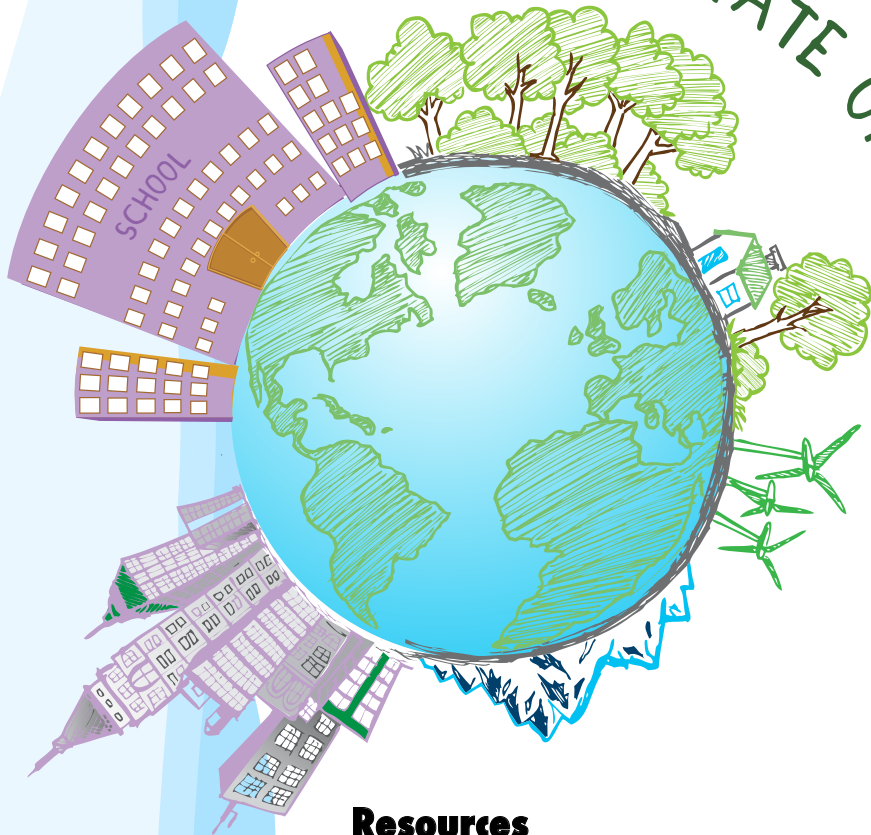


WHAT IS THE STATE OF OUR COMMONS?



Resources

Grade: 6 - 8

Lesson: What is the State of Our Commons?

Number of Class Periods: 4 45-minute class periods (additional time may be needed for completion or presentation of State of the Commons reports)



The Healthy Commons Lesson Set was co-created by TerraCycle, The Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education, and Learner-Centered Initiatives.



