

TEACHER'S 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 undergraduates 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 class 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 chapter's theme, students were asked to think about their own perceptions of the environment by interviewing one another using the 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? Have you lived there all of your life? Where else have you lived?
- 2) What are people's attitudes towards the environment in your hometown? For example, are people concerned about having natural spaces (e.g., parks), water and air quality, wildlife, etc.?
- 3) Is your hometown environmentally conscious? If so, are there recycling or other environmental outreach programs?
- 4) Are 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 orally share their answers to these questions, then briefly compare and contrast their experiences. One of each pair can present their differing views to the rest of the class. The discussions in my classes were usually lively, and we kept score of our 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 be-

tween urban areas and more rural areas. Finally, we talked about how our own life experiences, family, and friends can influence how we view the natural world and what we see as priorities for our planet's sustainability.

After the "interview" exercise was completed, 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 readings by Kline (2007, especially Chs. 1, 2, 11, and conclusion), Hughes (2002, Ch. 2), and Redman (1999, Ch. 2). Focus discussions on the global attitudes towards the environment, both past and present. How do your views

compare to the authors' 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.

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 Press.

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