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Homeland: Four Portraits of Native Action

This Study Guide Applies to the Following Student Audiences:

General: All secondary school students with curricula in Social Studies or Environmental Studies

Specific: Indigenous secondary students in all schools; public, private, tribal, and BIA; other minority secondary students; all secondary students in highly culturally diverse settings; tribal colleges

Synopsis of the Film:

Homeland: Four Portraits of Native Action

One of the most important but least known human rights stories in America today is the destruction of Native American lands and its impact on Native peoples. Nearly all indigenous nations in the U.S. sit on land threatened by environmental hazards—toxic waste, strip mining, oil drilling and nuclear contamination. The realities are often bleak—children play near radioactive waste, rivers that tribes depend on for food are poisoned, and reservations are surrounded by strip mines and smoke stacks spewing noxious fumes.

Homeland: Four Portraits of Native Action takes a hard look at these realities. It follows the efforts of activists who are fighting back in four Native American communities. These leaders are passionately dedicated to protecting Indian lands and ensuring the cultural survival of their peoples. They are:

Gail Small, Northern Cheyenne, Montana – An attorney fighting to protect the Cheyenne homeland from the ruin caused by 75,000 proposed coal bed methane gas wells that threaten to contaminate the Tongue River.

Evon Peter, Gwich'in, Alaska – The Chief of an isolated community fighting efforts to drill for oil in the fragile Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. At risk are the refuge, the caribou and the cultural survival of the Gwich'in people.

Mitchell and Rita Capitan, Eastern Navajo, New Mexico – Tribal activists rallying their community against a new uranium mining proposal that threatens to contaminate the only source of drinking water for 15,000 people on the Navajo reservation.

Barry Dana, Penobscot, Maine – The Chief of the Penobscot who is battling powerful paper companies and the state government to save the Penobscot River—a source of culture, food and medicinal plants for the Penobscot people.

Homeland: Four Portraits of Native Action shows how indigenous people feel a profound spiritual connection to the natural world. For them, issues of clean air and water are not just about maintaining good health and a good quality of life; honoring the earth is part of their spiritual essence.

Study Guide Objectives:

- To understand the environmental effects of energy development.
- To consider the role of democratic participation in policy-making.
- To understand the concept of environmental justice.
- To strengthen an understanding of cultural diversity among indigenous peoples.
- To consider differences in the orientation to the earth of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.
- To develop appreciation and respect for different cultural values.

Grade Level and Subject Areas:

Tribal Colleges

Grades 9-12

Social Studies, American History, Native American Studies, Civics, Environment, Economics

Applicable McRel standards: Level IV [Grade 9-12]

Historical Understanding

Standard 2.

Understands the historical perspective

Benchmark 10. Understands how the past affects our private lives and society in general

Benchmark 11. Knows how to perceive past events with historical empathy

Civics

Standard 4.

Understands conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among individuals, groups, and institutions

Benchmark 7. Understands that even when the majority of people in a society agree on a social decision, the minority who disagree must be protected from oppression, just as the majority may need protection against unfair retaliation from the minority

Standard 14.

Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life

Benchmark 1. Understands the importance of established ideals in political life and why Americans should insist that current practices constantly be compared with these ideals

Health

Standard 2.

Knows environmental and external factors that affect individual and community health

Benchmark 2. Knows how individuals can improve or maintain community health (e.g., becoming active in environmental and economic issues that affect health, assisting in the development of public health policies and laws, exercising voting privileges)

Materials Needed:

Internet access for researching background information and discussion topics.

Estimated Time Needed:

Homeland can be seen either in its entirety (86 minutes) or in 20-minute modules (there are four stories, each approximately 20 minutes long).

Suggested Procedure:

First class period: View the first two 20-minute modules. Follow this with a 10-minute class discussion based on the questions, “What do the nations portrayed in the film have in common in terms of their relationship to the land?” and “How do you think that relates to their identities as indigenous people?” For homework, assign a short essay describing their opinions and ideas on those questions.

Second class period: View the remaining two 20-minute modules. Follow this with a 10-minute class discussion based on the question, “Are the notions of community and relationship to the environment expressed by the indigenous leaders in *Homeland* different from those of non-indigenous people? Why or why not?” For homework, assign students a short essay describing their opinions and ideas on that question.

