## Ahimsa Center- K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson Plan

**Title of Lesson:** Sustainable Communities and Gandhi’s Ashrams  
**Lesson By:** Mary Carroll Alexander

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</th>
<th>Class Size:</th>
<th>Time/ Duration of Lesson:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle or High School Earth/ Environmental Science</td>
<td>Could be modified for any class size</td>
<td>95 minutes (can be extended to several days with enrichment activities)</td>
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### Goals/ Objectives of Lesson:

- Student will be able to explain how Gandhi’s ashrams were examples of sustainable communities through discussion and a freewrite exercise.
- Students will be able to identify both sustainable and non-sustainable practices in their own communities through discussion and the creation of posters.
- Students will demonstrate their original idea of nonviolence as it relates to the environment through discussion and a freewrite exercise.
- Using Gandhi’s ashrams as an example, students will apply or model an example of their own to demonstrate their taking part in building a sustainable community in society, in neighborhood, in school, or at home.

### Lesson Abstract:

This lesson allows students to take a look at the term “sustainability” and identify both sustainable and non-sustainable practices in modern human civilization. Students discuss how humans have affected the environment, and take a look at Gandhi’s ashrams as models of self-sustaining communities.

### Lesson Content:

Mohandas Gandhi was a major political and spiritual leader in India during the first half of the twentieth century, and his teachings and beliefs continue to influence modern society today. He was a pivotal part of Indian independence from British rule through his belief of ahimsa, or non-violence in thought, word, and deed. This included a deep understanding and commitment to practicing non-violence with people, animals, the environment, and even entire countries, as demonstrated in his fight for Indian independence from the British empire. His ideals were also deeply rooted in satyagraha, meaning “soul force,” or grasping on to the truth. Gandhi was constantly seeking truth in all situations and exploring the most just and fair methods for society and the world as a whole. Gandhi influenced countless leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela. Gandhi’s practice of ahimsa, or nonviolence, can also be related to the environment. Irresponsibility towards the environment is a form of violence, and it is crucial for students to realize how their actions make an impact on the environment and how they can practice nonviolence towards the Earth.

Gandhi also lived in renouncing, or giving up, material possessions in order to focus on serving others. Gandhi said, “If I am to serve others, I am to detach myself of all desires.” In his spirit of renunciation, Gandhi created self-sustaining communities, for example his ashrams. An ashram is a self-sustaining community of individuals that lives and works together in promoting...
non-violence and social change. He showed that everyone, rich or poor, should be able to have food, shelter, or clothing in a self-reliant way. Gandhi’s ashrams in the first half of the twentieth century have influenced communities in India and around the world. All who lived in the ashram were expected to work for the good of the community and had to abide by certain rules. Gandhi built self-sustaining communities through khadi (handmade cloth used for clothing), diversification of crops, cooking together in a common kitchen, creation of village industries, and by developing sanitation systems. His communities were meant to rely on as few resources as possible. Being self-sustaining would then free the Indian people from British rule.

Making khadi, or handmade cloth, was an essential part of ashram life. Gandhi made the revival of the charkha (spinning wheel) his mission... for Gandhi the charkha had been the sun in the solar system of village-based industries and thus the foundation for a prosperous society.” (Bapu Kuti pg. 237). He believed it could help alleviate unemployment and make the people free by having them create their own cloth, creating self-reliance. He saw it as a way of developing community values by teaching people of all walks of life to work together. It created interdependence, because the spinners had to work with the weavers and ginners and even the customers when they produced more cloth than they needed. Also, making khadi produced no pollution or waste, making it a very environmentally friendly process. Through khadi, Indians could be independent of imported fabrics from other countries. They could rely solely on themselves, becoming self sufficient in a world that is coming to rely on others so much through imported goods and outsourcing of jobs.

Gandhi’s ashrams were environmentally friendly because they relied on and used few resources, and those resources were used wisely. On one occasion, when a member of the ashram was cutting vegetables and a few small pieces fell on the floor, Gandhi picked them up, washed them, and added them to the pot. Gandhi explained, “We are living on public funds. We cannot afford to waste even a single tiny fragment.” Not only did Gandhi want to use their resources wisely, but he understood the necessity to live sustainably and make the best use of everything that they had.

