

LESSON PLANS | CIVICS

Battle Over an Oil Pipeline: Teaching About the Standing Rock Sioux Protests

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For several months, Native American tribes and their allies, led by the Standing Rock Sioux, have been protesting against the Dakota Access pipeline, a project that would transport oil from the Bakken oil fields in North Dakota and Montana across the Plains to Illinois. The protesters, numbering in the thousands and including members of hundreds of different tribes, argue that completing the pipeline would desecrate ancestral lands, threaten the water supply, and unfairly burden the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, which is unlikely to benefit from any economic development that accompanies the project. Energy Transfer Partners, the corporation behind the pipeline, suggests the project will lead to greater economic development and increased safety and efficiency compared to the trains that currently carry Bakken crude oil.

This lesson plan asks students to weigh the potential drawbacks and advantages of the pipeline project for all involved, then challenges students to develop a reasonable and just solution to the current standoff. Ideas in the Going Further section can encourage students to look more closely at environmental issues, Native American history and more.

If you have one or two class periods...

Warm Up

Share this CNN video overview of the Dakota Access pipeline standoff with students. The issue is often presented as a conflict between two sides: the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and Energy Transfer Partners. Encourage students to think more broadly. Who else might be affected by the construction of the pipeline, in the state, the nation and beyond? Students can use the diagram below to organize their ideas.

Evaluate Costs and Benefits

Help students develop a thorough understanding of the issue through an exploration of the advantages and disadvantages of the Dakota Access pipeline. Drawing from the conversation during the Warm Up, point out that there are many groups with an interest in the project: Energy Transfer Partners; the Standing Rock Sioux and other Native American tribes; environmental activists; farmers and ranchers in the area; state and local governments; the federal government, including the Army Corps of Engineers, President Barack Obama and President-elect Donald J. Trump. Have students read [this overview](#) of the issue, keeping the interests of the various groups in mind. (This timeline might also prove helpful.) Then have students complete [this chart](#) (PDF) while considering each faction's goals or interests, and their role in the controversy. If the pipeline succeeds, what will be the consequences for each group?

Generate Solutions

Is completing the pipeline — or stopping the pipeline — necessarily a win-lose situation? Is there a compromise solution that might please both protesters and pipeline supporters? And if not, is there a resolution that at least might be deemed fair and equitable considering all of the circumstances?

Break students into teams representing each of the main groups identified in the chart above. Give students access to the following resources and time to develop a solution (or solutions) that would be acceptable to their group.

- **The View From Two Sides of the Standing Rock Front Lines**
- **North Dakota Oil Pipeline Battle: Who's Fighting and Why**
- **DAPL Pipeline Facts** (site owned by Energy Transfer Partners)
- **Taking a Stand At Standing Rock** (Op-Ed by David Archambault II, the chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe)
- **Neighbors Say North Dakota Pipeline Protests Disrupt Lives and Livelihoods**
- **'I Want to Win Someday': Tribes Make Stand Against Pipeline**

Next, have each group list its solutions for the rest of the class to see. Are there any ideas that have support from multiple groups? Ask students to explain their reasoning, then clarify, and extending their thinking as necessary. Can the class come to a consensus?

Make Predictions

Update students on the most recent developments in the standoff, or have students do their own investigating. In November alone, events include the United States Army Corps of Engineers halting pipeline construction on land bordering Lake Oahe, police using water cannons against protesters in below-freezing temperatures, and North Dakota's governor ordering the expulsion of protesters from federal lands. Use the [search page](#) to see the most recent related articles published in The Times.

Ask students: What do you think will happen next? How do you think this standoff will be resolved? Why?

Voice Your Opinion

In an editorial from November 3, 2016, The New York Times Editorial Board states: "The Sioux know as well as any of America's native peoples that *justice is a shifting concept*, that treaties, laws and promises can wilt under the implacable pressure for mineral extraction." Ask students what it is about the issues reviewed in this lesson that make justice a shifting concept, or moving target, for Native Americans. Then ask:

How might the United States government navigate a just and equitable solution to the conflict over the pipeline?

It is that question that students should address in a closing written exercise. Give students an opportunity to write their own editorial or letter to the editor (you could share these two for additional inspiration) addressing what justice looks like in this situation. Should it serve the interests of the tribe, the corporation, the government or — somehow — all of us?

