www.wri.org/>

- Contains country profiles with extensive information on environmental issues.

In gaining more knowledge on particular environmental issues and its effects on society (See “Sample Text-US Context” below), ask students to form small groups of 4-5 to respond to the following questions (relative to the topic of this lesson):

- *How does consumption reflect our values?*
- *What influences consumption?*
- *How does consumption impact the environment and society?*
- *Can consumption be positive? Can it be negative? What are some examples?*
- *What is the relationship between developed and developing nations and consumption?*
- *How does consumption influence your community and/ or country?*
- *What connections can you see between consumption, your environment and public health?*
- *What are some methods employed to support the environment and improve social issues?*
- *How does recycling support these issues? In particular, how does it respond to the issue of consumption?*
- *In referencing The Earth Charter, what principles are addressed by recycling?*

Small groups then share their ideas with the whole class.

Step Seven: Ask students to collect at least five items from outside and/ or from home that can contribute to making a quilt i.e., articles of clothing, beads, pictures, leaves, etc.

Materials should be light-weight and something that they no longer use, want, or will likely discard.

In preparation for creating the quilt, ask students about the message they would like to convey in their piece: *What have you learned about the connection between environmental protection and social issues? What would you like others to know? What hopes do you have for the future in relation to the protection of the environment and the promotion of peace?* Have students draft on paper a practice patch for the peace quilt.

Suggestions: 1) mix students into groups either by birthday or numbers to ensure that different students work together. 2) The quilt can have two sides, or two stories: one side is “before” students took action and raised awareness and the other side is the “after” showing changes that occurred and/ or the vision they have for the future. 3) Instead of sewing the pieces of the quilt together, attach them with safety pins, string or an adhesive so that it can be deconstructed or rearranged to create different messages.

Variation: Quilt making is only one suggested art form for students to invent. Many creative objects have been made by recycling materials for example, baskets woven with discarded lengths of plastic-coated telephone wire, bags made out of bottle caps, and toys created from tin cans.

Step Eight: Improving the environment and human life is not simply a question of our personal behavior as consumers. While we need to change our personal attitudes, there are other levels of the problem that need to be addressed i.e., the philosophical, economic and political levels. It is important to investigate these levels and how they can contribute to

resource waste and destruction of the environment which can increase potential for long lasting damages for the whole world population.

Following are some categories to deepen the discussion and research begun with students in the previous seven steps. Some examples include:

- On a philosophical level: To have more does not always signify to live a better life. Economic growth does not automatically improve quality of life. While basic needs have to be met, excessive wealth can decrease life conditions through the presence of such things as stress, obesity, and depression.

Are we living in a way that is right for all? What if all people lived this way, what would the world (the environment, the economy, society, political parties) look like? What life choices need to be made/ changed to improve social equality? (See “Sample Text on Gandhian Economy” below to support discussion).

- On an economic level: The problem is consumption, but not only consumption. It is important to question economic organization and production processes and how they can cause and/ or negatively impact the environment and society. *While excellent recycling programs exist in many cities and countries and many people abide by them, do these efforts do enough to significantly change inequality?*
- On a political level: The battle for oil, water and other resources are scenarios of past, present and potentially future violent conflicts. *What power dynamics perpetuate*

environmental degradation and socio-economic inequality? How can we be involved in political decision-making? How can we keep our governments accountable for protecting the environment and bridging economic gaps?

Sample Text on Gandhian Economy

*Redressing The Balance Between Rich And Poor*⁶

The world has enough to satisfy everyone's needs but not enough for everyone's greed. – Mohandas Gandhi

Mohandas Gandhi advocated nonviolence. One of his greatest insights was to understand that violence was linked to poverty and injustice, often referred to as structural or cultural violence. He emphasized equality and justice as essential conditions for the establishment of peace.

Two important social principles for Gandhi were central to his thinking: Sarvodaya (the welfare of all) and Antodaya (the welfare of the least). Gandhi reached out to the deprived and marginalized advocating to society to bridge the gap between rich and poor. He believed that energy should be devoted to help the millions of people left behind catch up.

How can we begin to meet the challenge of poverty and injustice both in our own countries and the world at large? We need to recognize the relevance of the enormous gap between

⁶ Text adapted from Gandhian Institute Bombay Sarvodaya Mandal: <http://www.mk gandhi.org/index.htm>

rich and poor to a culture of violence, both at home and in the world at large. The second stage is to be prepared to take some action ourselves to develop a culture of peace, such as living more simply, so as to make available more resources for helping the poor. In addition, we can help bridge the gap through active involvement in political decision-making i.e., keeping governments accountable to international law and encouraging reduction and cancellation of the debts of developing countries.

Going Further: Ask students to:

- Investigate more about the environment and its connection to society within their country and other countries.
- Research and report on the history of national parks, community gardens, environmental groups, etc. and how they have helped improve societies.
- Set up interviews with individuals who work for or are concerned about the environment and public health i.e., park rangers, local farmers, gardeners, artists, etc. As a class, prepare discussion questions as interviewees and later write a reflection paper on what was learned from the interview.
- Read about or visit exhibits and/ or interview quilt makers or artists who specialize in folkloric artwork or use traditional artistic techniques.
- Plant a tree, create a garden at school, and/ or care for a plant in the classroom.

Evaluation: In December 2003, Kathleen initiated a program with group of 6th-8th grade students at IS 90 in Harlem in partnership with Recycle-a-Bicycle (RAB), a NYC organization that teaches inner-city youth bike repair skills, and Gaelyn and Cianfarani, clothing designers who use recycled bicycle inner tubes to decorate or create clothing.