The following is an excerpt from Sangram Purohit’s article, “Gandhi’s Ashram.” This excerpt from the webpage could be read to students to give them some background information on Gandhi’s concept of a sustainable community.

“A mere enumeration of the vows is enough to indicate that life inn the ashram was austere. It was also busy. Everyone had to put in some manual work. There was a spinning and weaving department, a cowshed and a large farm. Every inmate of the ashram cleaned his own plates and washed his own clothes. There were no servants. The atmosphere was, however, not so much of a monastery but that of a large family under a kindly but exacting patriarch. Gandhi was Bapu, the father of the nation, Kasturba was Ba, the mother. It was a motley group including little children and octogenarians, graduates of American and European universities and Sanskrit scholars, devout whole-hoggers, and thinly disguised skeptics. It was a human laboratory where Gandhi tested his moral and spiritual hypotheses. It was also to him what the family is to most people, a haven from the dust and din of the world. It was a family linked not by blood or property, but by allegiance to common ideals. Gandhi ruled the ashram but his authority in the ashram, as well as in the rest of the country, was moral. When things went wrong or a member
of the ashram was guilty of a serious lapse, Gandhi would take the blame upon himself and atone for it by undertaking a fast.”

Students should understand that living in Gandhi’s ashram meant embracing sustainability as it relates to the environment and living simply, as well as contributing a part to the daily functioning of the ashram. Embracing responsibility was an important aspect of being a member of the ashram family, as well as internalizing moral and spiritual values to be carried out in everyday life.

Gandhi set an example of creating sustainable living practices in both South Africa and India, and his work has inspired many other movements for sustainable methods of living. For example, communities in India have begun to make paper out of silk cotton by adding bacteria to the silk cotton to form pulp. The plant used is called *ceiba pentandra*, which is a plant that can grow on wastelands. This is a great alternative to trees, which are being cut down at an alarming rate in order to make paper. In addition, bio-gas technology is being developed as an alternative way of creating energy by using the methane from fermented cow dung to create electricity. Organic farm practices are growing in popularity as well. Gandhi’s ideals have also inspired conservation movements such as the Chipko movement, which worked for the conservation of forests in Northern India.

Sustainability is living in a way that meets the needs of human can be met without compromising the environment or jeopardizing the Earth for future generations. It also means that humans will be economically and socially responsible, meaning that humans and animals are not mistreated as a result of these practices. Sustainable practices include organic farming, alternative forms of energy such as wind and solar power, conservation methods such as reducing, reusing, and recycling resources, and eliminating or minimizing pollution.

For more information on sustainability, see:

http://www.sustainablemeasures.com/Sustainability/index.html

http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/

**North Carolina State Content Standards: Earth Environmental Science**

**Objective 1.06:**
Identify and evaluate a range of possible solutions to earth and environmental issues at the local, national, and global level including considerations of:

- Interdependent human and natural systems.
- Diverse perspectives.
- Short and long range impacts.
- Economic development, environmental quality and sustainability.
- Opportunities for and consequences of personal decisions.
- Risks and benefits of technological advances.
Objective 2.06
Investigate and analyze the importance and impact of the economic development of earth's finite rock, mineral, soil, fossil fuel and other natural resources to society and our daily lives:

- Availability.
- Geographic distribution.
- Conservation/Stewardship.
- Recycling.
- Environmental impact.
- Challenge of rehabilitation of disturbed lands.

Objective 2.07
Analyze the sources and impacts of society's use of energy.

- Renewable and non-renewable sources.
- The impact of human choices on Earth and its systems.

Objective 4.04
Evaluate water resources:

- Storage and movement of groundwater.
- Ecological services provided by the ocean
- Environmental impacts of a growing human population.
- Causes of natural and manmade contamination.

Guiding Questions:
- What is sustainability? Does sustainability only relate to the environment?
- What is meant by sustainable versus not sustainable communities?
- What are non-sustainable methods currently used in our communities?
- What sustainable methods did Gandhi use in his ashrams?
- How is sustainability a form of non-violence?
- How can we incorporate sustainable methods of living into our communities today?
- How can you internalize your relationship with the environment?

