Stewards Group: You are a Social Scientist

Your Background and Biography

You studied international relations in college, although you also enjoyed the series of earth science classes you took to meet your science requirements. China seemed to be everywhere in the news, so you picked Mandarin for your foreign-language courses. Working as a research assistant to an inspiring professor took you to China and introduced you to the pleasures of doing research around the world.

After graduating you thought about applying to work at the U.S. State Department as a diplomat, but a well-paying job offer with an international consulting firm gave you the chance to go back to China right away. You joined the Beijing office, helping clients deal with issues related to international trade and outsourced manufacturing. The work was not very stimulating, but it was an amazing time to be in China. As Beijing prepared to host the Olympics in 2008, pollution control became big news. Most of the stories were about air pollution, but you ran across a small story about efforts to clean up pollution around the Bayan Obo rare earths mine in the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia.

You quit consulting to go to the University of California, Berkeley, where you enrolled in a geography PhD program. Geography allowed you to combine your primary interests: natural science and people. When talk of a potential shortage of rare earth elements hit the news in 2010, you knew you had your dissertation topic. You traveled to Inner Mongolia to interview people on all sides of rare earth production: geologists, refiners, miners, and local villagers harmed by the pollution. You also tracked emerging plans to produce rare earth elements in new places. You spent months in Brazil, studying proposals to develop new rare earth mines in the Amazon rainforest, as well as a much less destructive plan to extract rare earth metals from the existing waste of a long-established mine in Brazil’s industrial heartland.

Your research made you a respected figure in your field, and you wrote a successful book chronicling the systems that govern rare earth production. Through the 2010s, as rare earth metals started to garner more attention in the media, you were interviewed by news outlets and radio stations as an esteemed expert. Now you work as a professor teaching about sustainable mining and international relations.

Your job in these negotiations is to help produce a Sustainability Seal that will help to make the production and use of rare earth metals more sustainable and less harmful to...
people and the natural world. Your unique skill is understanding the cultures and social systems in different geographical locations where rare earth metals could potentially be mined, now and in the future. In negotiations you are looking for an interdisciplinary approach that stresses the importance of international cooperation in finding a sustainable solution to the production of rare earths.

Your Role

Your goal is to write a statement of guiding values that will set the standards for sustainable practices within the rare earth elements industry. Learn as much as possible from the experts to ensure you make the right decision. During this hearing you should do the following:

- Keep an open mind. Allow yourself to be persuaded by well-reasoned arguments and convincing evidence.
- Find out as much as possible about the issues so you can carefully evaluate the arguments presented. Consider what is in the best interest of the environment and our future.
- Facilitate discussion and cooperation within and among the groups. Your goal is to implement the best, most effective set of Sustainability Seal guiding values possible, which will require compromise between groups.

Your Assignment

You will become the expert on the Activists Group and report back to your fellow Stewards with an evaluation of the group’s position and arguments. Engage in the following activities as you conduct your research:

- Attend the meetings of the Activists Group to learn more about its arguments and to plan for the hearing. Remember that you are an observer, so you should not participate in discussion.
- Write two questions you would like to ask the Activists Group during the hearing.
- Write a one-page analysis of the Activists Group’s main arguments and positions. What are its main concerns? Which of its arguments do you find convincing? Which are unconvincing? Why?

SOURCES

Group Sources

- Stewards Case Study: “Working Outside of Government Regulation to Protect Human Health and the Environment”

Individual Sources

• Klinger, Julie. "Rare Earths: Lessons for Latin America." Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies, Fall 2013.