

# Wetland Controversy

## Key Concepts

1. There are many viewpoints in land-use issues.
2. Role-playing can help students understand differing viewpoints and the difficulties of decision-making.

City Council  
Member

Guest  
Speaker

Mayor

## Background

Wetlands seem to be at the center of many of today's land use controversies. Some groups of people see wetlands in their natural state as buffers against erosion and pollution and as critical habitat for wildlife. Other groups, see the need for homes or industrial plants and look to wetland areas as sites for those kinds of projects. How are these conflicts resolved?

In "Wetland Controversy", students role-play a city council meeting, one of the forums in which such decisions are made. Admittedly, this type of forum is not the only way in which land use decisions are made. However, it is a forum for public comment on such issues and therefore will give students exposure to the variety of viewpoints held by the public.

Additional background is found in the preceding activities "Wetland Metaphors" and "How Thirsty Is the Ground?"

## Materials

- "Wetland Controversy" role cards
- Guest Speaker "Character Worksheets"

## Teaching Hints

In this activity, students enact a city council meeting by role-playing the characters listed below.

Begin this activity by naming your wetland. It may be that you are aware of a wetland in your area that actually is in jeopardy and you can base your exercise on that specific wetland. Or, you can use a real wetland in your own area as the topic, pretending that it is under pressure to be developed. Otherwise, you can simply make up a wetland such as "Sweeney's Swamp", or

“Jones’ Marsh”; (you can even name it after yourself!). This wetland, whatever you name it, will be referred to in this activity as the “local wetland”.

Here is the situation: A faction of fictitious folks in your town has surreptitiously been meeting to express their dismay about the “wasteland” in the community--the local wetland. They call themselves the Citizens Opposed to Wetlands (COW) and feel that the wetland is of no real value and should be converted to other uses. On the other hand, another faction, (also fictitious) has gotten wind of the COW and has joined together to defend this natural area. Using the motto “Save Our Wetlands” (SOW), these citizens feel that the wetland is valuable for a variety of reasons and should be preserved at all costs.

The mayor, upon hearing of the growing SOW vs COW controversy, has called for a special city council meeting to give concerned citizens the chance to offer their opinions on the subject as guest speakers. In order for the city council members to have the best possible information on which to make their decision, they will be free to ask questions of any of the guest speakers. A decision will be made at the end of the meeting to determine the fate of the wetland.

The characters and a brief description are on the following pages.

**Wetland Controversy Role Cards - cut out and laminate**

## Mayor

**Mayor Justice B. Fair**

Mayor Fair is a wise and fair person who wants to make the best possible decision for the city...especially because this year is an election year.

## City Council Member

**Simon Sense**

All council members are elected officials who may have other jobs. They must weigh the evidence on this issue and decide the fate of the local wetland--for the good of the city.

## City Council Member

**Bertha Broadmind**

All council members are elected officials who may have other jobs. They must weigh the evidence on this issue and decide the fate of the local wetland--for the good of the city.

**Wetland Controversy Role Cards - cut out and laminate****City Council Member****Harry Reason**

All council members are elected officials who may have other jobs. They must weigh the evidence on this issue and decide the fate of the local wetland--for the good of the city.

**City Council Member****Iris Wise**

All council members are elected officials who may have other jobs. They must weigh the evidence on this issue and decide the fate of the local wetland--for the good of the city.

**City Council Member****Phil Osopher**

All council members are elected officials who may have other jobs. They must weigh the evidence on this issue and decide the fate of the local wetland--for the good of the city.

**Wetland Controversy Role Cards - cut out and laminate**

## City Council Member

**Kitty Prettycity**

All council members are elected officials who may have other jobs. They must weigh the evidence on this issue and decide the fate of the local wetland--for the good of the city.

## Guest Speaker

**Phil Swamp**

Phil is a carpenter who builds homes. He knows that if the wetland was filled in, homes could be built to accommodate the rising population of the county. This would mean more jobs.

## Guest Speaker

**Wanda Fillandbuild**

Wanda is the owner of a restaurant chain who thinks this wetland is in a perfect location to sell her "Wanda burgers."

**Wetland Controversy Role Cards - cut out and laminate**

## Guest Speaker

**Marsha Plenty**

Marsha lives in a house near the floodplain of a river. She knows how important wetlands are in reducing flooding and is concerned about her home.

## Guest Speaker

**Duane DeMarsh**

Duane is a farmer who has filled in a marsh on his property for farming and thinks all marshes should be filled in for better use.

## Guest Speaker

**Ima Beaver**

Ima is a longtime resident of the city and grew up near the wetland. She thinks the wetland is beautiful and wants her grandchildren to be able to enjoy it too.

**Wetland Controversy Role Cards - cut out and laminate****Guest Speaker****Will Huntmore**

Will is a sportsman who loves to hunt and realizes how important wetlands are for ducks and other animals.

**Guest Speaker****Candy Velop**

Candy is a developer who would like to convert the wetland into a lake and build "lake-view" condominiums all around it.

**Guest Speaker****Amos Keetow**

Amos detests pests! He lives near the wetland and feels it a source of all the insects that ruin his barbecues.