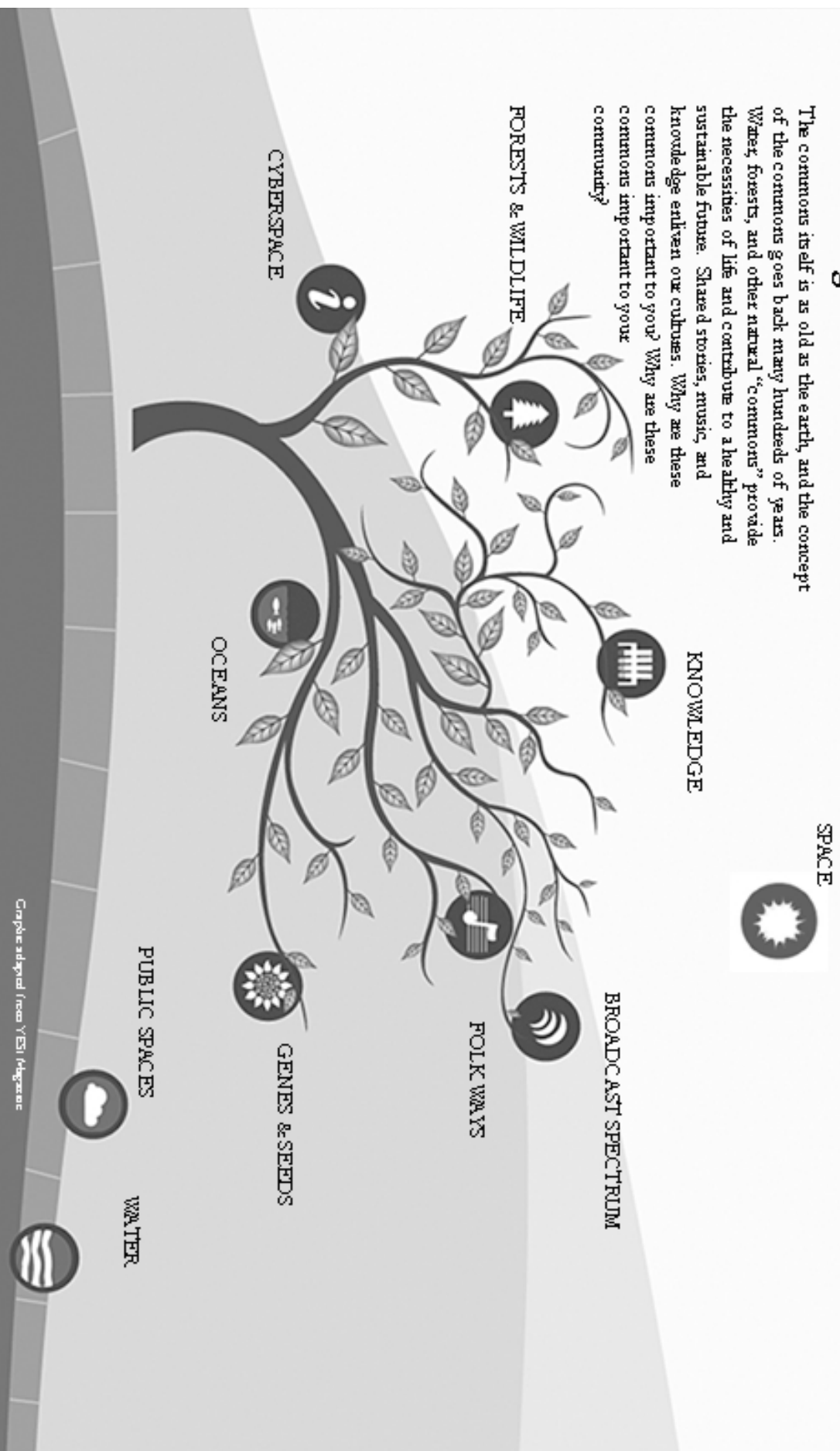
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Student Resource

Discovering the Commons

The commons itself is as old as the earth, and the concept of the commons goes back many hundreds of years.

Water, forests, and other natural "commons" provide the necessities of life and contribute to a healthy and sustainable future. Shared stories, music, and knowledge enrich our cultures. Why are these commons important to you? Why are these commons important to your community?



For each of the above categories, list examples of commonly owned or shared spaces or things in your school or home community.

IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING THE COMMONS (JONATHAN ROWE, TOMALES BAY INSTITUTE)

What are the Commons? Are there common characteristics that you can use to identify the Commons? The following are guidelines to developing a basic understanding of what comprises the Commons.

Is the activity, resource, etc., open to anyone?

A sidewalk is free and open to all, as is the air we breathe and the language we speak. Anyone can go to Central Park, or walk along the river, or go to the library. We don't have to ask anyone's permission to speak English or Spanish, or pay a fee for the words we use.

Are there conditions for using a Commons?

There are conditions for attending the public schools (e.g., we have to be a certain age, be residents of the city, etc.) The streets are free but to drive a car on them we have to have a license and the car has to be registered and insured. We may also have to pay for parking.

Sometimes the conditions are informal. A playground basketball court technically is open to all. However if there are people playing, you better be at their skill level if you want to try to join the game. Front stoops are also technically open to everyone, although only those who know the people who live there might sit on them.

Who sets the rules?

Rules are built into the languages we speak. There are no police who make sure we use the language correctly – except where we learn the rules of language in school. However if we don't use it correctly, sometimes people will correct us and enforce our language use in certain settings.

Musical notes, chords, scales etc., are also examples of a common language that we are free to use. Music has its own internal rules, although we can stretch those rules. But if we don't do it well people may avoid the music we create.

The same is true of lines. Most people get into line and respect the people who got there ahead of them. If someone tries to cut in front they may find themselves facing a confrontation.

Sidewalks are a mixture. There are formal conditions, laws that say we can't rob or assault others with whom share the sidewalk. But for the most part we follow an informal social code. You don't stare at people or hassle people or walk into people. Playgrounds are mixtures too. On most playground basketball courts there is an informal rule: winners play and losers sit.

Is a Commons limited or unlimited?

Some Commons are without limit (infinite). No one ever will exhaust the English language or the musical scales or the numbers 1-100 by using them. Thus there is no need for rules to limit use. Such rules would only stifle people for no good reason.

On the other hand some Commons are limited (finite). Fish stocks are an example. Fish can be plentiful unless open access produces conditions in which “the number of fisher folk fishing the way they do results in more fish being taken out faster than the replenishment rate.” Clean air is another example. It can hold only so much gunk, and that’s why we have to set limits. There is only so much space in a park or on a sidewalk before it becomes overcrowded.