During school break in February 2004, she facilitated peace education workshops emphasizing the link between peace and recycling. These workshops set a platform for a 7-week summer project organized by RAB which concluded with the creation of a quilt made of recycled materials to display youth's message for peace. The quilt was sewn by Gaelyn and Cianfarani and displayed at a NYC art gallery.

In brainstorming the link between peace and recycling, students responded with “recycling fostered less violence, noise pollution and waste, it created more space, people pay attention more and are more creative.” They focused locally on NYC neighborhoods, but branched out into discussions about where they and/ or their families came from (the group represented Somalia, Barbados, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Ireland, and the US) and how the peace and recycling related to these regions of the world. All students participated, listened and learned more about one another and made connections to one another's thoughts. They mentioned caring for the environment of NYC as well as in their travels to other places.

Connection: See *Television and Violence* in Strand One on Culture of Peace/ Roots of War.

More Useful Resources:

- **Millienium Ecosystem Assessment:**

<http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.aspx>

- **World Wildlife Fund Global Network:** <http://www.wwf.org/>

(global conservation organization dedicated to reversing environmental degradation and building a future where people live in harmony with nature).

- **Greenpeace International:** http://www.greenpeace.org/international_en/
(focuses on worldwide threats to our planet's biodiversity and environment with opportunities to join campaigns)
- **World Health Organization:** <http://www.who.int/en/>
(physical, mental and social well-being of all people)
- *State of the World 2005: Refining Global Security*, Renner, M., French, H. & Assadourian, E. The Worldwatch Institute, 2005: W.W.Norton & Company, New York.

Sample Text-US Context

General Recycling Facts⁷

- In this decade, it is projected that Americans will throw away over 1 million tons of aluminum cans and foil, more than 11 million tons of glass bottles and jars, over 4 and a half million tons of office paper and nearly 10 million tons of newspaper. Almost all of this material could be recycled.
- Incinerating 10,000 tons of waste creates 1 job, landfilling the same amount creates 6 jobs, recycling the same 10,000 tons creates 36 jobs.
- In a lifetime, the average American will throw away 600 times their adult weight in garbage. This means that each adult will leave a legacy of 90,000 lbs. of trash for their children.
- Recycling all of your home's waste newsprint, cardboard, glass, and metal can reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 850 pounds a year.
- Each of us generates on average 4.4 pounds of waste per day per person.
- Enough energy is saved by recycling one aluminum can to run a TV set for three hours or to light one 100 watt bulb for 20 hours.
- Annually, enough energy is saved by recycling steel to supply Los Angeles with electricity for almost 10 years.
- You can make 20 cans out of recycled material with the same amount of energy it takes to make one new one.

Paper Recycling Facts

- Every Sunday, the United States wastes nearly 90% of the recyclable newspapers. This wastes about 500,000 trees!
- Every day Americans buy 62 million newspapers and throw out 44 million. That's the equivalent of dumping 500,000 trees into a landfill every week.
- American's throw away enough office and writing paper annually to build a wall 12 feet high stretching from Los Angeles to New York City.
- If everyone in the U.S. recycled just 1/10 of their newsprint, we would save the estimated equivalent of about 25 million trees a year.
- One tree can filter up to 60 pounds of pollutants from the air each year.

⁷ Copyright © 2004 Full Circle Recycling: <http://www.fullcircle recycling.com/faq.html>

- One ton of recycled paper saves 3,700 pounds of lumber and 24,000 gallons of water.
- One ton of recycled paper uses: 64% less energy, 50% less water, 74% less air pollution, saves 17 trees and creates 5 times more jobs than one ton of paper products from virgin wood pulp.

Tips for waste prevention-Reduce use and consumption, reuse and repair

- Avoid disposable items whenever possible. Instead carry a reusable cup or mug for beverages.
- Use the blank sides of scrap paper for notes before recycling the paper.
- Print documents on both sides of the paper and set your photocopier to “double-sided.”
- Use e-mail for assignments and reduce the number of messages you print out.
- Walk or ride a bike whenever possible to reduce gas emissions.
- Buy copier paper with at least 30% post-consumer recycled content
- Save plastic produce bags and paper or plastic grocery bags for reuse
- Carry a cloth or string bag to use when you shop.
- Pack lunches in reusable containers to reduce waste and save money.
- Borrow books from the library, buy them used rather than purchasing them new or share them.
- Repair broken or damaged items rather than replacing them i.e., fix a bike
- Donate items you can no longer use to a nonprofit group or thrift store.
- Compost leaves, grass and produce in a compost pile to improve soil for plants or a garden at school.

Summary of The Earth Charter⁸

UNESCO, Paris, March 2000

Together with the Earth Charter consultation process, the most important influences shaping the ideas and values in the Earth Charter are contemporary science, international law, the teachings of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of the world’s great religions and philosophical traditions. The declarations and reports of the seven UN summit conferences held during the 1990s, the global ethics movement, numerous nongovernmental declarations and people’s treaties issued over the past thirty years, and best practices for building sustainable communities.

As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Principles:

I. RESPECT AND CARE FOR THE COMMUNITY OF LIFE

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.
2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

⁸ For the full text of The Earth Charter, see: <http://www.earthcharter.org/>

3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.
4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

II. ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY

5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.
6. Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.
7. Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.
8. Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

9. Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.
10. Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.
11. Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.
12. Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual wellbeing, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

IV. DEMOCRACY, NONVIOLENCE, AND PEACE

13. Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.
14. Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.
15. Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.
16. Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.