Introduction To Public Lands

Grade Level: Secondary

Time: 1-5 days

Introduction and Teacher Background:

Public lands are owned and managed by a government agency. Ownership may be the federal government or it could be either a state or local body. When we think of public lands, most of us usually think about a national park or a national forest. Public lands are much more extensive: they include land used for government buildings, for highways, for military bases, for wildlife management, for water management, and for a host of other uses.

Public land may be defined as government owned and managed land that is used for any public purpose. Governments are assigned the tasks of providing transportation, education, administration, health and police protection to name just a few governmental responsibilities. Each of these activities requires a place, or some land, upon which to complete these tasks. As stated earlier, public land is required for a national park or forest. On a less spectacular level, most governments also need land called rights-of-way, or easements upon which to locate roads, water and electric lines, and sewage mains. How do you suppose the various levels of government got ownership of these lands? At the national level, all land not owned by an individual at the time of independence from England became public land. On the state and local levels, when these governments were created, they too received ownership to those areas in their jurisdiction that were not owned by some individual or group such as a church or a military organization.

In 1845, when Florida became a state, it was already the owner of many acres of land that had been allotted to the state when it was a territory. In 1823, an act of congress stated that an entire township was to be given to the state to be used to establish a “seminary of learning.” In the same law all rivers and navigable waters were to “remain public highways.” The land under those water bodies was to be owned by the state. In 1845 lands were provided to establish a “seat of government” and two seminaries, one east and one west of the Suwannee River. Of course, these became the Florida State University and the University of Florida. This very important act followed the policy of the federal government that gave section 16 of every township in the state to be used or sold for the support of public schools.

As we might guess, much of the unused and publicly owned land was of very poor quality. On the other hand, land that was located far from developed areas may have been of high quality but it lacked access, or an easy way for people to get to it. When the nation, state, or community grew, many times the governments used these lands to encourage occupation and development. For example, in 1862 the Congress of the United States passed the Morrill Act, a law that, among other things, allowed each state to receive 30,000 acres of land for each senator and representative they had in the legislative branch of the government. These lands could be sold or donated in order to generate money to establish schools of agriculture and engineering. About 90 schools over the country are called Morrill Act or Land Grant Schools because they were created due to this act. In Florida, Florida A and M and the University of Florida are Land Grant schools.

In that same year, 1862, congress passed the Homestead Act, which, among other things, gave 160 acres to any family that lived, or “homesteaded,” on a parcel and developed it for five
years. If a family didn’t want to wait five years, they could purchase the land for $1.25 an acre. Be assured, $1.25 in the 1860s was worth a lot more than it is in the 2000s. In either case, the Homestead Act encouraged people to move south and west (particularly west) to turn idle, public land into production. Ownership and land production were very important because they translated into needed tax money for the local and state governments.

Today every level of government has large holdings of land. Some of it is used for purposes mentioned above and purchased through state programs and tax money. Some, however, is needed for a valid purpose and must be taken from a landowner through a process called “eminent domain.” That is when an evaluation is made of the land and the owner is given fair value for the land by a government. If the owner thinks the value is more than the government offers, he/she can go before a board of citizens to try to get more value. Sometimes they get what they ask for and sometimes the citizen board feels the state offer is adequate. There are other ways a government acquires land such as receiving it as a gift through outright donation or through a will upon a person’s death. A very interesting relatively new process is for the public to acquire land through a purchase in cooperation with a non-profit group set up for that purpose. Examples of that kind of organization are the Trust for Public Land and The Nature Conservancy.

This is a general description of how governments in our country first received their public land. More description can be found by writing or e-mailing the Bureau of State Land Management, in the Department of Environmental Protection in Tallahassee, or from the Property Appraiser’s office in your county courthouse.

Materials: Background information provided and a variety of maps provided by property appraiser’s office (http://sun6.dms.state.fl.us/dor/property/appraisers.html)

Objectives:
Cognitive:
To understand:
-the nature of public lands.
-the various characteristics of public lands.
-the many uses of public lands.
-the purpose of rights-of-way, easements, etc.
-various terms used in discussing public lands.
-the different ways each level of government has come into possession of their land.
-some of the aspects of the history of public lands and how they have been used.
-the general intent of both the Morrill and Homestead Acts of the U. S. Congress.
-the process and purposes of the “eminent domain” procedure.

Psychomotor:
Be able to:
-interpret a map of Florida’s Conservation Lands.
-construct a map of selected public lands in your town.
-use data from the Property Appraiser’s office to identify local public land.
-plan and implement a field trip to observe several parcels of public land.

**Affective:**
To appreciate:
- the need for a society to have public spaces.
- the relationships of public land to the support of education.
- the importance of good management of public land.
- the use of tax money to implement good land and water management.

**Concepts:**

Public Land- Government-owned and managed land that is, or could be, used for public purposes.

