Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title:
Sustainability and Changing Conceptions of Nature and Labor

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
11th grade U.S. History and Environmental History

Duration of Lesson:
Approximately 1 hour, with possibilities for extensions

Content Standards:
Massachusetts Department of Education Curriculum Frameworks for Social Studies:
USII.2 Explain the important consequences of the Industrial Revolution [...] on the environment.

Lesson Abstract:
Students will learn about evolving definitions of nature and wilderness prior to and following the rise of industrial capitalism in the United States and the implications these concepts have for sustainability in the United States. Students will have an opportunity to consider a major issue of contemporary debate over sustainability (e.g., climate change) and practice using the principles of ahimsa and swaraj as developed by Mohandas K. Gandhi to imagine what a more sustainable future for the country might look like.

Guiding Questions:
Is sustainability a matter of privileging the environment over the economy, or is it possible to have both a thriving and a sustainable economy?
Is labor, especially on an industrial scale, sustainable?
How did humans come to be depicted as the destroyers of nature, and how did nature come to be depicted as a landscape devoid of humans?

Content Essay: Sustainability and Changing Conceptions of Nature and Labor

When Bill McKibben sounded the climate change alarm for the general public with his book *The End of Nature* in 1989, the Wall Street Journal editorialized, "McKibben's subject is the end of nature itself, which he claims humans have brought about" (McKibben). Indeed, from the office windows of many Americans, it is not difficult to see that humans are destroying nature as the plow, the drill, and the chainsaw advance across the land. Yet to suppose, as environmentalists have for decades, that humans are destroying nature is at once to commit a logical fallacy and to undermine efforts to create a truly sustainable future. For in the end, humans are a part of nature, and a peaceful human coexistence with other species is difficult to
promote while demonizing an entire segment of humanity--usually either third-world and impoverished people who live near or in the last wilderness areas, or corporate executives who run companies that extract resources from those areas. In this essay, I will argue that a sustainable future for the planet rests on placing humans, including human edifices and human labor, back into our definition of nature, thus restoring the belief that, as Gandhi said, "human labour has a unique place in the cultured human family" (Parel, 183).

How Nature Came To Be Devoid of Humans

In the twenty-first century, as the historian William Cronon has written, people think of nature and wilderness as “an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness” (Cronon, 69). Seen as such, wilderness and nature offer the antidote to modern civilization, and thus the preservation of wild peopleless spaces becomes our only hope for saving the planet and ourselves. We have in the United States federally managed and federally protected wilderness areas and we imagine (all evidence to the contrary) that when we enter those places, we are walking on ground that has not been altered by human impact. We go there to escape the city, to encounter nature, to rejuvenate the soul. Wilderness, in short, is thought of as the place where humans are not present except as itinerant travelers on a leisurely break from the nine-to-five; it is a necessary space and worthy of exercising restraint to preserve. Yet people did not always think of nature and wilderness this way.

One has only to go as far back as the eighteenth-century to find a time when definitions of wilderness and nature were radically different from what they are today. As late as the 1700s, nature and wilderness--that is, areas untouched by Western civilization--were seen as dangerous, satanic, and unproductive rather than the best hope for humankind. British colonists in North America used the word “wilderness” as synonymous with “barren” and “desolate” (Cronon, 70). Even the nature-loving Henry David Thoreau found a trip to Mt. Katahdin in Maine's north woods too remote and imposing. He preferred the more tame and more convenient Walden Pond as the spot for his cabin, from which he could easily walk into Concord Town on Sundays to have his clothes laundered. But even in Thoreau one can see a shift in thinking from the eighteenth-century observers of nature, for despite all of Thoreau’s reservations about the humbling and inhospitable Maine woods, he proclaimed boldly that "In Wildness is the preservation of the world" (Cronon, 72).