Some Commons are limited in theory but not practice. Technically the public library could be jammed to overflowing but it rarely is, and the same is true of Central Park.

Do we have any say (voice) in these rules, and how?

Having a say in making and enforcing rules is a basic distinction between a Commons and private property. In private property – e.g., a store – the owner sets the rules and we have a limited say in. For example, health, safety, product labeling are still in the context of private property... With a Commons all citizens have a voice, for example in the governments and block associations, etc., that we elect.

Whether that say is effective is another matter, and one worthy of discussion too. Once we establish that a Commons is ours, and that we are joint owners, then our right to have a say in the management of our own property becomes all the more clear.

Can or should a Commons produce revenue?

When a Commons is limited and desirable then we can charge people for using it. This can help pay for upkeep of the Commons and help pay for other things as well, such as schools. Parking is an example, admission fees for zoos and other attractions are another.

When should there be a charge for the use of a Commons and when should it be free?

Should there be fees for using public basketball courts to help keep them in good condition? Should people have to pay to use the public library? Should people be expected to pay to walk across the Brooklyn or George Washington Bridge?

Who has rights or first “dibs” on the Commons?

Sometimes there are conflicting uses for a limited Commons. Young people want to play in the street and cars want to drive in it. Some people want to put noise in the air and some want peace and quiet. There can’t be both at the same time – noise and quiet. So which gets priority? Who decides?

When should something be a Commons in the first place?

There is a big push today to abolish the Commons and make everything part of the economic market. Private corporations would own the libraries, the schools, the playgrounds, the water system, maybe even some streets, and people would have to pay prices to use them. When is that okay and when is that not okay? Why?

Some additional characteristics are:

- Commons aren’t included in the economic market;
- Commons are sometimes invisible; and
- Commons can be non-exclusionary.

IDENTIFYING THE COMMONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

What are the common spaces, resources, and things in your community?

1. Applying your new knowledge of the Commons, you are going to take a community walk in your school or home community. *Record what Commons you see and don't see in your community.*

2. Use the following to help you with your observations and documentation:

- Remember to look for evidence of visible and invisible Commons.
- Also note where some example of the Commons such as water, etc., may no longer be available to all and are private and/or public goods.
- Keep in mind Commons such as fashion, history, natural resources, language and music.

3. Respond to the following in the space below or on a separate sheet of paper:

A *What characteristics of the Commons did you see in your community?*

B *What characteristics of the Commons did you not see?*

C *What surprised you or was different from what you expected?*

4. Share your observations and your response to the above questions with the class. Discuss how the walk helped you to better understand the characteristics of the Commons and how they exist in your community.

A _____

B _____

C _____

Student Reflection

Considering the Commons

Review the work of the past two days. Pause and consider what you have been learning. In the space provided, respond to the following questions:

1. Why are these Commons important to me?

2. Why are these Commons important to my community?"

Finally, select a Commons from the school or home community that you feel is particularly important and which you would like to help others to understand better. This Commons will become the basis of your "State of the Commons Report."