Going Further Ideas

Explore Environmental Issues

■ This is not the first time in recent history that the Sioux Indians have dealt with the consequences of efforts to improve infrastructure in the Dakotas. The Oahe dam, built in 1958, was constructed to control the Missouri River's flooding and provide hydroelectric power. It did those things, but it was also severely destructive to the Standing Rock community, flooding homes and forcing the surrender of land through eminent domain laws. Re-engineering the Missouri River changed the entire way of life of the Standing Rock Sioux by eliminating the natural resources on which the tribe had depended.

For members of the Standing Rock tribe, the pipeline project is not unrelated to the Oahe dam project decades ago. "The trauma we deal with today is a residual effect of 1958, when the floods came," said David Archambault II, chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. The MSNBC four-part series "Geography of Poverty" details the dire plight of the tribe today:

The Standing Rock poverty rate is 43.2 percent, nearly triple the national average of 14.5 percent. There is little economic activity to speak of and childhood mortality, suicide and dropout rates are among the highest in the nation. Food insecurity is vast. Access to quality health care and education is lacking. Far too many go without electricity or running water.

This history raises complex questions for students to consider: Should government officials weigh past injustices committed against the Standing Rock Sioux, such as the consequences of the Oahe dam project, when deciding the fate of the pipeline? Should the tribe be spared the risk posed by the pipeline, just like the city of Bismarck was previously, given that it's not slated to receive any benefits?

- Right now much of the crude oil from the Bakken fields is transported by freight train, and accidents happen. This timeline includes crude-oil rail accidents in the United States since 2013, including this train fire near Heimdal, N.D. The 2013 rail disaster that killed 47 people in the town of Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, is a reminder of the human and environmental risks of transporting vast quantities of oil by train. You can watch the above Op-Doc video detailing concerns about these trains.

The Dakota Access pipeline promises to reduce the need for crude oil rail transport. But are pipelines any safer? This timeline lists pipeline spills since 2013, and this Reuters analysis of government data reports that Sunoco Logistics, the future operator of the Dakota Access pipeline, “spills crude more often than any of its competitors with more than 200 leaks since 2010.”

As this Forbes article points out, whether you transport oil by pipeline, rail, truck or boat, it's a matter of “pick your poison.” Each method comes with its own environmental and human risks. But the economic reality is that it's “simply cheaper and quicker to transport by pipeline than by rail or by truck.”

So what is the best solution? And, are there new regulations or safety measures that can substantially reduce the risk of explosions or spills from any of these crude oil transport methods? This Op-Ed suggests one way to prevent oil train disasters. What else can you find?

- Environmental issues often carry both local and global implications. In this case, there is the immediate concern over whose drinking water might be at risk. But activists also claim that their role as “water protectors” has national scope — by blocking the pipeline, they are preserving the water for all those that use the Missouri River downstream now and in the future. This is a matter both of environmental awareness (identifying the potential pitfalls of this kind of development) and environmental justice.

Robert D. Bullard, the dean of the school of public affairs at Texas Southern University, defines environmental justice like this:

Environmental justice is defined as the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

Have students consider this definition (or a more detailed version [here](#)), and then address this question: Is the Dakota Access pipeline an example of environmental injustice? Why or why not?

Research a History of Resistance

■ The Standing Rock camps, while notable in that they include representatives from hundreds of tribes, are drawing on a history of resistance and protest that is deeply ingrained within Native American culture. First, students can watch [this video](#) posted to the Standing Rock Sioux tribe's site. Then, assign students one of the listed topics to research and compare to the current protests, focusing on the following questions:

1. What was (or still is) at stake for Native Americans?
2. What strategies were (or still are) being used to achieve goals?
3. How does the event or topic connect to the conflict over the Dakota Access pipeline today?
4. What lessons can be learned from this event or topic about what makes a protest successful or unsuccessful?
5. What year or years are associated with this topic or event?

For research:

- Ghost Dance Movement
- Society of American Indians
- Occupation of Alcatraz
- National Day of Mourning
- *United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians*

- Occupation of Wounded Knee
- The American Indian Movement
- Red Power Movement
- Indigenous People's Day
- Standing Rock International Indian Treaty Council
- Indigenous Peoples Global Summit on Climate Change
- Indigenous Environmental Network

After students have completed their research, have them share their answers with the class and add to a shared timeline (in the classroom or online using a tool like Tiki-Toki).

Have students consider elements of a successful protest: Is cooperation among tribes an important factor? Nonviolence versus violence? Media attention? To support facilitation of this conversation, teachers might additionally review [this NPR piece](#) or [this Times article](#), both of which emphasize the traditions upon which this current protest draws.

■ **This Opinion piece by David Treuer** highlights the way that the “water protectors” protesting the Dakota Access pipeline represent both a continuity of ideas and a change in strategy:

The legal and ethical argument is about tribal sovereignty and the protection of natural resources.

There is nothing new about such issues. However, what is novel is that the tribe and the outside protesters are working together. The Standing Rock reservation set up a protest camp and made a stand with the protesters. By September, more than 300 tribes — including my tribe, the Ojibwe — were physically represented at the protest camp, at the confluence of the Cannonball and Missouri Rivers.

What also makes this Indian protest different from others is its manner and its reach. The protesters refer to themselves as “water protectors.” Theirs is a nonviolent protest that is speaking broadly, in such a way that non-Indians can see that these environmental and policy concerns affect them, too.

Have students read the piece, annotating it and marking areas that represent continuity and change both from prior protests by American Indians and from the African-American civil rights movement. What does Mr. Treuer mean when he states: “to say that the story of the Dakota Access pipeline is another iteration of that old western story is to repeat the mistakes of past protests and movements. We situate ourselves in a position of powerlessness”? According to Mr. Treuer, how can Americans, indigenous and otherwise, assume power over the situation that has developed in Standing Rock?

Investigate the Loss of Land and Wealth

■ In the context of United States history, Native Americans have experienced great losses — broken treaties, massacres and deprivations. Should that past affect how one views this particular issue today?

To address this question, students can explore [this interactive](#), a project of [ehistory.org](#). Students can highlight the Sioux lands first by entering the tribe name in the search box, and then use the timeline at the bottom of the page to watch how lands belonging to Native Americans were lost over time. What happened to Sioux lands in 1851? 1868? 1882?

Students can also learn more about the Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868), which is connected to the pipeline debate. In “Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee,” Dee Brown describes the treaty, signed at the end of Red Cloud’s War:

For a few more weeks [Red Cloud] kept the treaty makers waiting, and then on November 6, surrounded by a coterie of triumphant warriors, he came riding into Fort Laramie. Now a conquering hero, he would sign the treaty: “From this day forward all war between the parties to this agreement shall forever cease. The government of the United States desires peace, and its honors is hereby pledged to keep it. The Indians desire peace, and they now pledge their honor to maintain it.”

For the next twenty years, however, the contents of the other sixteen articles of that treaty of 1868 would remain a matter of dispute between the Indians and the government of the United States. What many of the chiefs understood was

in the treaty and what was actually written therein after Congress ratified it were like two horses whose colorations did not match.

Does this description of the treaty suggest that both parties had a clear understanding of the agreement that was made? How might this background color the ongoing relationship between the Sioux Indians and the United States government?

Students can also look at how different maps tell alternate stories about the pipeline:

- **The Black Snake in Sioux Country**, an anti-pipeline map by Carl M. Sack, a geographer and cartographer studying at the University of Wisconsin
- **Energy Transfer Partner's Dakota Access pipeline map**
- **The Conflicts Along 1,172 Miles of the Dakota Access Pipeline**, a New York Times map

Consider what the creators of each map have chosen to include or omit. Each map is of a similar area, but tells a different story: Ask students to translate each one into a brief written statement about the land and the people living there. What complications do the various maps help surface or hide?

For the Standing Rock Sioux, the battle against the pipeline is not just about safe water — it's also about respecting sacred ancestral lands and burial grounds, and what they consider “unceded territory.” Should these claims be respected, even if the pipeline never crosses current reservation boundaries?

■ Since 2006, North Dakota has been experiencing an energy boom from the discovery of the Parshall Oil Field, driving the state to claim the nation's lowest unemployment rate — though the boom has slowed with the recent fall in global oil prices. All that oil money has led to newfound wealth for many in a state with fewer than a million people, and nothing but headaches for many others. A. G. Sulzberger writes in [this 2011 article](#):

As some residents find themselves cashing oil royalty checks worth tens of thousands of dollars a month or more, many of their neighbors are resigned to

receiving almost nothing from the wells that pepper the landscape and even their own land — aside from the headaches that go with living in a boomtown.

At the same time, the Standing Rock Reservation is mired in poverty. MSNBC writes:

Tribes have been forced to fight a series of losing battles to control and capitalize on the natural resources found on their land. In North Dakota, where an oil boom has bolstered the state economy and driven the unemployment rate down to just 3.1 percent, the unemployment rate in Standing Rock is 79 percent.

This vast inequity raises questions about how the wealth from natural resources should be shared. Is there a better way to divide the windfalls that come from natural resources? Is there a better way to protect people and the environment from the hazards of natural resource extraction? Or, is that the way our economy is supposed to work — there will always be a clear division between winners and losers, even in a sparsely populated state like North Dakota?

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