In the mid- to late-nineteenth century in the United States, the nation ceased to be the agrarian democracy that President Thomas Jefferson had envisioned. The process of industrialization imported from Britain and Europe had created an urban society in the United States that in turn led to a cultural divide between rural and urban American, as well as to a collective cognitive deficit. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was possible and indeed common for a man in Newark to eat a steak that had come from a steer that had been raised in Texas, slaughtered in Illinois, and shipped by refrigerated train to New Jersey. Never before had humans been so far removed from the source of their food, water, energy, and commerce. While industrialization was reshaping American society, some historians and scholars noticed a small footnote in the 1890 census announcing the closing of the frontier--which Frederick Jackson
Turner described as the “meeting point between savagery and civilization”—and thus the end of cheap public land for homesteading and development (Turner).

At the precise time that industrialism moved Americans from the country to the city and from farms to factories, the industrial process and subsequent population boom had swallowed up the land and the resources with which it had been provisioned. In the process, Americans came to lose that intimate knowledge of nature that comes from working in the outdoors. It became easy and indeed appealing to romanticize nature and see in it a precious and restorative force that would bring humans back to their prelapsarian roots, rather than to see in nature a desolate and foreboding landscape. And increasingly, Americans came to see nature and wilderness as places where humans were not present, with detrimental implications for environmentalism and sustainability.

Why Humans Need To Be Included In Our Definition of Nature

To point to the preservation of a few biological hotspots or wilderness areas as the key to sustainability and to continue in the mythology that nature is all that is not human is to forsake a truly sustainable future. The writer Wallace Stegner rightly noted that humans are the most dangerous of all species; but, as he says, they are also “the only species which, when it chooses to do so, will go to great effort to save what it might destroy” (Stegner). Yet all human work, the mere act of eating and living, requires an exchange with the natural world. Seven billion people need food, clothing, and shelter at the very least, and increasingly have come to want energy in the form of fossil fuel for transportation and for heating. All of these products, all of these needs and wants, come from what we call nature, and to extract them from the earth is always going to alter the earth. Though humans try to hide their labor, the historian Thomas Andrews rightly points out that paradoxically, “It takes work to erase labor from a landscape” (Andrews, 837).

Mining, irrigating, transporting, clear-cutting, and mowing all leave a mark on the landscape, and even the most basic and essential act of farming involves a fundamental transformation (some might say destruction) of wild spaces. Though we do need to preserve landscapes which are of immeasurable spiritual value (what would the United States be without the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone?), the real battle for sustainability will be in finding ways to ameliorate the deep scars that all forms of human labor must leave on the earth. The question, then, is not whether humans should be leaving marks, as many advocates of wilderness preservation would argue, but rather how many marks humans should leave and what kind of marks are tolerable and sustainable.

The environmental historian Patricia Nelson Limerick writes that energy producers and Americans who labor in the earth are understandably frustrated with consumers who are “engaged in a carnival of energy use, driving big cars and living in houses that are often unnecessarily large, taking an abundant supply of energy for granted,” because these same consumers are apt to grouse when the price of that energy inches up and condemn “the people and enterprises that provide them with this comfort and luxury” (Limerick, 30). The scene Limerick describes is fairly widespread and gains traction partly due to contemporary ideas of wilderness and nature. These ideas support our demonization of miners and ranchers and others whose labor in the earth provides jobs and products that are much in demand. With this kind of
mindset, it is difficult to find the common ground on which all elements of society—laborers, executives, consumers, and producers—may come together to cooperate and create a sustainable ecosystem.

