

**LEVEL:** Grades 5-12

**SUBJECTS:** English, Social Studies, Drama

**PROCESS:** Through a parable, students learn that ecosystems are valued in diverse ways.

**OBJECTIVES:** The student will:

1. Recognize the values held by various groups and individuals regarding an ecosystem.
2. Evaluate their own personal values related to an ecosystem.
3. Listen to and respect the rights of others to maintain different values.

**TIMEFRAME:** 30 minutes to 2 hours.

**SKILLS:** Acting, creative writing, debating, discussing, researching.

**MATERIALS:** Parables (one enclosed), writing materials, props for student-developed skits.

**VOCABULARY:** None.



## THE BLIND MEN AND THE ECOSYSTEM

**OVERVIEW:** Ecosystems are made of many parts, all interacting with each other. Plants, animals, bacteria, fungi, water, air, and soil are all parts of whole dynamic ecosystems. People are part of ecosystems too! We interact with all the other parts of our ecosystem every day, though we may not realize it.

Sometimes people only “see” one part of an ecosystem. That is, they become keenly aware of only the one part of the ecosystem that’s most important to them. Frequently, they assume that everyone else sees -- and values -- the ecosystem in the same way they do. Of course, this isn’t true. People have different perspectives about ecosystems and their management.

In the management of ecosystems, whether forest, desert, or watershed, conflicts are inevitable. But by understanding the various perspectives and the values behind those perspectives, sometimes

people can avoid or mitigate those conflicts.

In this activity, students take the old Indian parable, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” analyze its message, research the perspectives of various “blind people” in an ecosystem management conflict, and rewrite the parable as, “The Blind Persons and the Ecosystem.” They may choose to write and perform a skit or melodrama.

### **PROCEDURE:**

1. Read the story of the “Blind Men and the Elephant” and discuss its message. (Story is attached.)

2. Ask:

**-How can this message be applied to an ecosystem management conflict?**

Have students research an ecosystem management conflict and determine the various perspec-

tives of the people involved. Often students will only identify two opposing sides to a conflict. Usually there are many more than two sides.

3. Rewrite the parable or perform it as a skit. (See attached as an example.)

4. Leave ample time for discussion.

**ASSESSMENT:**

1. Have students list the “blind persons” involved with an ecosystem management conflict. What are their perspectives? Why do they have those perspectives?

2. Have students write two or three paragraphs describing:

-In what ways are you “blind” to other perspectives of an ecosystem management conflict?

-How can you improve your eyesight?

3. Evaluate students’ contributions as they discuss some of the purposes of parables.

**EXTENSION:** Find other parables and rewrite them to emphasize an environmental lesson.

## The "Blind" Men and the Elephant

Once upon a time, six blind men lived together in India. They had often heard about elephants, but because they were blind, they had never seen one. The Rajah had many elephants. So, the blind men went to the Rajah's palace to "see" an elephant first-hand. They traveled together, walking one behind the other, communicating with each other so they wouldn't fall down. Each man put his hand on the shoulder of the man in front.

An elephant was standing in the courtyard of the palace. The blind men touched the elephant with their hands.

The first blind man touched the side of the elephant. "An elephant is like a wall," he said.

The second blind man touched the trunk of the elephant and jumped back. "An elephant is like a snake!" he said.

The third blind man reached out and touched the tusk. "Sharp! An elephant is like a spear," he said.

The fourth blind man grasped the leg of the elephant. "How thick and tall," he said. "An elephant is like a tree."

The fifth blind man touched the ear of the elephant. "An elephant is like a fan," he said.

The sixth blind man reached out and touched the tail of the elephant. "It is thin and tough. An elephant is like a rope."

The blind men were tired and sat down to talk about the elephant. "An elephant is like a wall," said the first blind man.

"What? A wall? You're wrong," said the second blind man. "An elephant is like a snake."

"A snake? You're wrong," said the third blind man. "An elephant is like a spear."

"A spear? You're wrong," said the fourth blind man. "An elephant is like a tree."

"A tree? You're wrong," said the fifth blind man. "An elephant is like a fan."

"A fan? You're wrong," said the sixth blind man. "An elephant is like a rope."

The blind men could not agree. They shouted and argued! Their argument got louder and louder!

The Rajah was awakened by the shouting. He called out his palace window, "Stop!"

The blind men stopped arguing. The Rajah said, "The elephant is a very big animal. Each man only touched one part. You must put all the parts together to find out what an elephant really is like."

The blind men listened. They rested under a cool tree and talked quietly. "The Rajah is a very wise man. Each one of us knows only a part. To find out the whole truth, we must put all the parts together," said one blind man. And they did.

They left the courtyard traveling together, walking one behind the other, communicating with each other so they would not fall down. Each man put his hand on the shoulder of the man in front.

## The "Blind" Persons and the Watershed

Once upon a time, seven blind persons from the Land of Stereotypes came to the Big River Watershed. They all marvelled at the rich natural resources the area had to offer. Because they had on blinders they could not see well, they traveled together, walking one behind the other, communicating with each other so they would not fall down.

