

THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

CONCEPT

Students will research and map federal land holdings and explore the benefits of having land held in trust by the federal government. Students will also discuss acceptable uses for public land.

STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS

1. Write the words “public” and “private” on the chalkboard and ask students for definitions. Discuss the difference between public and private property. Ask students to give examples of public property (parks, streets, schools, libraries, national forests).
2. Ask what are some acceptable reasons for our government to own land? (Conservation? Preservation? Recreation? Development of natural resources?)
3. Share background material provided with this lesson.
4. Divide students into groups, and assign one region of the US to each group so that every state is covered.
5. Have each group research to find lands held by the federal government within their regions and find how those lands are used. Provide students with maps of the US and have them map the public lands. Students should design their own legends to show how the land is used and which government agency controls the land. Have students discuss within their groups whether or not they think the land is being used as it should be. Then have groups report their findings to the class, and open the discussion to the class.

GRADE LEVEL

9-12

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

THEMES

Location, Place,
Human-
environment
interaction,
Regions

SUBJECTS

Geography, Social
Studies

VOCABULARY

grassland—terrestrial ecosystem (biome) found in regions where moderate annual average precipitation (10-15 inches) is enough to support the growth of grass and small plants but not enough to support large stands of trees.

rangeland—land, mostly grassland, whose plants can provide food (forage) for grazing or browsing animals. (This land usually cannot be used for our food and fiber in any other way.)

RESOURCES

US Bureau of Land
Management
www.blm.gov

The Evolution of the
Conservation Movement
lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/amrvhtml/conshome.html

BACKGROUND

The Federal government owns and manages about 650 million acres of land in the US—28 percent of the total land area. Four agencies manage 96 percent of the Federal landholdings for conservation, preservation and/or development of natural resources. These agencies are the US Forest Service, the US Bureau of Land Management, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service. Most Federally-owned land is in the West as a result of early treaties and land settlement patterns.

Federal and other public lands are important to our food and fiber system. On public grasslands and rangelands in the West, cattlemen are allowed to graze their cattle. Much of the land cannot be used for any other purpose because it erodes easily or is too rocky or dry. The land is useful, however, as a food source for grazing animals. In fact, grazing animals play an important role in maintaining the health of these lands. Before cattle were placed on them, bison helped maintain the delicate balance. The herds fertilized the land with their droppings while their hooves plowed them in. Grasses that grow in these areas have complex root systems that help anchor the plants. Blades of rangeland grass grow from the base, not the tip, and as long as only its upper half is eaten, the grass can be eaten again and again. Grazing animals also act as fire fighters. When they graze they reduce the length of the grass, just as humans do when they mow the lawn. This helps prevent the spread of wildfire, since there is less material on the ground to burn.

Grasslands and rangelands provide forage for large numbers of wild herbivores and essential habitats for a variety of wildlife and plant species. An estimated 84 percent of the wild mammal species and 74 percent of wild bird species in the US are supported by rangeland ecosystems. Rangelands also act as crucial watersheds that help replenish surface and groundwater resources by absorbing and slowly releasing rainfall.

EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

Have students research one of the following subjects that have impacted land use in the settling of the West: the invention of barbed wire; range wars; cattle trails; Homestead Act; land management legislation (Federal Land Policy and Management Act, Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act, Public Rangeland Improvement Act, Taylor Grazing Act); public agencies in control of public lands (US Forest Service, US Bureau of Land Management, US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service).

National Association of
Conservation Districts,
www.nacdn.org/education/