

Steak de Marsh au Wetland Sauce

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Abstract

A cartoon is presented as a means of simplifying a generalized wetlands issue to students. A complementary activity is proposed and discussed as a means of treating the limitations of the cartoon and approaching solutions to the issue based on distinctive values positions.



Expensive electric technology is not the only gimmickry available to classroom teachers. A cartoon can comprise a number of frames, and can be made with simple lines by any teacher who respects what has been referred to as its ability to "... crystallize complex issues into a single metaphor".¹ If this is so, the role of the cartoon as a teaching device in environmental education is still much underplayed.

The purpose of this item is to present the above cartoon and a related idea as ways of simplifying wetlands issues and clarifying related concepts and values. They are not lessons in their own right, but could form a basis for planning parts of a unit on wetlands. They were originally conceived for a nature

conservation magazine² as part of a series of ideas aimed at encouraging teachers to make more use of the up-to-date information on wetlands now available in magazine articles; such articles are often too long or content-laden for student use.

Valuable wetlands are being 'developed' into farmlands which become unproductive in a short time, and produce food at enormous long-term cost to the community or even surplus to real needs.³ The cartoon challenges readers to respond to the idea of 'eating' a wetlands wildlife habitat. Initially they must react instinctively to the thought of being served a steak accompanied by an ecological consequence of its production — destruction and displacement of wildlife! Student reactions to this could be mixed and even confused. They will need further activity to resolve their dilemmas, but the cartoon as a starting point should seek the widest possible range of responses — there is

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no single, 'correct' response. (Modifying the cartoon may help, e.g., try giving the frog, and even the steak, a thought balloon.)

Cartoons like this synthesize many symptoms, but hardly lend themselves to analysis of complex issues. Another simple activity seems necessary to integrate reactions to the cartoon into a strategy for resolving the general issue it represents.

Writing a recipe for *Steak de Marsh* can help channel the various reactions into a more-or-less ordered conflict. A class may be divided into three groups; those interested only in having food, those interested only in preserving wildlife, and those who want both. Each group must select from the following list of 'ingredients'; those which suit its interests, and eliminate those against its interests:-

- *One large boggy area*
- *Numerous bacteria and other micro-organisms*
- *Algae, reeds and other aquatic green plants*
- *Marsh grasses, herbs, shrubs and trees*
- *Numerous insects and smaller animals*
- *Fish, amphibians, reptiles and birds*
- *One or more dams*
- *A plan to drain and fill the whole area*
- *Crops, cattle and pasture*
- *Fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides*

The revised lists of ingredients can then be used for writing 'recipes' for the management of the area. Each group could add any other ingredients it needs and add the main people needed for the type of management proposed. Whether or not they are written in recipe book style, the cooking 'methods' devised will reflect disagreements amongst the groups. The resultant 'issue' will only be a starting point, but the paths taken towards resolving it should engage students in consensus as well as conflict.

The concepts of management and cooking are hereby considered analogous. The extent to which students understand the recipe-making process directly influences their perceptions of management plan development, where various resources and interests can be treated in infinite combinations but ultimately only one can be prescribed. To say that "*A management plan is just like a recipe*" can be very illustrative for students in primary years or those for whom such a concept is new. It is important however, that the analogy remain the medium and not become the subject of instruction.

A cartoon is definitely a more metaphoric device. The above example tends to say "*Think of the issue in this absurd sort of way*", but much of the magic of cartoons lies in their presentation of both the absurd and the serious together. To encourage students to present more of their own issues (wetlands and otherwise) in cartoons, imagine a pond ... houses, farms and factories in the background ... assorted plants and animals ... a frog asking a worried-looking waterbird: "*You're new to this pond, aren't you?*"

References

1. Harrison, R.P., *The Cartoon: Communication to the Quick*, Sage, London, 1981, p. 14.
2. *Wildlife Australia*, Vol. 23, No. 1., March 1986, p. 29. (Conceived by M. Cox, drawn by D. West).
3. Harvey, G., "The Taxpayer and the Swamp", *Wildlife Australia*, Vol. 23, No. 1., March 1986.