

Minister of the Environment

Justin T. O'Connor Sloane
kingoconor [at] yahoo.com
Center for Interamerican Studies (Cuenca, Ecuador)

Introduction

This lesson is designed for use in advanced, preferably adult, conversational English courses. The objective of this lesson is to create an engaging dialogue concerning environmental and economic issues. This lesson works equally as well when presented to a class for spontaneous discussion or when given as a homework assignment in advance of class discussion. This lesson is devised to expand the vocabularies of English language learners (ELLs) by introducing and utilizing words that they may be unfamiliar with or that they do not routinely encounter.

The Scenario

- You are the newly appointed Minister of the Environment of a small, developing nation somewhere in South America.
- Your country is rich in natural beauty and certain natural resources but poor economically.
- A large, multinational oil corporation has determined that a sizeable reserve of oil exists under a vast expanse of relatively undisturbed tropical forest in a region that is considered to be one of the most beautiful in your country and which possesses a great and as of yet unrealized potential for a profitable and sustainable eco-tourism industry--an industry that would initially require government funding to develop.
- The region in question is also one of the poorest in your nation: unemployment is two to three times as high as in other regions, emigration is draining the tax-paying population and the people who remain are growing increasingly restless politically as evidenced by a sharp increase in protests, demonstrations, and marches upon provincial seats of government; some of which have closed intra-national highways, disrupting travel and commerce.
- The multinational oil corporation has approached your government's Department of Commerce and Economic Development with an economically attractive but environmentally destructive proposal to exploit the oil reserves.
- As per your country's often controversial, but congressionally mandated Environmental Protection Act the aforementioned department must receive your approval as Minister of the Environment if the proposed extraction of oil is to occur.

The Assignment

- What decision do you make? Do you allow the oil company to drill or not? Why? Support and defend your decision. What do you think the negative consequences of your decision could be? What do you think the benefits of your decision could be? How do you feel about your decision?

Points to Consider

- The oil company has made it clear that it is not willing to spend money on environmental protection measures: it is a take it or leave it proposition based upon what the company perceives to be the economic desperation of your nation. *Teachers: This is an important point to mention when presenting this lesson to your class because otherwise many of your students will choose the compromise route which short-circuits lively discussion.*
- As the new Minister of the Environment you are under tremendous political pressure: from the economic development at any cost governmental and societal faction; from the environmental protection and sustainability governmental and societal faction; from those who see a very bright political career for you if you play your cards right as Minister of the Environment, etc.
- You are both an environmentally conscious and economically pragmatic politician and so you will weigh both sides equally.
- The office of the Minister of the Environment is not a purely symbolic office; you have real political and governmental power. Historically, the office has not particularly favored either of the aforementioned factions.
- Environmental lawsuits were brought against the previous Minister of the Environment by a particularly vociferous and active,

nationally organized, environmental group: the Environmental Protection Front (EPF). The lawsuits failed but effectively ruined the previous Minister's career.

Questions

Teachers: Most of these questions are intended to allow for in-depth discussion by following-up students' yes/no answers with why/why not (etc.)?

- To further your own political aspirations do you side with the most powerful faction even if it goes against what you believe to be right?
- Do you do what you believe to be right, your political career be damned?
- Would you be concerned by the potential for intergovernmental conflict between your Department of the Environment, and the Department of Commerce and Economic Development; a conflict that could possibly jeopardize your career in government and politics?
- If you say no to the oil company you will risk being ostracized by the high-level social circle to which you belong due to its large business and pro-business component; are you willing to accept this risk?
- Do you consider short term, unsustainable economic progress to be worth the long term environmental costs if it creates jobs and tax revenue?
- Do you believe that stemming migration from and reducing political unrest in the region at issue outweighs the environmental concerns?
- Your decision will definitely be front-page news, so if you say no, when the unemployed citizens in that region of your country that would have benefited economically from the oil company's proposal learn of your decision, they are sure to demonstrate, closing down highways and quite possibly marching upon your office in the capital city; would you be willing to stick to your decision in the face of such a formidable protest if it were to occur?
- If a public opinion poll found that the majority of your nation's populace disagreed with your decision, would you reverse it?
- Do you take the EPF seriously enough to allow them to influence your decision or do you simply ignore them and hope that they don't cause you any trouble?
- The region of your country at issue is biodiversity rich. Do you risk destroying a potentially valuable and sustainable pharmaceutical resource area without first doing research?
- Do you think that eco-tourism is a viable economic option to resource exploitation?
- Should economic concerns take precedence over environmental concerns?