**Gandhi, Labor, and Sustainability**

Mohandas K. Gandhi said that his life was his message, emphasizing the strong emphasis he placed on actions rather than theories. However, it is possible to see in both Gandhi’s actions and in his teachings and writings a great lesson to help address the challenge of sustainability in our time. As the scholar Vinay Lal has noted, although Gandhi was “remarkably reticent on the relationship of humans to their external environment” and never associated with “forest satyagrahas,” one can reasonably infer from his many writings and from the way he lived his life that he had a “profound attachment” to all living creatures (Lal). Lal further notes that nearly all of India’s environmentalists—and many outside of India—cite Gandhi as an influence. One Gandhian disciple, the Norwegian Arne Naess, who coined the term “deep ecology,” helped bring Gandhi’s ideas to some strains of late twentieth-century environmentalism. As Lal describes, deep ecology is rooted in the belief that “it is not possible to alter man’s relationship to nature without altering man’s relationship to man and man’s relationship to self.” Furthermore, in “deep ecology,” man is viewed as being “not merely in the environment, but of it” (Lal). Yet while it is true that Gandhi’s ideas have permeated India and indeed even some Western nations, the United States seems to still have much to learn from him.

Perhaps the most remarkable contribution Gandhi made to advancing a program of nonviolent social change was to not only humanize his oppressor, but to love him or her. In contemporary environmental and political discourse in the United States, humans are too often demonized, as demonstrated above. Repeatedly, Gandhi was able to transcend this impulse to find common ground and recognize the dignity of all sentient beings. In his seminal work about the means and ends of Indian independence, *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi made it clear that while he resented the effect that British civilization had on India, he loved the British people and indeed took inspiration from many of them. When writing to the Viceroy Lord Irwin to announce his desire to negotiate the repeal of the salt tax and the commencement of the Salt March, Gandhi addressed his adversary with the greeting, “Dear Friend.” Years earlier, while pursuing satyagraha in South Africa, Gandhi had to negotiate with General Jan Smuts, who repeatedly betrayed Gandhi’s trust. Still, Smuts had to admit in retrospect that Gandhi “never forgot the human background of the situation, never lost his temper or succumbed to hate, and preserved his gentle humor even in the most trying situations” (Sethia, 54). Gandhi had a transformative power over his adversaries that was rooted in his deep respect for all life, and this power might be used by environmental advocates to find common ground with climate change skeptics, hydraulic fracturing proponents, and others who are often demonized in contemporary America.

Gandhi wrote extensively in *Hind Swaraj* about the dignity and duty of labor. The forefathers of Indian civilization, he wrote, “saw that our real happiness and health consisted in a proper use of our hands and feet” (Parel, 67). For Gandhi, labor was a duty that had moral value so long as it did not lead to the exploitation of people or societies, and by extension one may presume nature. The depth of respect that Gandhi had for the common laborer and the poor can be seen in his choice of salt as the focus of the 1930 satyagraha, for the tax on salt fell heaviest
on the commoners, for whom salt was the only condiment available. It was no surprise that Gandhi’s method of protesting the British tax on salt involved a march to the sea where Indians could capture sea water to make their own salt. The basic Indian labor embodied in this protest signified a lack of British control and thus a step toward independence. If American environmentalists were to afford all laborers the dignity that Gandhi afforded the self-sufficient Indian laborer, then we might come a long way toward avoiding the trap of preserving wilderness areas for the leisure of the wealthy capitalist elite and instead build common ground on which to find a sustainable future.

Furthermore, Gandhi’s ideas of what kinds of labor are truly sustainable in a civilization, though largely antithetical to American culture, could through piecemeal adoption help to produce a more sustainable ethic in the United States. It is easy to mock Gandhi as a man who pined for a return to the Dark Ages or to some pre-capitalist Eden, but his views on labor are in fact more complex. Gandhi distrusted most machines and indeed was very critical of industrial societies, yet this distrust was based upon a strong belief in the value of human labor. He believed that India as a nation should reject large-scale import-export industry and instead adopt the spinning wheel, which would “not only solve the question of unemployment,” but would also serve to “declare that we have no intention of exploiting any nation” through capitalist competition (Parel, 165). That is, Gandhi believed that any form of labor that created an unequal dependency between people or between nations was exploitative and thus fostered fundamentally unsustainable relationships amongst men as well as between men and nature. In a revealing speech, Gandhi quoted the English scientist Alfred Russel Wallace, who admitted that “the rapid growth of wealth and increase of [Britain's] power over nature put too great a strain upon our crude civilization” (Parel, 158). Gandhi did not wish for Indians to dominate nature, but rather to exist in and with nature. For Gandhi, this was not a false choice between human labor and the preservation of nature, but a harmonious synergy of the two that would lead to sustainable health and happiness for the people of India.