Soon they came to a tributary stream and followed it downhill. Eventually, the groups were at the banks of the Big River.

The first person was a miner. He felt the geologic formations nearby and decided they held gold, silver, and other minerals that the world needed to make important things. To get the minerals from the mountains and to dissipate mining's waste, he needed water from the river. "This river was made for mining," he said.

The second person was a farmer. She noticed all the level land in the valley and nearby plains, and thought, "This is a good place to grow food for the people of the world. Too bad it doesn't rain much around here." She then decided to divert water out of the river to water her crops. As she began to dig the ditch, she said, "This river was made for agriculture."

The third person was a fisherman. He felt the splash of the river and a mayfly tickle his arm. This is a good place for the people of the world to catch fish, he thought. He prepared for the first cast and said, "This river was made for fishing."

The fourth person was a city mayor. He knelt down and tasted the river; it was good to drink. "But my city is so far away," he said. "I will ask my engineers to divert this water to my city; then it will grow and prosper. It will be a great city of the world." The mayor was pleased and said, "This river was made for cities."

The fifth person was a rafter. She said, "Wow! The holes in this river are awesome. Class four or five, for sure." This is a great place for the people of the world to scream, laugh, and get an adrenaline rush, she thought. As she strapped on her life jacket, she said, "This river was made for rafting."

The sixth person was an environmentalist. He thought, this watershed is so fresh and clean. "Back in the land where I came from everything is so polluted and scarred. I can't let

that happen here," he said. "I must save the river for the world. This river should be left alone."

The seventh person was a bureaucrat. With all these people competing for the use of the river, they will need my help, she thought. I will have to regulate all of them. I can show the world how effective government works. As she made her budget request to Congress, she thought, "This river was made for regulating."

At the end of the day, the blind persons were tired. They began to talk about the Big River Watershed.

"This river was made for mining," said the first person.

"What? You're wrong. This river was made for farming," said the second.

"Whoa," said the third person. "This river is for fishing."

"You're wrong. This river is for cities," said the fourth.

"NOT!" said the fifth person. "This river is for rafting."

"Rafting?" said the sixth. "This river should be left natural."

"I am with the government," said the last. "I am here to help you."

The group could not agree. Each person shouted louder and louder -- and called his or her lawyer.

Finally, a voice from the watershed said, "Stop!"

The seven people stopped shouting. "The Big River Watershed is a very big ecosystem. Each person has only considered one part. You must put all the parts together to understand what the watershed really is," said the voice.

The seven people listened. They sat down together and talked quietly. Although they did not agree on everything, they listened to each other sincerely.

Afterwards, they took off their blinders and saw more than they did before. And even though they were no longer visually impaired, they travelled together, one beside the other, communicating with each other, so they would not fall down.

## The "Blind" Persons and the Watershed

A Parable of the Big River (or your own local) watershed

### Props for Cast:

Narrator: Large Story Book (with title on cover)

Persons carry clothing "props" in day packs.

Person #1 -sunglasses, day pack, mining hard hat, geologists hammer or gold pan, long white stick.

Person #2 -sunglasses, day pack, cowboy hat, irrigation boots, bandanna, shovel.

Person #3 -sunglasses, day pack, fishing vest, waders, fly rod.

Person #4 -sunglasses, day pack, drinking glass and pitcher.

Person #5 -sunglasses, day pack, shorts, "teva" sandals, lifejacket, paddle.

Person #6 -sunglasses, day pack, Earth-day t-shirt.

Person #7 -sunglasses, day pack, tie and sportcoat, clipboard.

NARRATOR: (read slowly, as if telling an ancient story)

Once upon a time, seven blind persons from the Land of Stereotypes came to the Big River.

(From the rear of the auditorium enters the line of "blind" persons comically shuffling down the center aisle, each with one hand on the shoulder of the person in front.)

They all marveled at the rich natural resources the area had to offer.

(Group stops, pause, "look around.")

(in unison) Oooooo! Eeeeeee! Ahhhhh!

(Group then continues shuffling forward.)

NARRATOR: Because they were wearing blinders, they travelled together, walking one behind the other, talking and communicating with each other so they would not fall down.

PERSON #1: Whoa! Say, there's a log here. Be careful. Take a big step.

(One person at a time, in sequence, help each other over the log. "Be careful," "Let me help you," etc. Keep shuffling along.)

NARRATOR: Soon they came to a tributary stream...

PERSON #1: Whoa! Hey, there's a little creek here...

PERSON #2: (Putting a toe in the creek.) Oh, yeah, it's nice and cool.

PERSON #3: Hey, let's follow it downstream.

PERSON #4: Good idea!

NARRATOR: And so they did. More tributaries joined it, and eventually the blind persons were at the banks of the Upper Arkansas River. They all marvelled at the river....

ALL PERSONS: Oooooo! Eeeeeee! Ahhhhh!

(Group begins to explore the river with their hands, etc....)

Person #1 notices a rock in the river and bites it. Its gold! He gets excited! Repeat.

Person #2 notices the river but is also hungry. Notices how hot and dry and flat the landscape is. Repeat.