Materials Needed:
- Computers with internet access
- Digital story “Earth: Our Beautiful Home”
- Journals and writing utensils
- Poster paper and markers

Lesson Context:
This lesson would be good to use during a unit on sustainability. Previous knowledge of resource use, pollution, alternative forms of energy, water quality, consumption, and conservation would be helpful.
Outside of science class, this could be used in conjunction with an Earth Day activity. Also, it could be used during a unit on Gandhi or nonviolence and how his ideals relate to our lives today.

**Teaching Activities:**

1. Begin class with a 5 minute “deep listening” exercise. Ask students to close their eyes and sit comfortably. Explain that they will be participating in a deep listening exercise, where they are to keep their eyes closed and to focus carefully on the words read by the teacher. They are not to talk during this exercise. After asking students to close their eyes, pause for about 20-30 seconds before beginning. Then, ask students to picture what the Earth was like before modern human civilization. Go through each of the following questions slowly, pausing several moments in between each one. Ask them to think about what they see, smell, hear, taste, or touch. What is it like? Encourage students to continue thinking about this place they have created in their mind. Give students about 30 seconds of silence to form this place. Then, ask students to shift in their minds to what our Earth looks like today. Ask them to think about what they see, smell, hear, taste, or touch. What is it like? How is it different than the image they created in their minds earlier? Again, give students 30 seconds to a minute to create this new image in their minds.

2. Ask students to open their eyes and journal for 5 minutes about their experience. Students should record their observations of Earth before and after modern human civilization.

3. Allow students to share their observations first with a partner or in small groups, and then aloud as a whole class. Discuss differences in the two images created in their minds. What has been the result of humans on Earth? Has the influence of humans been beneficial or destructive? Can humans live nondestructively?

4. Ask students, What is sustainability? What does this mean in our world today? Make sure students have a basic understanding of the definition of sustainability and what it means in our world today. Have students give an example of their own to illustrate “sustainability.”


6. Discussion: According to the video, what are ways in which humans are harming the earth? What are unsustainable practices? Can you think of any more unsustainable practices that the video did not display? What are sustainable methods of living? What are ways in which we can live to make our world last longer? What can you do personally to cut down on pollution and resource use?

7. Students could create posters in groups of both sustainable and nonsustainable practices based on previous discussion. They could also take time to do more research on a certain aspect of a sustainable community and find examples in society today to share with the rest of the class.

8. Intro to Gandhi’s ashrams using lesson content. Explain to students how Gandhi’s ashrams functioned. Why is the ashram considered a sustainable community? What do you think it would be like to live in Gandhi’s ashrams? Do you think this kind of cooperative community would work today?

9. Intro to Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence. Explain that ahimsa is nonviolence in
thought, word, and action. Ask students the following questions and discuss: What is nonviolence to you? What is nonviolence towards the environment? Do you think harm towards the environment is considered violence? Why or why not? What is an example of nonviolence towards the environment?

**Assessment/ Evaluation:**
One page freewrite for homework/ at end of class:
- Go home and look at your living space. Is it sustainable or not?
- How can you relate Gandhi’s asrams to your personal lifestyle?
- How can you practice nonviolence towards the environment?

Assessment of participation and comments during class discussion

**Journal entry**

Choose one of the extension activities and have students complete one of the following:
1. A written report from the data collected from interviewing adults- parents, community members, and neighbors about sustainable practices in their current lives and also in their past.
2. Documentation of oral histories through video or voice recording using educational technology.
3. Establishment of school/ community project to educate others on methods of sustainable communities.

**Extension Activities/ Enrichment**
1. Students can create an oral history project of sustainability in their environment. Students can interview adults- parents, community members, and neighbors about sustainable practices in their current lives and also in their past. How was life different 20 or 30 years ago than it is now? Are humans living sustainably? Why or why not? Students could create these oral histories through video, voice recording, or written interviews.
2. Students could organize a school/ community project to educate others on methods of sustainable communities.
3. Students could discuss their freewrite homework assignment with their families. What can the family do to live more sustainably?
4. Create a school/community garden.

**Bibliography**


UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Division for Sustainable Development. <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/>