



# Ethnic Studies Lesson 1E: Introduction—Environmental Determinism

**TOPIC:**  
INTRODUCTION

**GRADE LEVELS:**  
11-12

**TIME:**  
1½ HOURS

## California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Themes, Values, and Principles Alignment

### *Theme:*

3. Systems of Power

### *Values and Principles:*

4. Critique empire building in history and its relationship to white supremacy, racism, and other forms of power and oppression.
5. Challenge racist, bigoted, discriminatory, and imperialist/colonial beliefs and practices on multiple levels.

## California English and Social Science Standards Alignment

### *English Language Arts Standards (11th and 12th Grade):*

#### Reading—Informational Text (RI.11-12)

Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging. (RI.11-12.5)

#### Writing—(W.11-12)

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. (W.11-12.1)

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. (W.11-12.5)

### *Social Sciences Standards (11th and 12th Grade):*

#### History-Social Science Content Standards—(Grades 9-12)

Analyze the impact of environmental determinism on the justification of slavery, including its role in shaping ideologies and policies. (History-Social Science Content Standard 11.2)

## INTRODUCTION

Understand the historical and contemporary implications of environmental determinism on society, including its impact on justifying slavery and perpetuating racial injustices, and affecting the role of religion in America. (History-Social Science Content Standard 11.3)

### Lesson Purpose

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Students will research environmental determinism and its role in justifying slavery.

### Essential Questions

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*How did the concept of environmental determinism help justify US slavery?*

*Why is studying American history through ethnicity important?*

### Materials

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[University of North Carolina: Race Deconstructed: Science and the Making of Difference](#)

[Science Direct: Environmental Determinism](#)

[Environmental Determinism vs. Possibilism](#)

[Scientific American: The Ugly History of Climate Determinism Is Still Evident Today](#)

[KWL Chart](#)

### Vocabulary

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environmental determinism

possibilism

### Lesson Steps

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#### *Step 1:*

- As a class, to restate the definition of biological determinism. Let students know that there were other pseudo-scientific theories during the Ages of Enlightenment and Reason that were used to classify people. Ask students what they believe environmental determinism might be. Break students into eight groups. As groups read the summary for their primary source, they should take notes on a summary of their primary source, what their primary source can add to the definition of environmental determinism, and how it might have eventually been used to justify slavery in the US. Have students read [University of North Carolina: Race Deconstructed: Science and the Making of Difference](#). Give each of the groups a separate primary source on this page.
- When students have completed their notes, have each group share with the class. Using this information, have students help develop a working definition of *environmental determinism*. Show students [Science Direct: Environmental Determinism](#). Ask students how their definition is the same or different from the one presented here. Let students see that this is only one of many definitions in the scientific literature that is presented further down the page on that website.
- Ask students how environmental determinism might have been used to justify slavery in the 1700s, 1800s, and 1900s.

## INTRODUCTION

### Step 2:

- Ask students what they know about the term *possibilism*. Have students watch [Environmental Determinism vs. Possibilism](#) (video 5 minutes, 6 seconds). As students watch, ask them to take notes on which school of thought they identify with the most and why. Students should also note how possibilism helps us see a non-example of environmental determinism. Non-examples can help us continue to refine the definition of environmental determinism.
- When students have completed their notes, have a student pair up with another student to share notes. When students have completed their notes, have pairs meet with another pair and share notes. As a class, have groups of students share their notes, and help the class continue to refine their definition of *environmental determinism*.

### Step 3:

- Ask students if they believe that environmental determinism is still part of our thought process today. As a class, use a group reading strategy such as round robin or popcorn to read [Scientific American: The Ugly History of Climate Determinism Is Still Evident Today](#). As students read, they should take notes on what elements of environmental determinism they hear in the article. Students should also think of any time they have heard these arguments in their own lives.
- When students have finished reading, have them share their notes with one other person. As a class, have the pairs of students share their notes with the class.

### Step 4:

- As a class, ask students this lesson's questions, "How did the concept of environmental determinism help justify US slavery?" and this unit's question, "Why is studying American history through ethnicity important?" Make note of what was learned on this unit's KWL chart—along with additional questions.

## Essential Question Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection

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As time permits and for homework, have students create a lesson about environmental determinism for a younger student. Students should create a definition, an example, and a consequence of the theory, and ask the younger student to create an example of their own. Students should write out a one-page lesson.

## Additional Readings and Resources

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Sowell, Thomas. "How Geography Rendered Africa Extremely Poor." Thomas SowellTV. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwKKvuYQrBY&t=57s>

**NOTE TO EDUCATORS REGARDING ADDITIONAL READINGS AND RESOURCES:** America is a pluralistic country, ethnically. It is also a pluralistic country politically—left, right, and center. Ethnic studies educators have ready access to resources from the left-of-center in the [2021 California Model Curriculum](#) and in the [Liberated Model Curriculum](#). This Comparative Cultures Ethnic Studies curriculum favors teachers exposing students to views from across the political spectrum. Educators often lack guidance to materials from outside the left-of-center. Therefore, in the sections on Additional Readings and Resources, the Comparative Cultures Ethnic Studies curriculum alerts educators to credible resources that provide an alternative to the other Model Curricula. In doing so, this curriculum encourages educators to acquaint students with evidence-based views from left, right, and center.

## Ethnic Studies 1B: KWL Chart

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**KNOW****WONDER****LEARNED**

*What do we think we already know about this topic?*

*What do we wonder about this topic? Write your questions below.*

*After the research is completed, what did we learn? Make sure to cite your source.*

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