

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington. By Richard White.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1hg3z27m>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 17(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Dahl, Kathleen A.

Publication Date

1993-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

southeastern tribes have not retained fluency in their ancestral languages, and that dimension of the language/identity issue cannot be explored. But what can be explored is the role(s) played by the distinctive, tribally specific varieties of "Indian English" in defining and demarking group membership and group allegiance. Such usage is important to Lumbee interaction with other Lumbee and with non-Indian neighbors, as Brewer and Reising have explained ("Tokens in the Pocosin," *American Speech*, 1982), and is equally important to language dynamics among Mississippi Choctaw and Miccosukee peoples, as I have learned through my own fieldwork. Whether there is, in some sense, a uniquely Catawba English, a Mattaponi English, or a Waccamaw Sioux English can be particularly important in the light of the federal acknowledgment process if, as is the case in other Indian settings, Indian English varieties retain features of ancestral language grammar and rules of discourse and become, in effect, ways of talking "Indian" to outsiders.

I do not intend these comments as criticisms but only as indications that issues outside of the volume's "panorama" remain to be explored. More important, I think, is the information the volume does provide: It offers a succinct orientation to contemporary Indian life in the United States Southeast, exactly in the sense intended by the 1986 symposium. The straightforward presentation of the chapters and the readability of the prose make text content particularly accessible and even more appealing.

William L. Leap
The American University

Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington. By Richard White. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992. 234 pages. \$14.95 paper.

In his foreword to this paperback edition of *Land Use, Environment and Social Change*, first published in 1980, William Cronon calls the book "an underappreciated classic" and points out that past readers may have missed the broader social and historical implications of this study because they saw it as merely a local history of a rather obscure place. Readers will gain more from this book, Cronon suggests, if they imagine that "all the world were indeed Island County" and if they understand that the forces shaping this

small part of North America have been replicated many times over throughout the continent and the world.

Twelve years after its initial publication, it seems quite remarkable that anyone would read this book and *not* recognize the universality of the social and environmental themes contained in its pages. In these days of radical environmentalism, old growth forests, spotted owls, and sophisticated legal battles between preservationists and timber companies, White's environmental history of Whidbey and Camano Islands in Puget Sound acquires new urgency and import. The author skillfully provides a microcosm in which to study and understand the larger historical processes that have created the "natural" landscapes dotting our land.

White organizes the chapters of this book in chronological order, beginning with the geologic formation of Whidbey and Camano Islands. He then discusses the archeology of the region and the precontact lifeways of the first human inhabitants, the early years of contact and cultural conflict between native societies and European and Asian newcomers, and the century-and-a-half of fluctuating land use patterns that followed. It is a story of Indians and fur traders, farmers and sheepherders, loggers, homesteaders, and vacationers. Above all, it is a record of the dramatic impact all of these characters had upon the land.

Anyone remotely aware of modern environmental concerns will recognize the processes documented in these pages: the extermination of wolves, eagles, and other predators, the spread of foreign plants and "weeds" into areas disturbed by farming and logging, the introduction of cows, sheep, and pigs into ecosystems previously inhabited by wild creatures, the overpopulation of species such as deer after the predators were gone, the market hunting that wiped out local populations of sea otter and elk, and the relentless destruction of the ancient forests, so that by 1938, the National Land Planning Board considered the county "an unforested area" (p. 112).

White discusses these processes within the context of human motivations and behaviors. For every human action, he suggests, there is an environmental reaction, which then creates a new landscape to influence future human decisions and behavior. Social history and natural history become inextricable, and it is necessary that we appreciate both if we are to deepen our understanding of land use and environmental issues. And so this book also documents the human side of ecological change: the disease

epidemics that ravaged Indian populations; the removal of the remaining Indian people to reservations; violent racism and vigilantism aimed at successful Chinese tenant farmers by resentful whites; the instability of national markets that threatened the existence of local farmers; and the Depression-era poverty that drove desperate families onto the logged-off lands. The author carefully demonstrates how these social and economic events influenced and, in turn, were shaped by the aforementioned environmental processes.

Particularly interesting is the information contained in the chapters pertaining to the Native American societies that inhabited what eventually became Island County. Four different Coast Salish groups—the Skagit, Snohomish, Clallam, and Kikialos tribes—lived relatively peacefully on Whidbey and Camano Islands, sharing the resources of this region with closely related peoples on the mainland to the east. White characterizes their relationship to the land as productive and sustainable. The basic subsistence of these groups depended on the seasonal harvest of camas bulbs, salmon, and deer, in addition to dozens of other plant and animal resources.

Yet White avoids the overromanticization of the Indian way of life that is currently popular among both Indians and non-Indians, including many radical environmentalists, who have appropriated certain images of the “noble savage” living “in harmony with nature.” (Tipis and powwow drums have become standard “props” at many of the conferences organized by Earth First! and other groups.) Instead, the author carefully documents the many ecological changes brought about by native peoples in Island County as they deliberately altered environmental conditions to maximize production of key resources.

Throughout the Pacific Northwest, the traditional staple plant food was “roots” such as camas, arrowroot, bitterroot, wild carrots and onions, and many others. Women would dig huge quantities of roots and then roast or dry them for storage. Until recently, this activity was perceived as “gathering,” and Northwest Indian tribes have been characterized as “foragers.” Newer interpretations of this subsistence strategy have looked more closely at the cultivation effects of constantly turning over the plants with digging sticks and of scattering the small or broken roots and bulbs. White’s study emphasizes this aspect of root “gathering” and also points out that the Skagits “moved the bulbs into fresh areas—at first unwittingly, perhaps, but later with zeal and care”

to increase their harvest (p. 22). Interestingly, when the potato was introduced into the region, all Salish groups quickly took up its cultivation "without any direct instruction by the whites" (p. 22).

There are at least two other plants that Indians deliberately encouraged: nettles, used for medicines, dyes, and cordage; and bracken ferns, with edible roots that could be ground into flour for bread. The careful use of fire and weeding to propagate these plants caused the decline of fire-sensitive species and the proliferation of fire-tolerant species, permanently changing the local ecosystems. Similar techniques used by native groups on the Great Plains and in Australia have had similar ecology-altering results. This realization is dramatically different from the conventional view of native peoples as leaving no mark upon the land.

Still, as White explains, the impact of native populations was minimal compared to what followed, and the native worldview contained many spiritual ideas that "blurred the boundaries" between humans and animals. Salish peoples developed customs and beliefs that prevented overhunting and waste, although many of these customs waned as Indian populations declined and new ways of life were introduced or forced on them by whites. The traditional cosmologies were soon replaced by what the author calls "symbolic expression in the fence," which "marked the boundary of the farmer's conscious control" and forever separated the world of humans from that of the wild things (p. 41).

Land Use, Environment, and Social Change contains many maps, historic photographs, charts, and tables that concisely summarize information in accessible form. It would be an excellent book to use in college courses related to American and Western history, environmental sociology and environmental history, economic anthropology, and human or cultural ecology. It probably would be less useful in courses concerned primarily with Native American issues, although the discussion of the Salish Indians in the beginning chapters is interesting and valuable. This book certainly should be of interest to anyone concerned with environmental issues generally, and Pacific Northwest issues in particular. Above all, those who know that "the natural world is a social construction" (p. xix) will find Richard White's thoughtful study of the intricate relationship between humans and the environment insightful and rewarding.

Kathleen A. Dahl
University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh