Course Description

The course will examine continuing controversies in environmental stewardship and public use in Yellowstone National Park. Issues such as brucellosis in the park's bison herd, the use of snowmobiles in wilderness areas, and the reintroduction of wolves to the park form a backdrop for the consideration of complex policy decisions. The course has as its focus conflict management, examining how competing interests can be addressed and adjudicated in a democracy. As a culminating experience, students in the course will examine controversies in their own communities, using the skills and understandings developed in the study of Yellowstone to engage in civic issues back home.

Student Learning Outcomes

Knowledge - Students will be able to:
- Demonstrate a deep understanding of one or more particular public lands controversies, including relevant scientific findings and understandings, the history of the controversy, the stakeholders involved, and efforts at resolving the controversy.

Skills - Students will be able to:
- Listen respectfully to another position or point of view;
- Describe a point of view that the student has heard from someone with whom the student disagrees;
- Propose a solution for a difficult controversy that offers both sides some "wins";
- Organize others for collective action;
- Describe a series of actions that citizens in a democracy can take to change policy or practice; and
- Apply knowledge (facts, theories, etc.) from the student's own academic study/field/discipline to policy dilemmas related to public land use.

Experiences - Students will be able to:
- Participate effectively in a series of civic experiences (e.g., town hall meeting, ...) related to controversies and public lands;
- Meet with individual stakeholders on both sides of an issue to ascertain their perspectives and understand their positions;
- Participate in a public meeting about a public lands controversy and then write a reflective essay about the experience; and
- Write a letter to the editor of a local paper, making comments and suggestions about a public lands controversy.

Reflections - Students will be able to:
- Prepare a well-written and thoughtful essay about a controversy over public lands that describes the controversy, the stakeholders, the issues, and the history of the conflict. The essay should include recommendations for successful resolution of the issue;
- Articulate the importance of being able to work collaboratively across and within community contexts and structures to solve problems related to public land use;
- Articulate reflective insights or analysis about how different stakeholders in communities shape and change the context and definition of public lands controversies;
- Demonstrate evidence of adjustment in own attitudes and beliefs because of learning about the diversity of viewpoints surrounding public land policy controversies; and
- Describe what the student has learned about her or himself as it relates to a reinforced and clarified sense of civic identity relating to public land controversies.

Learning Activities

The course utilizes backward design. All learning activities are directly tied to the Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) for the course. Some of the suggested course learning activities include:
- Quizzes
- Essay exams
- Discussion questions
- Debates
- Role plays
- Creation of written materials (i.e. letter to the editor)

Example

You work for the National Park Service and have been asked to brief the incoming Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park on the "brucellosis policy controversy." You have been asked to be sure to give a complete and unbiased account of this policy controversy that includes the point of view of all of the stakeholders involved. Draft a memo for the incoming Superintendent that addresses all of the following questions:
- What can science tell us about this controversy and why can't science "solve" the problem?
- Who are the various stakeholders? What values do they hold and how do these values shape their point of view regarding the controversy?
- Is there any common ground? If so, how can this common ground be utilized to find a solution? If not, where do you see areas for common consensus to be built?

Controversies in Yellowstone

Brucellosis

This disease can be found in Yellowstone bison and elk. Controlling the disease has not necessarily been for the benefit of the bison or elk themselves but rather for the surrounding livestock industry which, until recently, has faced severe economic penalties if cattle herds became infected with brucellosis. In an attempt to control the disease federal and state agencies have sent thousands of free ranging bison to slaughter and have depopulated multiple herds of domestic cattle.

Wolf Reestablishment

Over the course of a two year period (1995-1996) thirty one Canadian gray wolves were released in Yellowstone National Park. The decision to reestablish wolves was, and continues to be, controversial, especially in the ranching community.

Winter Use

Citizens have debated the acceptable uses of Yellowstone in the winter for more than 15 years. Some believe that the park should be open for snowmobiling while others do not. After more than 15 years of public debate and 10 federal lawsuits a final Rule for winter use in Yellowstone National Park has been promulgated and is currently being implemented. One of the goals of the Adaptive Management Plan is to create and enhance policy stakeholder buy-in. The creation of policy is not only about scientific evidence, but also about the melding of citizen opinions and values.

Course Structure

In addition to news articles and videos, research papers, government reports and book chapters, the course also offers original innovative content created specifically for this course. Course videos include interviews with 26 different stakeholders.

A Local Component

After students have completed the main course modules they will be required to research and talk to stakeholders about a local public lands controversy. The final project will require students to demonstrate their understanding of the SLOs by applying what they have learned about conflict management and finding common ground to the local controversy.

Innovative Content

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