

LESSON:

Is Environmental Health a Basic Human Right?

Summary: In this exercise, students develop a consensus about what they consider “basic human rights” BEFORE reading the article. They follow by reading the article and answering questions of why they did or did not include environmental health in their definition.

EHP Article: “Is Environmental Health a Basic Human Right?”
From *EHP Student Edition*, March 2005: A1006–A1009
<http://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/members/2004/112-17/spheres.html>

Objectives: By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

1. Identify some “basic human rights” as defined by the United Nations and others.
2. Describe the history of the movement for establishing a “right” to a clean environment.
3. Evaluate the complexities of including the right to a clean environment into international human rights declarations.

Class Time: 1–2 hours

Grade Level: 9–12

Subjects Addressed: Environmental Health, Social Science, History

►Prepping the Lesson (15 minutes)

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Obtain a class set of *EHP Student Edition*, March 2005, or download the article at <http://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/science-ed/>
2. Make copies of the student instructions.

MATERIALS (per student):

- 1 copy of *EHP Student Edition*, March 2005, or 1 copy of the article, “Is Environmental Health a Basic Human Right?”
- 1 copy of the student instructions

VOCABULARY:

Basic human right
Environmental health
Environmental justice
Jurisdiction
Private sector
Tariff

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The article has a good review of the history of the movement toward accepting environmental health as a basic human right. After the initial adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, additional declarations were added, particularly in respect to the rights of children. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child introduces a right to a high standard of health as a basic right. Unfortunately, the realities of life for many people, particularly for the world’s children, remain bleak. It is estimated today that 400 million children lack clean water and 500 million lack basic sanitation. More than one in six children in the world today are severely hungry and approximately 20 million have been forced from their homes by war. On a more hopeful note, of 190 countries in the world today 100 recognize a right to a clean environment and/or the responsibility for the protection of natural resources in their national constitutions. While it is important to establish standards for basic human rights, it is clear much more must be done to attain those standards. For further information, see the *Resources* section below.



RESOURCES:

Environmental Health Perspectives, Environews by Topic page. Choose Natural Resources, <http://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/topic>

Khan S. "At risk: 1,000,000,000 of the world's children." *The Independent* 10 December 2004, <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/politics/story.jsp?story=591676>

"Earthjustice Presents 2004 'Human Rights and the Environment' Report to the UN," April 6, 2004, Earthjustice, <http://www.earthjustice.org/news/display.html?ID=812>

Resources for the Future, <http://www.rff.org>

United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, <http://www.unhchr.ch>

▶ Implementing the Lesson**INSTRUCTIONS:**

1. Begin with a class discussion of what students consider "basic human rights." Include the question of who is responsible for ensuring these rights. Define a "right."
2. Help the students develop a consensus definition of basic human rights.
3. Hand out copies of *EHP Student Edition*, March 2005, and refer your students to the article "Is Environmental Health a Basic Human Right?" or hand out article copies.
4. Have the students read the article and highlight and/or take notes as needed.
5. Tell students to complete the student worksheet.
6. Lead a discussion with students about the answers they wrote on the worksheet. Discuss as a class how the concepts in the article expand the concept of human rights, and identify some of the challenges of guaranteeing these rights.

NOTES & HELPFUL HINTS:

- Allow students to brainstorm freely about what a child born in the world today should be able to expect as his or her "rights." These rights will include freedom to do or have certain things, such as enough food, as well as freedom from certain negative things, such as persecution on the basis of race or gender.
- If you would like to expand the exercise, you could provide a copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>) for students to read as a followup.

▶ Aligning with Standards**SKILLS USED OR DEVELOPED:**

Communication (oral)
 Communication (written—including summarization)
 Comprehension (listening)
 Comprehension (reading)
 Critical thinking and response

SPECIFIC CONTENT ADDRESSED:

Human rights, environmental health, allocation of resources

NATIONAL SCIENCE EDUCATION STANDARDS MET:**Content Standards:**

Science in Personal and Social Perspectives Standards

- Personal and community health
- Population growth
- Natural resources
- Environmental quality
- Natural and human-induced hazards
- Science and technology in local, national and global challenges

History and Nature of Science Standards

- Science as a human endeavor
- Nature of scientific knowledge
- Historical perspectives



Teaching Standards

Plan an inquiry-based science program

- Develop student understanding and nurture community of science learners
- Work within and across disciplines and grade levels

Guide and facilitate learning

- Support inquiries when interacting with students
- Orchestrate discourse among students about scientific ideas

Create learning environments that provide time, space, and resources for learning science

- Make tools, materials, media, and resources available to students
- Use resources outside of the school

Develop communities of science learners that reflect the intellectual rigor of scientific inquiry as well as attitudes and social values conducive to scientific learning

- Give students a voice in decisions and require students to take responsibility for the learning of all members of the community
- Nurture collaboration among students

▶ Assessing the Lesson

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, a “right” for the purposes of this discussion can be defined as “something that is due a person or governmental body by law, tradition, or nature.”

Students’ consensus definition should come to include some of the following “rights” that are included in the UN Declaration of Human Rights:

- Right to life, liberty and security of person
- Freedom from unjust imprisonment
- Right to move freely within one’s country
- Right to leave and return to one’s country
- Right to have families
- Right to own property
- Right to the protection of law
- Right to privacy
- Freedom of thought, religion, speech, and assembly
- Right to work and be paid fairly
- Right to an education
- Right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being
- Right to a clean environment, (i.e., clean water, air, etc.)

In their written answer as to why environmental health was or was not included in their definition, students should mention the complexity and difficulty of enforcing an international guarantee of environmental health given the scarcity of resources and the wide variability of environmental standards across the globe. Students should refer to the example of conflicts over the provision of safe drinking water as discussed in the article.

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