To Pollute Or Not To Pollute?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Background:

The consequences of global warming might one day leave us wondering if we could have lessened its impact. How do we engage people now to think about distant issues like global warming or local issues like water pollution? How do we make sure that everyone (individuals, groups, countries) shoulders the responsibility of caring for the environment?

The Center for Research on Environmental Decisions (CRED) is addressing some of these important questions by studying how individuals and groups are affected by climate change. Center scientists are curious about how people think and react in situations where they consider the environmental impacts of their decisions. Working with decision makers (like farmers and policy makers), CRED can then use this information to improve communication and the environmental decision making process.

Objectives:

In this activity participants will start to think about what thought processes they use to make decisions concerning the environment. They will be introduced to *common pool resources* or a resource (like the lake in this game) that is difficult to exclude people from using. Participants will also learn about *free riders,* people/groups that consume more than their fair share of a resource or shoulder less than a fair share of the costs of its production.

Explanation:

Why did we play this game?
In this game, a real world scenario is simulated where the decisions of one person have an impact on the outcomes of both themselves and others. These types of decisions are similar to the decisions that individuals, companies and even countries are making in regards to global warming everyday.

Why should I care about common pool resources and free riders?
Free access and unrestricted use of a limited resource (like the lake in the game) ultimately dooms the resource to be destroyed. This occurs because the benefits (more money) of exploiting the resource go to individuals, while the costs (decreased water quality) of exploiting the resource are distributed between everyone who shares the resource.

How does this game relate to the real world?
This game helps us to understand how people think about common pool resources and free riding when they make environmental decisions. Using the results form this activity we might advise someone like Mayor Bloomberg to pass a law that reflects what we found in this study. If a specific rule in this activity motivates our participants to stop polluting, we might push legislators to pass a law similar to this scenario.