

## 25 Questions to Integrate Environmental Literacy into your History-Social Science Classroom

### **Questions to encourage student thinking about the role of the environment in history**

*There are many ways to engage students with these questions, but you may want to consider having students identify one question to explore in more depth through a research project; having students identify which questions relate to current lesson material for a class discussion; asking students to examine their own community through one or more of these questions; or applying one or more of these questions to an event in the news.*

### **Economics, Government, and Politics**

1. What is the impact of geography, climate, and natural resources on a society's development over time, including its economy and government? What kinds of environmental goods and hazards have shaped human communities?
2. To what extent was a society's population size tied to environmental factors? Did geography or environment affect social organization or forms of governance?
3. What were the geopolitical forces behind trade and economic growth? How did trade contribute to both slow, long-term, cumulative environmental change and rapid, more dramatic change? Consider the various crops and livestock that moved between different regions through trade. Were there any environmental effects from introducing non-native species to new areas?
4. How were legal practices related to environmental goods? Were a society's legal and political policies oriented around communal or individual ownership of land? Did property rights or water rights contribute to social and political dynamics? How did the use of fences shape economic and ecological relationships? What kind of pressures did crops and domesticated animals put on the land?
5. How did humans interact with the environment through their labor? Did these relationships with the environment vary in cases of slavery, indentured servitude, capitalist production, etc.?

### **Indigenous Populations, Cultural Contact, Colonialism, Imperialism, and Migration**

1. How did indigenous populations use and change the land? Consider the size of native populations, deforestation, food production through hunting and intensive agriculture, and the establishment of travel routes for trade or warfare.
2. Consider how geography and natural resources affected relationships among different social groups. Did the environment play a role in colonialism, imperialism, or nationalism? How did the environment figure in colonial policies and practices that led to indigenous dispossession? Did native populations use the environment to resist colonization? How were post-contact experiences shaped by geography and access to environmental goods?
3. What environmental impact did human migration have on the environment? What environmental factors contributed to migrants' reasons for moving?
4. How was the environment implicated in the spread of disease and epidemics?

### **Social Conflict and War**

1. How did environmental factors contribute to wars and other key moments of social conflict? What were people fighting over? Was the conflict related to an abundance or scarcity of environmental goods? Consider access to natural resources like oil, water, minerals, lumber, game, fertile land that supported the production of agricultural commodities, navigable waterways that promoted trade, or materials that facilitated the creation of weapons.
2. What effects did human geopolitical conflict have on the environment? What were the long-term ecological impacts of war? Consider how human violence changed the landscape. Did the conflict

result in a redistribution of environmental goods, or change who controlled natural resources? Did access become more equitable across socioeconomic groups?

3. How did national and state borders affect animals, insects, and plants? Were nonhuman migration patterns or ecological systems affected by these geopolitical boundaries?

### **Industrialization and Urbanization**

1. In what ways did new technological inventions change human relationships with the environment? How did changes in forms of transportation and communication affect the environment?
2. What were the environmental effects of industrialization and urbanization?
3. How did urban reformers address the role of nature in city residents' lives? What environmental issues did they hope to remedy? In what ways has nature been considered separate from, or a part of, urban areas?

### **Culture and Thinking About the Environment**

1. How did a society perceive or imagine the natural world, and its place in the environment? What stories or myths did people tell about nature? What insights do these stories hold for how people viewed themselves and one another?
2. Did spiritual or religious traditions shape a society's approach to the environment? Consider how the environment was portrayed in creation myths.
3. Have societies given different weight or preference to nature in these different settings and frameworks: wilderness, pastoral/agricultural/rural landscapes, cities, suburbs? Did historical actors believe that they could control nature? Or did they perceive nature as an uncontrollable force?
4. How did a society think about the environment in terms of leisure? What forms of nature were available for leisure time (i.e., national parks, local parks, playgrounds, gardens, conservatories, beaches)? How was the environment modified to create these spaces? Who had access to these places? Did they exclude anyone?
5. How have societies defined environmental catastrophes? Were droughts, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, or fires considered purely natural occurrences, or have societies identified underlying human influences?
6. What was the relationship between human society and the natural world in terms of food systems? Consider the typical menu of different social groups. Where did their food come from? How did their food choices affect the environment?
7. Compare different maps representing the same region or area. What clues can you find about the different cartographers' cultural and political assumptions? Is the landscape portrayed differently in the two maps? What were the intended uses of these maps? Who were the intended audiences?

### **Environmental Activism and Reform**

1. In what ways have societies recognized their impact on the environment? What types of political and social movements or institutions were organized to address these changes? Who participated in these movements? What were their goals? Did they draw on themes of conservation, preservation, or environmental justice? Were they successful?
2. Not all environmental reformers shared the same goals. What conflicts existed among environmental reformers?
3. What challenges did environmental policymakers and activists face in trying to achieve environmental reform? Were there difficulties in establishing national or transnational collaborations on environmental issues?