Person #3 notices a mayfly land on him. Tries to catch it. Finally does and examines it. Repeat.

Person #4 notices the cool, good taste of the river water. Gets out drinking glass, fills it and drinks. Repeat.

Person #5 notices the splashing waves; gets very excited about the waves. Repeat.

Person #6 notices the river smells and swishes hand in the river. Picks a flower. Repeat.

Person #7 notices what the other blind persons are doing and begins to take notes. Repeat.

(Then the groups take off backpacks and begin to dress in appropriate attire. When all dressed, be still as narrator discusses each person.)

NARRATOR: The first person found gold, silver, and other precious metals near the river. He was a miner and mined ores that all the world would need to make important things. To get the minerals from the mountains, to process the ore, and to dissipate the waste, he would need water from the river.

PERSON #1: This river is made for mining!

NARRATOR: The second person noticed all the level land in the valley and the nearby plains and thought...

PERSON #2: This is a good place to grow food for all the people of the world but, it sure doesn't rain much around here.

NARRATOR: Then she had an idea. She could dig a ditch to divert water out of the river to water crops. A reservoir could store spring run-off water for when she needed it in late summer. As she began to dig the ditch, she said...

PERSON #2: This river is made for agriculture!

NARRATOR: The third person was a fisherman. He noticed a mayfly flit nearby and saw a trout jump for it. He scrambled for a fly rod in excitement. This is a good place for the people of the world to catch fish, he thought. And as he readied for the first cast, he said...

PERSON #3: This river is made for fishing!

NARRATOR: The fourth person was a city mayor. He knelt down and tasted the river and thought...

PERSON #4: My, this is good tasting water. My people would like to drink this water and use it in their homes. Too bad my city is so far away. If only I could get this water to my city, it would grow and prosper.

NARRATOR: And his city could be a great city of the world. Suddenly, the mayor had an idea! He would hire an engineer to build a dam to hold the river water and pipe it to his city. He was pleased and said...

PERSON #4: This river is made for cities!

NARRATOR: The fifth person was a rafter...

PERSON #5: Whoa, dude! This river is like totally awesome. The holes are like class four or five, for sure.

NARRATOR: This person thought the river is a great place for the people of the world to scream, laugh, and get an adrenalin rush. As she strapped on her life jacket, she said...

PERSON #5: This river is made for rafting!

NARRATOR: The sixth person was an environmentalist. He thought this watershed is so fresh and clean.

PERSON #6: Back where I come from, that is...the land of stereotypes, everything is so polluted and scarred with so many people, I can't let that happen here.

NARRATOR: The person thought that he must save this river for the future generations of the world. As he pondered the meaning of life while eating a granola bar, he said...

PERSON #6: This river should be left alone!

NARRATOR: The last person was a government bureaucrat. Therefore she wasn't really blind, just visually impaired. With all these people competing for the use of the river, she thought, they will need my help.

PERSON #7: I will have to regulate all of them. I can show the world how effective government works.

NARRATOR: And as she made her budget request to Congress, she thought...

PERSON #7: This river is made for regulating!

NARRATOR: At the end of the day, the people were tired. They came together and began to talk about the (your local) watershed.

PERSON #1: Boy, I had a great day. Found lots of gold and silver. This river is made for mining. Don't you think so?

PERSON #2: Maybe it can help you with mining, but this river really is made for irrigating farmland. Yes, this river is made for farming!

PERSON #3: Whoa! Wait a minute. This river is made for fishing. That's what's important!

PERSON #4: You're wrong. People are important. This river is for cities!

PERSON #5: NOT!! Hey man, this river is made for rafting!

PERSON #6: Rafting? Cities? Farming? Mining? Fishing? That will all ruin this river. This river should be left natural!

PERSON #7: Whoa, whoa. Wait a minute. I, am with the government. I, am here to help you.

(The group argues and fights, repeating their claims.)

NARRATOR: The people could not agree. They could not listen. Each person shouted louder and louder....and called his or her lawyer.

(In unison, blind persons pick up phone. "Hello?")

NARRATOR: Finally a voice from the watershed said...

WATERSHED VOICE: (Thunder-like, booming voice.) STOP!

(The group stops fighting immediately and look around/up.)

WATERSHED VOICE: (your local) Watershed is a very big ecosystem. Each person has only considered one part. You must put all the parts together in order to understand what the watershed really is.

ALL PERSONS: Oooooo! Eeeeeee! Ahhhhhh!

NARRATOR: The seven people listened to the watershed voice. They sat down together and talked quietly. And although they did not agree on everything, they listened to each other sincerely.

Afterwards, the group takes off their blinding glasses and see more than they did before.

(Persons take off glasses. Look around in amazement. They line up to leave down center aisle. Begin walking more confidently, no hand on shoulders.)

NARRATOR: And even though they were no longer visually impaired, they travelled together, one beside the other, never to return to the Land of Stereotypes. They still talked and communicated with each other, so they would not fall down.

(Group leaves. Helping each other walk back over the log.)

THE END