Third class period: Begin with a 20-minute class discussion guided by the questions listed below. Conclude the period with a 30-minute activity, such as those suggested below.

Discussion Ideas and Questions to Ask of Students:

- What does the term “environmental justice” mean?
- Where do you think the leaders in *Homeland* get the inspiration and strength to face their difficult struggles?
- Do you think the people in *Homeland* have a real chance to win their battles? What are the weapons they use to wage their wars?
- What are the greatest obstacles facing the Native American leaders in their efforts to save their land and cultures?

Class Activities and/or Take-Home Assignments:

- Activism against environmental threats is not unique to Native Americans; rather it is a global phenomenon. What are some other indigenous environmental struggles taking place in the world today? Identify case studies from three other continents. Compare and contrast those cases with the cases presented in *Homeland*.
- Research via the Internet several historical cases dealing with environmental threats to communities such as Love Canal in New York, Rocky Flats Arsenal in Colorado, Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania, and PG&E in California (made famous by the film *Erin Brockovich*). Discuss similarities and differences in the situations compared with the four communities in *Homeland*.

Background Information:

North America consists of some 500 distinct indigenous tribes. These tribes speak a variety of languages that span thirty distinct language families. Each tribe has its own cultural legacy consisting of customs, kinship, creation stories and economic systems. They represent a far wider degree of cultural diversity than all of the cultures on the European continent.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Europeans began to take over the American continent, indigenous peoples faced the prospect of total extinction. The U.S. government first tried to annihilate, and then assimilate indigenous communities into a national society based on European values and principles. Federal policy toward Natives was exemplified by the 1802 and 1818 Civilization Acts, which gave money to settlements that attempted to “civilize Indians.”

By the mid-nineteenth century, U.S. policy toward indigenous people was to do with them whatever was deemed necessary to accommodate the interests of “Manifest Destiny,” the European-American belief that it was God’s will that white settlers should “inherit” the continent. Manifest Destiny centered on the exploitation of the continent’s abundant natural resources. Indigenous-U.S. relations were driven by the government’s push to move indigenous communities away from these resources to places that appeared to have no value to the growing economy.

In 1851, the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Appropriations Act, which established the reservation system and reduced the land base of indigenous peoples even further. This land grab was easy to accomplish since indigenous peoples had no rights and no alternatives. Native peoples were put at risk again in the twentieth century when it was realized that the barren lands to which the tribes had been relegated were actually rich in energy resources, such as natural gas and oil. In 1971, Congress set up for-profit corporations (instead of tribes) to hold title to indigenous lands in Alaska under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, thereby disconnecting hundreds of federally recognized tribes from ownership of most of their ancestral lands.

Today, there are 317 official reservations in the U.S. Together they account for just four percent of the total territory of the U.S. Yet even those small pockets of land are being targeted for exploitation. Today’s tribal leaders understand that their communities are interdependent with one another, with other cultural minorities, and with the dominant national culture as well. But their very essence as

indigenous people means their welfare is tied to the welfare of their natural environments. It is for this reason that many tribal leaders are fighting back.

The four groups showcased in *Homeland: Four Portraits of Native Action* embody the broad cultural array of Native America. They also illustrate the powerful threats that Native Americans face in today's world.

The Northern Cheyenne live on a small reservation in eastern Montana that represents a small fraction of the Northern Plains area they once occupied. Today, the tribe numbers approximately 6,600 members. Two-thirds live on the reservation, which ironically sits atop some of the largest and most potentially lucrative natural gas and coal-bed methane gas fields in the world.

The Gwich'in, numbering about 7,000, live in fifteen communities across northern Alaska and Canada, inside the Arctic Circle. They are considered to be the oldest inhabitants of the Americas. They share cultural similarities to other Arctic peoples due to the special challenges of living in their harsh natural environment. To preserve the delicate balance required to survive in such a land, they have resisted assimilation and instead maintain their traditional lifeways. Essential to their culture and survival is the Porcupine caribou, now threatened by potential oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The Gwich'in consider the fight to protect the birthplace of the caribou in the refuge coastal plain a human rights issue.

