Calming the Waters: Learning to Manage Western Water Conflict

Conflict has surrounded the Truckee, Carson and Walker River Basins for decades. Key issues include historical use on tribal lands, historical and current water rights, threats to water quality, and wildlife habitat protection. This program teaches youth about Nevada’s water issues and helps them develop the skills needed to address future water conflicts.

Issue:

The conflict over water in northwestern Nevada typically involves adult stakeholders with little youth exposure. But, since youth are our future decision-makers and resource managers, it’s important to have a program to teach them about Nevada’s water issues and help them understand how to address water conflict.

Teaching students to collaborate is important to resolving future environmental issues. Many experts believe conventional litigious and legislative approaches don’t work because they encourage those on the losing end of the confrontation to undermine solutions. Learning about collaboration, however, will help youth to find lasting sustainable solutions to future water shortages and water quality issues. What’s more, studies have shown that people are demanding more involvement in the public decisions affecting natural resources in which they have a vested stake. This curriculum prepares students for that role.

What Has Been Done:

Requests for this curriculum came from a variety of sources, including American Indian tribal councils, local educators, environmental and recreation groups, and local irrigation districts. From 2000-2002, needs assessments were conducted in the Walker River Basin as well as with informants from the Pyramid Lake, Yerington and Walker River Paiute tribes. The curriculum that came out of this process was then presented to 75 American Indians from throughout the West at the 2003 Southwest Indian Agriculture Association Conference. All told, 500 individuals helped shape the curriculum through assessments, surveys and public forums.

Since 2003, private and public school teachers in northwestern Nevada have taught the curriculum in classroom settings. The “Calming the Waters” curriculum also was featured on the University’s Walker River Basin Project Web site, and new or expanded teaching sites include the Yerington Paiute Tribe in Lyon County and Smith Valley High School in Lyon County. The curriculum, in addition to examining historical issues and conflicts, also explores current water-conservation and water-quality issues and teaches collaborative skills to students. It incorporates social studies, language arts and mathematics, and borrows from such disciplines as economics, sociology, agriculture, ecology, physical geography and cultural geography.

During the course of study, students practice communication, joint fact-finding and cooperative problem-solving skills, working in groups to research and report on various aspects of water conflict. They learn the difference between an interest and a position, and they learn how personal values shape attitudes. Along the way they develop skills essential to successful teamwork.

Impact:

More than 1,600 copies of the “Calming the Waters” curriculum are in circulation in private schools, public schools, tribal governments and after-school youth programs in Lyon, Storey, Mineral and Washoe counties. Test results show that students come away from these classes with improved knowledge of many subjects, including the geography of the Great Basin; the formation of Lake Lahontan and Walker and Pyramid lakes; the role of water in the lives of early Northern Paiute tribes; impacts of gold and silver mining on the region; key federal policies; and the effects of population growth on Nevada water use and issues.
Calming the Waters has received a number of awards, including the nationally competitive Association of Natural Resource Extension Professionals’ Gold Award; the National Association of County Agricultural Agents’ State Achievement Award for Excellence in 4-H and Youth Programming; the National Association of County Agricultural Agents State Award; and the U.S. Western Regional Finalist Award for an Extension Learning Module. It was also selected as the featured curriculum at the National Endowment for the Arts Teacher Institute in Nevada. It was nominated for a Western Extension Directors Award in 2009.

**Contacts:**

Loretta Singletary, Extension Educator, 775-463-6541, singletaryl@unce.unr.edu

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