Additional Questions

- Do you believe that the global environment and our planet's ecological balance are being destroyed by human activities?
- Do you believe that this harm is largely irreparable or can we reverse much of the damage?
- Do you believe that our survival depends on an environmentally healthy and ecologically balanced planet?
- Is destructive exploitation of the environment always necessary to meeting mankind's immediate needs?
- Do you think that mankind will ever progress past the pursuit of short-term economic gain at the expense of sustainable economics, the environment, and our long-term well-being?
- What do you think the state of the global environment will be like in 50 years? In 100 years? 500 years?
- If you have, or plan to have children, do you ever worry that in the future the global environment may be degraded to such an extent that they will not be able to enjoy the same quality of life as you? What about their children, your grandchildren?
- Do you have confidence that mankind will eventually protect the environment in the way that is necessary to ensure our survival?
- How long do you think we have till we go beyond a point of no return ecologically speaking: or do you not believe that such a point exists in the balance of nature?
- Do you agree that a happy future for mankind depends on a healthy environment?
- Do you feel that your government is doing everything it can to protect the environment?
- Do you do everything that you can to protect the environment?
- Do you agree that the burning of fossil fuels such as oil and its derivative, gasoline, in internal combustion engines and coal in powerplants contributes to global warming by increasing the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, trapping sunlight that would otherwise be radiated back out into space, thereby elevating our planet's temperature?
- Do you believe that the effects of global warming will be detrimental, even disastrous to coastal cities, worldwide agriculture,

and many forms of plant life and the animals that depend on them?

- Do you think that mankind will implement the necessary technologies, many of which already exist today, to help in overcoming environmental problems?
- Why do you think that many of the environmentally friendly technologies that exist today are not being put to use?
- Do you agree that many large, multinational corporations are at least partially to blame for blocking the implementation of environmentally friendly technologies? If so, what do you think their reasons are for doing this?
- Do you believe that nature exists for no other reason than to be used for mankind's own purposes?
- Do you believe that biodiversity is priceless and that in it we can find the cure to just about anything?
- Do you believe that if we destroy biodiversity we are sacrificing a better future for everyone?
- Did you know that most pharmaceuticals are derived from plant species, many of which are to be found in biodiversity rich areas such as tropical forests?
- Did you know that tropical forests are being destroyed rapidly throughout the world?
- Do you think that mankind can overcome environmental problems with technology?
- Do you think that technology contributes to perpetuating the very environmental problems it is thought to be able to solve?
- Do you think that mankind will someday have to consume desalinated water and algae capsules to survive if there are global food and fresh water shortages?
- Do you think that mankind will be able to someday terra-form nearby planets like Mars so that an ever-growing human population can live there too?
- Do you think that if mankind destroys this planet it will be able to journey through the cosmos in huge spaceships till it finds new planets suitable for human habitation? Do you think that such planets exist? Do you think it is foolish that people suggest this as a future solution to our problems?
- What do you think some of the solutions to solving the environmental problems facing mankind may be?
- Do you think mankind will exist in 500 to 1,000 years if we continue in our current way of doing things? If so, how large of a population do you think that there will be?
- Do you prefer being in the city or being out in nature?
- Do you think that this preference influences your perception of how important you feel environmental and economic issues to be?
- Are you a member of any environmental groups?
- Do you tend to pay much attention to environmental issues?
- Do you believe that mankind will ever solve the environmental problems it faces?

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