The Navajo Nation consists of some 300,000 members who live on the largest reservation in the U.S. The reservation spans three of the Four Corners states – Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah – and is larger than the states of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. Although their cultural heritage embraces life in the desert southwest, their origins as a people are in the far north, in Alaska's interior, where similar Athabaskan-speaking tribes are still found today. During the Cold War, the Navajo Nation's proximity to valuable uranium reserves resulted in a tragic health crisis for Navajo men who mined radioactive uranium without protective clothing. Despite the devastating effects of uranium mining, energy corporations remain committed to plundering uranium beneath Navajo lands.

The Penobscot of Maine number just over 2,000 members. They live on their traditional homelands along the banks of the Penobscot River, which continues as the focal point of their culture. Today, industrial encroachment upon the watershed, particularly by the paper products industry, threatens to destroy their way of life as well as the river's entire ecosystem.

A common concern in these four cases, as well as the environmental movement of the country in general, is the ongoing relaxing of the safeguards and stewardship of the land in favor of the interests of the energy industry. This rollback of thirty years of environmental laws has been particularly alarming in recent years. While more and more people recognize the importance of environmental protection, indigenous people view this not as a stand-alone political issue, but as an integral need in a comprehensive, holistic vision of the earth as a living, organic community.

The dire stories in *Homeland* are symptomatic of a systemic problem. Environmental hazards, ranging from toxic and nuclear waste dumping to clear cutting, endanger nearly every Indian reservation in the United States. While the threats faced by these communities have grave cultural implications for the future well-being of indigenous America, the overall risk factors ultimately present a crucial challenge to the welfare of all Americans.

Extensions and Adaptations:

“The non-indigenous world is not the exclusive model for modernity, and there is no reason to relegate indigenous culture to the status of mere tradition.”

–Víctor Hugo Cárdenas, *former Director of the Indigenous Peoples Fund (Fundo Indígena)*

Indigenous peoples offer distinct cultural legacies and unique perspectives on the natural world that can enrich academic and social environments globally. This premise can act as a departure point for ongoing student exploration and classroom discussions.

Suggested Adaptation Activities:

- Divide the class into debate team pairs, each pair representing both the indigenous perspective and the resource-exploitation perspective of the four environmental cases in *Homeland: Four Portraits of Native Action* (or a similar real-world indigenous environmental issue). Have each team pair debate the pros and cons of their respective positions. As an alternative, have one side argue the point from the perspective of Rita and Mitchell Capitan and the other side from the point of view of the “Allotees.” Rather than being confrontational, each team should strive to convince the other side of the advantages of their position.
- Review the four cases in *Homeland: Four Portraits of Native Action*, focusing on how the people affected in each case are frustrated by the political and legal inadequacies in resolving their issues. Discuss possible remedies to empower them and others in similar situations. Consider the utilization of existing legal and political mechanisms as well as the formulation of new policy and laws that could benefit civil society.

Resources

For more information about the film:

Katahdin Foundation

www.katahdin.org

Or call or write:

Katahdin Foundation

1010 Grayson Street, Suite 1

Berkeley, CA 94710

510-666-0866

For more information about the four groups featured in *Homeland*, please visit these websites:

ENDAUM

www.endaum.org

Gwich'in Steering Committee

www.gwichinsteeringcommittee.org/

Native Action

www.nativeaction.org

The Penobscot Nation

www.penobscotnation.org

Additional Resources:

Native Movement

www.nativemovement.org

Honor the Earth

www.honorearth.org

Northern Cheyenne Net

www.ncheyenne.net

The Navajo Nation

www.navajo.org

Ecosystem Change: The Impact on Indigenous Health

<http://topics.developmentgateway.org/indigenous>

Indigenous Environmental Network

www.ienearth.org

Cultural Environmental Studies: Indigenous Cultures and Environmental Injustice
www.wsu.edu/~amerstu/ce/native.html

Amazon Watch
www.amazonwatch.org

First Nations Environmental Network
www.fnen.org

The Cultural Conservancy: In the Spirit of Inter-Species Harmony
www.nativeland.org

The Center for Native Lands
www.nativelands.org

International Indian Treaty Council
www.treatycouncil.org

Oxfam America: Indigenous Environmental Network
[www.oxfamamerica.org/whatwedo/where we work/united states/local partners/IEN_partner](http://www.oxfamamerica.org/whatwedo/where_we_work/united_states/local_partners/IEN_partner)

Native American Views of the Environment
<http://webhost.bridgew.edu/jhayesboh/RESOURCE/env-indigenous.htm>

The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/