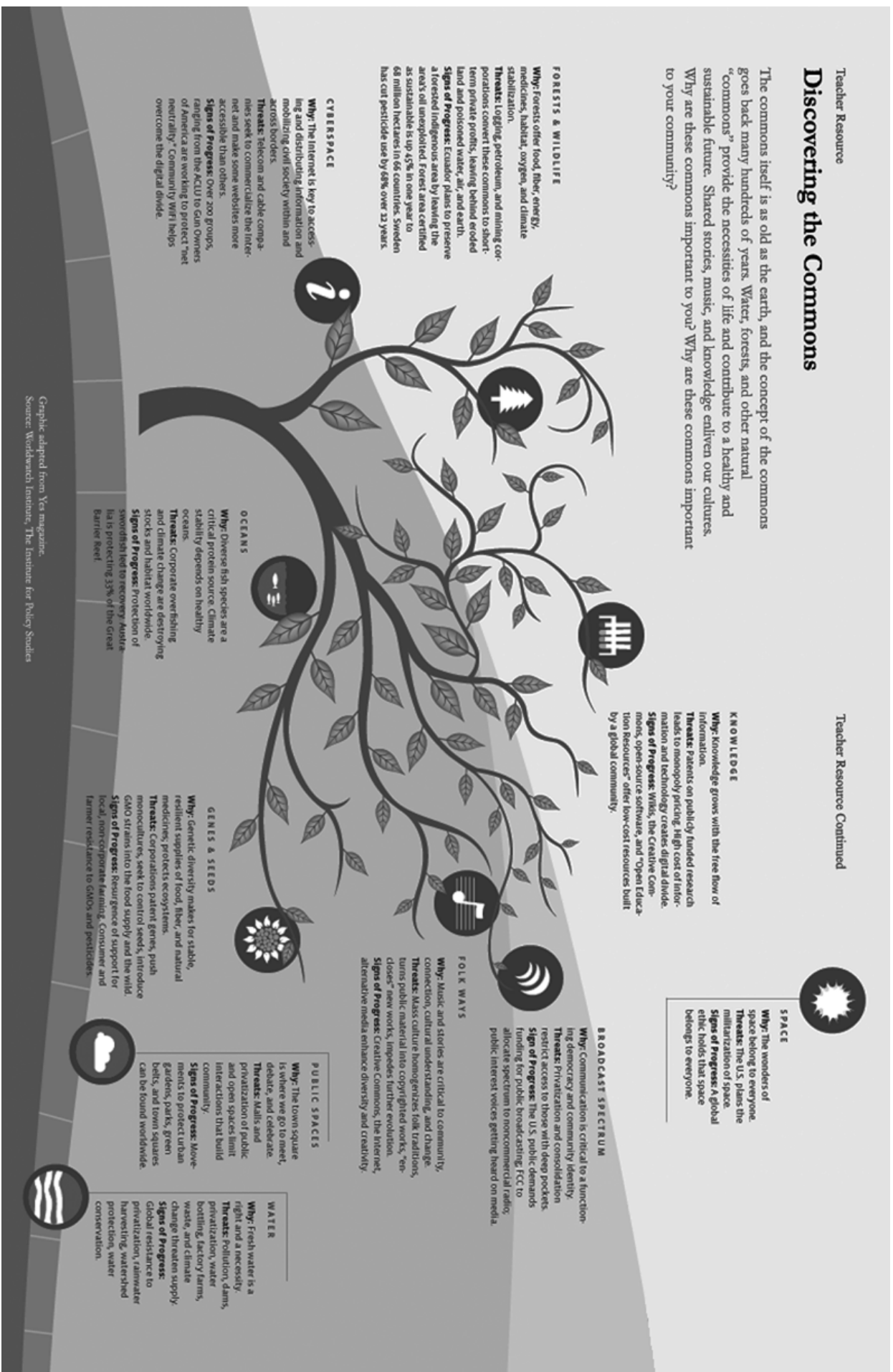
My Commons focus:

Teacher Resource

Discovering the Commons

The commons itself is as old as the earth, and the concept of the commons goes back many hundreds of years. Water, forests, and other natural “commons” provide the necessities of life and contribute to a healthy and sustainable future. Shared stories, music, and knowledge enliven our cultures. Why are these commons important to you? Why are these commons important to your community?

Teacher Resource Continued



Graphic adapted from Yes magazine. Source: Worldwatch Institute, The Institute for Policy Studies

Student Activity

The State of the Commons Report

Commons is a generic term. It embraces all the creations of nature and society that we inherit jointly and freely, and hold in trust for future generations.

Your **State of the Commons** report is an invitation to look carefully at a Commons that you find particularly interesting. It provides you with an opportunity to communicate your awareness and understanding about this Commons to others: to help others appreciate its importance, recognize how they themselves use it, and understand their responsibilities to protect and nurture it so that it will be healthy and strong enough to continue to provide support for everyone.

Your report on the State of the Commons should include the following components:

A Description of the Commons

This section focuses on the specific Commons you are reporting on.

Guiding questions:

- What Commons is the focus of this report?
- What makes it a Commons?
- What are its key functions? (e.g. – fills basic needs, source of natural resources, provides natural recycling, acts as a knowledge bank, inspires creativity, supports communication, enables travel, establishes community)
- What materials cycle in this Commons? Are they natural or man made? Since all materials cycle, what are the materials cycles that are operating in this Commons?

History of the Commons

The Commons is as old as time itself. In this section of the State of the Commons you should describe the ways other societies and civilizations and your own community have addressed the particular Commons you have selected to examine. Be specific and cite examples.

Why the Commons Matters Now

What is it about the Commons that you are focusing on that is critical to protecting the planet, enhancing our quality of life, reducing inequality and leaving a better world for those who follow us? Include and cite whatever information or beliefs is leading you to say the things that you do.

Current Challenges to this Commons

Overuse can lead to destruction. In what ways is the health of the Commons you have selected as your focus being challenged or threatened? What specific stresses are being put on this Commons? By whom? How do you know (be specific and cite any sources)? How might those challenges be managed? Are these challenges connected to the materials cycles?

What Do the Commons Need from Us?

What are some ideas that you have for improving or maintaining the Commons? What do people need to be aware of or learn more about in order to enable this Commons to reach peak and consistent health?