NO PREP

Resource Scarcity and Conflict

Struggles Over Earth's Essentials

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Resource Scarcity and Conflict: Struggles Over Earth's Essentials

The Geography of Scarcity

Throughout history, access to resources has shaped civilizations, economies, and conflicts. Today, resource scarcity—the lack of enough essential materials like water, food, and energy—has become one of the defining issues of global geography. Scarcity often occurs when resources are limited in supply or unevenly distributed, meaning some regions struggle while others prosper. Water is one of the most pressing issues.

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The Geography of Scarcity

Throughout history, access to resources has shaped civilizations, economies, and conflicts. Today, resource scarcity (the lack of enough essential materials like water, food, and energy) has become one of the defining issues of global geography. Scarcity often occurs when resources are limited in supply or unevenly distributed, meaning some regions struggle while others prosper. Water is one of the most pressing issues. Although about 70% of the Earth's surface is covered in water, only a tiny fraction is fresh and accessible for human use. Regions such as the Middle East and North Africa experience extreme water shortages, leading to disputes between countries and within communities. Similarly, fertile farmland is under pressure due to overuse, population growth, and climate change. These challenges make survival more difficult and can push nations toward conflict and competition. Energy resources such as oil, natural gas, and coal are also unevenly spread across the globe. Countries rich in fossil fuels, like Saudi Arabia or Russia, hold significant economic and political power, while others must import to meet their needs. Renewable resources like solar and wind power are growing, but not all regions have equal access to the technology or infrastructure to use them effectively. Geography thus plays a crucial role in determining who has resources, and who does not.

How Scarcity Leads to Conflict

Resource scarcity often increases tensions between communities, nations, or even global powers. In some cases, competition for resources sparks "resource wars." For example, control over oil fields has played a role in conflicts in the Middle East. In Africa, disputes over access to water and grazing lands have fueled clashes between farmers and herders. Scarcity does not always directly cause wars, but it can worsen existing tensions, especially in regions already facing poverty or political

instability. Migration is another outcome of scarcity. When people cannot access farmland, clean water, or jobs, they often move elsewhere, sometimes triggering disputes with local populations. For example, drought in the Sahel region of Africa has forced thousands to migrate southward, creating competition over land. Geography magnifies these struggles. Rivers that cross borders, like the Nile or the Mekong, become flashpoints as countries debate who has the right to use the water. Melting glaciers in the Himalayas threaten water supplies for billions in Asia. Meanwhile, climate change worsens scarcity by altering rainfall patterns, drying lakes, and damaging cropland. Without cooperation, the struggle for resources could escalate into greater global instability.

Global Responses to Scarcity

While scarcity can lead to violence, it can also encourage cooperation. Nations that share rivers sometimes create treaties to divide water fairly, as with the Indus Waters Treaty between India and Pakistan. International organizations promote sustainable farming, water conservation, and renewable energy as long-term solutions. Technological innovations are also key. Desalination plants can turn seawater into fresh water, though they are expensive. Advances in agriculture, like drought-resistant crops, help farmers adapt to changing climates. Global trade allows countries with fewer resources to import what they need, but this creates dependency and vulnerability to price changes. The challenge of the future will be managing scarcity in a way that reduces conflict and promotes fairness. Geography shows us that resources are never evenly shared, but human choices determine whether this inequality leads to war—or to cooperation.

Key Information

Resource	Region Affected	Conflict or Challenge
Water	Middle East, North Africa	Tensions over shared rivers and aquifers
Oil	Middle East	Competition over control, global dependency
Farmland	Sub-Saharan Africa	Conflicts between farmers and herders

Resource	Region Affected	Conflict or Challenge
Minerals (lithium, cobalt)	South America, Africa	Struggles over mining and exploitation
Food	Global	Rising prices and shortages spark unrest

Case Study Excerpt: The Darfur Conflict

In western Sudan, the Darfur region became the site of a devastating conflict beginning in 2003. At its root was competition for scarce resources. The region's semi-arid environment was already vulnerable to drought, and climate change worsened the situation. Farmers, mostly from settled communities, relied on shrinking farmland for crops, while nomadic herders needed grazing land for their animals. As the land became less productive, clashes intensified. What began as disputes over water and land escalated into a broader conflict involving ethnic and political divisions. Armed groups formed, and violence spread rapidly. Hundreds of thousands were killed, and millions were displaced, creating a humanitarian crisis. International organizations tried to intervene with peacekeepers and aid, but the underlying problem of scarce resources remained unresolved. The Darfur conflict illustrates how environmental stress can combine with political and social divisions to spark violence. It shows that resource scarcity does not act alone but often magnifies other tensions, leading to devastating consequences. Understanding this link is crucial for building peace and sustainability in fragile regions.

1. How did resource scarcity contribute to the outbreak of the Darfur conflict?

2. Why is it important to consider both environmental and political factors in conflicts like Darfur?

Multiple Choice

1. What is the main reason water scarcity is such a global concern?

    a) Most countries refuse to share it

    b) Freshwater cannot be stored

    c) Most water is saltwater, not fresh

    d) Water is evenly distributed across the globe

2. Which conflict is often cited as an example of how scarcity and politics combine?

    a) Cold War

    b) Darfur conflict

    c) Vietnam War

    d) Gulf War

3. What technology helps turn seawater into drinkable freshwater?

    a) Solar panels

    b) Irrigation canals

    c) Hydroelectric dams

    d) Desalination plants

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Nile River	A) Example of a treaty to divide shared water
2. ___ Oil	B) Technology that makes seawater drinkable
3. ___ Darfur	C) Major resource in the Middle East, source of global competition
4. ___ Indus Waters Treaty	D) Scarcity of this resource led to violence in Sudan
5. ___ Desalination	E) River crossing multiple countries, source of tension

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The _____ region of Sudan experienced violent conflict partly due to resource scarcity.

2. Melting _____ in the Himalayas threaten water supplies for billions in Asia.

3. Resource scarcity can lead to both conflict and _____ between nations.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. How does climate change intensify resource scarcity around the world?

_____

_____

_____

2. Why might resource scarcity cause migration in some regions?

3. What are some solutions that countries are using to manage water scarcity?