Perhaps even more instructive were the means by which Gandhi modeled sustainability in his own life. Spinning his own cloth, adopting the loincloth, fasting, adopting vegetarianism, walking, and taking all the vows that monks and ascetics often take all helped to reduce significantly Gandhi’s impact on the environment. These renunciations all came as a way to transcend the lifestyle of modern industrial civilization, which as the historian Tara Sethia has noted, made “bodily welfare” a priority and thus represented for Gandhi “a hindrance to the needs of the human spirit” (Sethia, 59). Bill McKibben has also pointed to this lifestyle as a possible means for cultivating sustainability on an individual level in society; as McKibben put it after being inspired by Gandhi, “renounce and enjoy.”

Gandhi’s ideas about nonviolence may very well point out the best path to a sustainable future. At the very least, Americans would do well to try to practice a civil and respectful discourse between dissenting factions. Better still it would be to adopt Gandhi's mantra of “renounce and enjoy” to lessen our consumerist demands on the natural world, though it seems impractical to suggest that Americans may in the foreseeable future adopt the loincloth and the khadi. To the degree that Americans could adopt even a fraction of Gandhi’s minimalism and asceticism while also doing more to tone down demonizing rhetoric about laborers and
As the environmental historian William Cronon demonstrates, mankind was for much of the history of industrial capitalism considered to be unnatural, partly due to the unrestrained extraction of wealth that people pursued. However, the writings and teachings of Gandhi can help to put people back into the realm of nature, allowing one to see Los Angeles as just as natural a setting as the Sierra Nevada. The actions that a beaver takes in building a dam or that a sparrow takes in building a nest is no less a natural interaction with the environment than the actions a corporation takes in building a business, with one caveat: if man allows himself to become, as Gandhi says, “intoxicated with modern civilization,” with the wealth that can be accumulated in a system of industrial capitalism, then man has in fact lost touch with his natural self (Parel, 34). Thus, Gandhi argues that what is natural is for man to exercise restraint and control over passion and desire, which in turn will yield greater environmental stability and sustainability. Mankind can do this by controlling the type and amount of one’s labor in the earth, to dignify manual labor above machine labor, and to treat all of mankind as natural beings worthy of respect, admiration, and dignity. In that way, civil discourse may redeem civilization itself.

Bibliography:

Teaching Activities
1. Bring in contrasting editorials or video clips from cable news about environmental controversies such as the proposed Keystone XL Pipeline or the debate over climate change. Have students read or view the arguments as presented by each side, then have them read an editorial from the New York Times by Patricia Nelson Limerick in which she says that whenever...
she finds two people who vehemently disagree with each she invites them to lunch to try to find common ground (http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/25/opinion/25limerick.html). Ask students to write emails to leading voices on both sides of the debate, inviting them to lunch and to a more civil discussion.

2. Introduce the topic of climate change in class. Have students read at least two expert opinions from opposing sides (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/warming/debate/) and then write a response explaining which side they agree with. Then have them write a letter to the expert whose opinions they found to be most pernicious, wrongheaded, or ill-informed in the spirit of Gandhi’s letter to Lord Irwin and based on principles of ahimsa and satyagraha.

3. Have students draw a picture of what comes to mind when they think of the word "nature." Have a discussion about what images show up most often (mountains, birds, streams, trees?), and what images are not present that perhaps should be present (people, the work people do, the things people make?). You may also discuss what implications our conceptions of nature have for creating a sustainable future in which humans may be peaceful occupants of the planet.