

Water in the West  
Role-playing Activity  
SAHRA/SPLASH  
September 3, 2003

Need:

The development and allocation of water resources is a source of perennial controversy and debate in the western United States. It is important for students to understand that often there is no correct answer to complex sociological and ecological questions. Instead, answers require a careful weighing of the available evidence and the use of personal judgment. This role-playing activity, set at the turn of the century, attempts to uncover for students the motivation of historical personalities and groups during the development of the West's first public dams.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Describe the benefits and trade-offs associated with water development, particularly with regards to sustainability and ecological impact.
- Generate and defend an informed opinion about an important issue in western politics and society.

Connections to Unit and other disciplines

This activity connects to what students have learned about the American history and government. Discussing the environmental impacts of dam building and other water development connects this lesson to biology and environmental science. Connections to other skills involve public speaking, careful listening and critical thinking.

Introduction

To The Class: "To illustrate the complexity of real-world societal and political questions we are going to build on what we've learned so far about the importance of water in semi-arid ecosystems and do a role-playing exercise." Explain to students that we will present them with a historical set of circumstances about dam building on western rivers. They will be playing the roles of concerned citizens, policy-makers and representatives of industry in a county meeting. They need to remember to be respectful and to listen carefully to each others' comments and concerns so that they can make an effect case either for or against the proposed action.

Content and Procedures:

Divide the class into four groups. Pass out the scenario page to each. Ask someone to read the paragraph aloud to the class. Ask for questions.

Pass out the character descriptions to each group. Ask them to quietly read about their characters and to reflect on what they might say in response to the scenario. Also, ask the

groups to make a sign to place on their desks that says their group affiliation (e.g. “Salt River Farmer’s Alliance”). Stress to the students that their characters are at this meeting because they have strong opinions about what should be done in their community.

Structure the debate so that each group introduces themselves to the other groups and states briefly their position on the issue.

Ask various questions of the groups about the plan:

Who has concerns? Who is for building a dam on the Salt River? Why? Are there comments on this position? What are the advantages/disadvantages of this development plan? If given a choice to only preserve and protect the river or develop the Phoenix area, which one would you prefer? Why? How can we satisfy both objectives of protecting water resources and promoting economic development and jobs?

Summary/Conclusions/Closure

Collect the scenario papers etc. Ask the students to reconsider their original opinions about the scenario. Did anyone change his or her opinion? Why? Did having additional information about various citizens concerns make personal decision easier or harder? Ask them finally to suggest ways that each of the concerned groups might be satisfied by a compromise development plan.

As an extension:

Students research the impacts of dam building and water withdrawal on rivers and write a coercive essay on the subject.

## The Scenario

The time is the turn of the century, the place is the Salt River Valley, not far from where the metropolis of Phoenix, Arizona will eventually sprawl. The federal government is proposing a plan dam the Salt River to create a reservoir to supply the valley with reliable surface water. Involving the federal government in supplying water is a new idea

Farmers would spend their own money, not government funds, on the dams and canals needed to get water to them, and their use of water would be tied to their land. They wouldn't be able to sell their water separately to cities or syndicates.