**Wetland Controversy Role Cards - cut out and laminate**

## **Guest Speaker**

**Crystal Clearwater**

Crystal is the director of Public Utilities which provides water for the city. She is concerned because she knows that wetlands are important areas for water purification.

## **Guest Speaker**

**Dr. Peat Bog**

Dr. Bog is a scientist with a PhD. in wetlands science. He has studied wetlands and knows how valuable they are to people.



## Procedure

1. Explain to students that they will be enacting a city council meeting by role-playing characters with different viewpoints. Their task will be to decide the fate of a local wetland. Should they:
  - a) preserve it,
  - b) convert it to use it for something else, or
  - c) make some sort of compromise. They will need to explain the compromise.
2. Talk to students about responsible citizenship and the importance of citizen participation in decision-making that affects their lives. Remind them of their rights of free expression.
3. Give them the background information for this activity, emphasizing that a group of people feel that the wetland is a “wasteland” and should be drained, filled, and the land used for something else, while a number of others disagree, and feel that the wetland is valuable and should be preserved.
4. Assign character roles to the students:
  - select the Mayor who will be the facilitator of the meeting
  - appoint the six city council members who will listen to the testimonies and ask questions of the public
  - divide the remainder of the class up into ten groups (2-3 per group depending on the class size). Each of these groups will represent one of the ten city residents (listed above), with one person from the group being the spokesperson.
5. Give each “character” a Character Worksheet (one for the Mayor and each council member and one for each group representing a guest speaker) and give them time to answer the questions. The guest speakers each get a piece of paper with their character description and should work together to answer the questions for their character. **IMPORTANT:** Remind them that the character they are playing may not necessarily think the same way that they do. Encourage them to put themselves in the shoes of their character and say what the person might say, according to the character description.
6. Arrange seven desks in the front of the classroom for city council members and the Mayor. Put name cards on the desks for each member. Seat the Mayor in the middle.

7. After everyone has filled out a Character Worksheet, let the students put on any costume or prop materials that are appropriate for their character or simply add to the interest of the event (ties, glasses, straw hat, scarves, hunting vests, etc.)
8. Have the Mayor officially open the meeting and introduce himself/ herself to the audience. Have the city council members introduce themselves. The Mayor should give a brief introduction to the problem and then invite public testimony from the guest speakers.
9. Each guest speaker (spokesperson) now stands up before the council to express his/her viewpoint, using the Character Worksheet as a reference. When making their statement, they should introduce themselves, describe what they do and anything else that may be of interest about themselves. They should say what they feel about the wetlands and specifically the wetland in question. **Example:** My name is Dr. Peat Bog, and I am a professor at the local university. I was born and raised here and live here with my wife, Betty Bog, and my family. I have spent years studying every little thing about wetlands and have come to the conclusion that they are so important to us for so many reasons that it is a crime to destroy or change them.....and I'm a Ph.D.!"
10. After each guest speaker has had their say, it is time for the council to ask questions and challenge the viewpoints of the guest speakers in order to clarify the issue. This will hopefully be a time for students to exercise their creative thinking skills. For example, one council member might ask Wanda why she can't build her restaurant somewhere else. Or, alternatively, why Marsha needs to live in the floodplain of a river. Encourage students to extend their thinking and examine possibilities.

**NOTE:** If time allows, assign a committee (i.e. students) to study the problem and report back to the council at a later date. Have them prepare a report which:

- (1) Describes the values of wetlands,
- (2) Analyzes the potential effects of other activities on the wetland, and
- (3) Proposes several alternatives for how the site could be used.

When the committee is ready to report to the council, reconvene the meeting. Allow the council to ask any further questions or present any compromise solutions.

11. After all questions have been asked, the Mayor will decide it is time to make a decision and will call for a council vote:

**All in favor of preserving the wetland?**

**All in favor of converting the wetland?**

**All in favor of some compromise? (If one or more have been presented.)**

12. After the vote the Mayor makes his declaration about the fate of the wetland and the meeting is adjourned.
13. Follow-up the meeting with a group discussion. Ask questions to stimulate input:

**If you, as yourself, were voting on this decision, how would you vote?**

**How should decisions like this be made?**

**Should all people be involved in making the decision?**

**What kind of laws would you make to protect wetlands?**

## Key Words

**character** - a person portrayed in a drama

**compromise** - a settlement of differences in which each side makes concessions

**role-play** - a simulation in which individuals assume the behaviors of others

**wetland** - a lowland area, such as a marsh or swamp, that is saturated with moisture; especially when thought of as the natural habitat of wildlife

## Extensions

1. Invite a city planner to come and talk to your class about wetland and development issues.
2. Encourage students to attend a planning commission or city council meeting as Student Reporters and report back to the class.

# Wetland Controversy

## CHARACTER WORKSHEETS - Guest Speakers

Name \_\_\_\_\_

What do you do? \_\_\_\_\_

Describe yourself \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How do you feel about wetlands? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What do you think should happen to the wetland in your city?

Circle One:      Preserve it      Destroy it

Compromise (describe) \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_