Right-of-way- Land over which a person has the right of passage. It can be the land on which a road is built. It can be the land that contains water, electric, sewer, phone or other utility services. Such lands can be owned by private companies like power companies.

Easement- Legal permission to limited use or enjoyment on land that is owned by another person or company.

Jurisdiction- The power, or right to exercise power, or control over land.

Township- A division of territory in surveys of public land containing 36 sections (each section is a square mile).

Morrill Act- An 1862 Act of Congress that provided for grants of land to the various states for the purpose of establishing agricultural colleges. Later, it was used to support other educational objectives. Many states identified the section 16 in every township to be used, or sold, for education purposes.

Homestead Act- An 1862 Act of Congress that encouraged westward agricultural expansion by giving land to families who met specified rules.

Land Grant Schools- Agricultural schools that were established through the implementation of the Morrill Act. (In Florida, Florida A&M and the University of Florida).

Eminent Domain- A right of a government to take private property for public use with just compensation.

**Suggested Teaching Strategies:**

**Planning for the lesson:**
Obtain local and state maps to be used in these exercises. Local maps may be obtained (sometimes free), but always inexpensively (less than $5.00) from the local planning agency. Other sources are possible: banks, real estate agencies, the Property Appraiser’s office, and the Chamber of Commerce.

County and regional maps may be obtained from the County Agricultural agent, the regional planning office, the water management district office or the district office of the Florida Department of Transportation.
State of Florida maps can also be acquired at the Department of Transportation office or at a regional tourist agency.

Note: If only one or just a small number of maps are available, place a sheet of tracing paper or vellum over the map and make a simple outline map of the area under study. By making a classroom set of the simple maps it is possible to have the students fill in major roads, lakes, and other identifying points as a part of the exercise.

Initiating Activity:
There are many ways to open this study. One is to display a map, with significant reference points, of the city, county, or state that shows selected public lands without identifying titles or uses. These areas would include sites such as parks, recreation fields, major public buildings, and, possibly a wildlife management area, etc. Use a different color or symbol for each use.

Teaching Strategies:
1. Have students identify these sites as to their use and then ask “Who owns these parcels of land?” Develop the concept “public land.”
2. As stated above, another way to begin this unit of work is to place the concept “public lands” on the board and then have students brainstorm the possible meanings as you hand out maps for them to locate “public lands.”
3. If blank, or outline, maps are available have the students (2-4 to a map) label the public lands identified in discussion and then add lands they can think of. These can include schools, fire and police stations, public hospitals, airports, and other government buildings. The teacher may have to suggest lands such as public beaches, access points to water areas such as beaches, lakes and rivers. Military lands may include major bases as well as National Guard and Reserve Armories. In addition, garbage disposal sites, water treatment plants, and public power plants are important cultural infrastructure land uses in our society. While not necessary to map, roads need to be mentioned as a public land use that makes up a large part of our public land.

Culminating Activities:
1. Have a representative or the planning department come to the class to discuss the “Role of Public Lands In Our Society.” Of course this may be accomplished by having the teacher, or a group of students, go to the person’s office and tape (audio or video) an interview. Since there are many different types of public lands, the teacher has a variety of ways to cover this material such as interviews, student reports, teacher presentation, or role-playing.
2. Teacher or student presentations may be prepared to cover the various types of public lands mentioned above. Possibly the librarian would be a big help organizing library research on the topic.
3. Reviewing this resource guide’s introduction will suggest several map and research activities depending on what strategies the teacher has already chosen.
4. Exercises can be developed with other teachers, such as looking at the history of the Homestead and Morrill acts, examining the biology of national or state parks, forests, etc. A project with the math teacher could cover the Section-Township-Range system for
showing public land locations and other geography lessons could deal with the location of any of the types of land uses.

5. Several exercises such as these suggested are included in the following sections of this resource guide.

6. Depending on the availability of computers in the classroom, some of the maps and much of the content covered in this lesson can be obtained in electronic form.

**National Geography Standards:**
Standard 14-Environment and Society-How human’s actions modify the physical environment.
Standard 16-Environment and Society- The changes that occur in the meaning, use, distribution, and importance of resources.
Standard 17-The Uses of Geography-How to apply Geography to interpret the past.

**Sunshine State Standards:**
SS.B.1.3.1-The student uses various map forms and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report geographic information including patterns of land use, connections between places, and patterns and processes of migration and diffusion.

**FCAT Statement:**
LA.A.2.2.7-The student recognizes the use of comparison and contrast in a text.
LA.A.2.3.5 - The student locates, organizes, and interprets written information for a variety of purposes, including classroom research, collaborative decision- making, and performing a school or real-world task.
MA.A.1.3.2-understands the relative size of integers, and decimals; numbers expressed as per cents; numbers with exponents; numbers in scientific notation; radicals; absolute value; and ratios.
MA.B.3.3.1-solves real-world and mathematical problems involving estimates of measurements including length, time, weight/mass, temperature, money, perimeter, area, and volume, in either customary or metric units.