Timber!: Effects of the Lumber Industry on Oregon’s Economy & Environment

Grades: 7-HS
Subjects: Geography, Oregon History, Economics
Suggested Time Allotment: 2-3 class periods

Lesson Background:

This lesson is intended to increase awareness and initiate discussion of the need to balance economic and environmental considerations.

Some amount of industry is necessary because it provides people with a means of livelihood, but many types of industries can have a negative impact on the natural environment. From the earliest days of pioneer European and American settlement, a large segment of Oregon’s economy has been based on resource extraction of one kind or another. The Northwest is especially rich in valuable natural resources such as timber, fish, water, minerals and soil—harvesting these commodities allowed the economy of the region to develop very quickly, but over the years the people of Oregon learned some hard lessons about the consequences that can often result when too much of a natural resource gets used up too quickly.

This lesson will focus on the history of one of Oregon’s most important and impactful resource industries: timber extraction.

PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES

- For perspective on the historic prominence of the timber industry in our state, direct students to the Search page of Historic Oregon Newspapers and instruct them to Enter Search ...with all of the words: “lumber mills.” How many pages matches does the search turn up? (As this is written, 37,118 pages on the site contain the words “lumber AND mills”: that’s slightly more than 1 in 5 of the total digitized pages!)

- Review the page headlined “Commerce With The Whole World” in the January 1, 1904 Portland Morning Oregonian. Reproduced are total figures for ship cargoes cleared in Portland in 1903, outbound to various regions of the world. Note that the export numbers are reported by region; at the end of each regional section, there is a “Recapitulation” summarizing the total shipments for the year. Have the class prepare a chart compiling the total numbers for lumber exports—
board-feet and dollar value—by regions: Asia (“the Orient”), South Africa, Europe, Australia, South America, Polynesia (“Papeete.”) Questions for discussion: How many board feet total of Oregon lumber were exported from Portland in 1903? What was the total dollar value of these exports? Which regions of the world bought the most Oregon timber?

- For a visual record of Oregon’s turn-of-the-century lumber industry, students may be instructed to examine pictorial features published in the Portland Oregonian: ‘From Forest To Mill (September 30, 1900), ‘Through Mill To Market’ (October 7, 1900), ‘Millions In Oregon Lumber’ (January 1, 1903), and ‘An Up-To-Date Oregon Logging Camp,’ (May 21, 1905).

- In order to trace the historic progression of deforestation across the North American continent, teachers can reference maps such as those available here:

What conclusions may we draw after examining the maps showing the extent of U.S. old growth forests in 1620, 1850, 1920 and the present day?

What we think of today as “environmental awareness” is a relatively recent development. In Oregon’s pioneer days, the people who came and settled here had an entirely different way of looking at the land. From their journals and letters, we know that many appreciated its unspoiled natural beauty. But, at the same time, they could not help but view the environment in light of its economic potential and opportunities for personal enrichment. The ‘bounties of nature’ in the Northwest seemed almost
literally inexhaustible to the pioneers, and so little thought if any was given to preserving nature for future generations.

As the 19th century came to a close, however, we can begin to track the emergence of a new relationship towards nature and the environment. This time period was known as the Progressive Era, and many of the country’s old assumptions were being reexamined by a new generation of thinkers and political leaders. Among these were President Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the U.S. Forestry Service, and John Muir, celebrated naturalist and founder of the Sierra Club. As a preamble to the DEBATE activity below, students may be assigned biographic research on Roosevelt, Pinchot and Muir.

CLASS ACTIVITY: DEBATING FOREST PRESERVATION

In the early 20th century, environmental issues were debated from three main points of view: Laissez-faire, Conservationist, and Environmentalist.

The Laissez-faire position held to the belief that legal property rights were sacred and binding; that the owners of private property—including timber companies—should be able to do whatever they saw fit with the land they owned. This approach, in their eyes, was the most conducive to business and commerce, creating the most jobs and most profits for the national economy. (This was the position of the lumber business leaders and their allies.)

The Conservationist position stressed that the laissez-faire approach was too wasteful and inefficient. Rather than allowing individual business persons free rein to dispose of the natural resources under their control, their preference was a national plan and sets of regulations devised by experts to maximize the long-term economic benefits of natural resources. (This was the position of Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot.)

The Environmentalist position went a step further by asserting that nature was almost sacred, and that man was an intruder. Humans should be allowed to visit and look at nature on some limited scale, but should not be allowed to alter or exploit the natural environment. It strenuously opposed timber cutting on most lands. (This was the position of John Muir and the Sierra Club.)

The class should be divided equally into three groups. One group should be assigned the Laissez-faire position, another group the Conservationist position, and the remaining group the Environmentalist position.

Before staging the in-class debate, task each group with researching their position in the library and on the internet—just remember to keep it in the context of the early 20th century, Progressive Era!

Historic Oregon Newspapers has a great deal of content that will prove useful here. Below are some links to good, representative articles to get you started:
Earliest mention of ‘forest preservation’ in a digitized OR newspaper:
‘Tree Culture-Information Wanted’, Salem Willamette Farmer, April 4, 1884


‘Take Steps to Protect the Forests of America’, Coos Bay Times, December 10, 1908, pages 1 and 4: http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn85033159/1908-12-10/ed-1/seq-1/ http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn85033159/1908-12-10/ed-1/seq-4/


FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY: BRINGING THE ISSUE INTO THE PRESENT DAY

The majority of the world’s remaining virgin forestland is tropical rainforest. It is only in recent decades that pioneers began moving into and settling in these areas. Here we can see many of the main same patterns of deforestation playing out as occurred in the U.S. in previous centuries—and here the contemporary environmental debate is centered.

The U.S. Geological Survey maintains the Earthshots website of satellite imagery demonstrating environmental changes as viewed from space. A series of satellite images of Rondônia, Brazil illustrate the spread of deforestation over an eighteen-year period. Sharing these images with the class can be an excellent way to tie in this lesson from Oregon’s past to relevant issues of the present day.