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In the Name of Profit: Canada's Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Reserve as Economic Development and Colonial Placemaking

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The names established an agenda under which the rest of the encounter would be played out. After discovering a patch of “un-claimed” land, the conqueror would wade ashore and plant his royal banner. He proclaimed that these newly discovered lands were now his patron’s domain and laid claim to the new-found riches, the natural resources and the things living and inanimate—all of which was simply wilderness before being “discovered” and defined by Europeans... The power to name reflected an underlying power to control the land, its Indigenous people and its history. David Hurst Thomas, *Skull Wars*

Introduction

Although discussing initial European colonization of the Americas during the so-called “Age of Exploration,” David Hurst Thomas’ views on naming and colonial placemaking are wholly relevant today—it is only the banners that have really changed. Early on, colonial naming was done on behalf of such foreign nations and corporations as England and the Hudson’s Bay Company. Today, however, colonizing forces typically reside much closer to home, emanating from regional and local economic and political centres. In part a product of this geographic proximity, the identity and motivations of the contemporary colonizer are necessarily distorted and disguised by complex neoliberalized state bureaucracies, convoluted corporate structures, and well-designed marketing campaigns. Despite the passage of time, much of the placemaking process remains unchanged as it relates to imperialism and resourcism, where control over land and people is external, top-down, and inviolable.

In this paper, we examine the process of colonial placemaking in a very particular context—that is, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) biosphere. Located on the eastern, populated coast of British Columbia’s iconic Vancouver Island, the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Reserve (MABR) is one of 16 United Nations biosphere reserves in Canada. Designated in 2000 under UNESCO’s Man and the Biosphere Programme, its core philosophy is “sustainability,” balancing economic development with environmental conservation.

The MABR project collapsed not long after its establishment under local leadership. In 2014, Vancouver Island University—a state institution located in an economic and political centre about 40 km outside of the biosphere reserve—co-opted the project (thus the place), rebranding it Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere *Region* in 2015. The official reason given for the renaming is that the word “reserve” has a negative connotation in Canada. Yet, the entire UNESCO biosphere project is an exercise in rebranding, making the situation far more complicated, and invidious.

Our analysis of the MABR offers a unique look inside the process of late modern colonial placemaking through an archaeology of contemporary travel and tourism (O’Donovan and Carroll), considering the impacts on already-marginalized communities (Keefe). We take a critical heritage studies approach, which foregrounds the role of social power and ideology in the production of heritage and place (Graham et al.; Harrison; Smith). Following John Carman and Susan Keitumetse (41), we conceive of MABR as not just a “heritage space,” but a neoliberalized heritage space, where tourism and industrial capitalism are cut from the same cloth, rather than being contradictory pursuits. Focusing in particular on the placemaking process, we pay special attention to the role of naming. In linking contemporary heritage placemaking to capitalism (Graham et al.), troubling and timely questions about modern heritage environments and sustainability emerge (Barthel-Bouchier).

Our essay has three parts. We begin by deconstructing the name Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Reserve, gaining insight into its historical foundations and naming transitions. Through a photo essay, we showcase the symbols and icons (semiotics) used to

designate this place, and illustrate through a landscape survey the colonial nature of MABR as an ideological vehicle for white upper-middle class values and capitalist ideals. We explore this further in our discussion, foregrounding alternative narratives and situating MABR within the ecotourism-extraction nexus. We conclude by considering whether MABR represents a meaningful break with past placemaking practices.

Deconstructing MABR: From “Mount Arrowsmith” to “Man and the Biosphere” and Beyond

Power comes to appear as something other than itself, indeed, it comes to appear as a name. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*

MABR is the product of four distinctly colonial historical events. The first was the renaming of an already-named and inhabited Indigenous landscape, home today to the Qualicum, Snaw-naw-as, K'ómox, Snuneymuxw, Tseshaht, Ditidaht, and Hupačasath peoples, and once home to the Pentlatch. Called *kał-ka-čul*, meaning jagged face, by the Hupačasath, “Mount Arrowsmith” was so-designated in 1858 by British Royal Navy Captain George Henry Richards. As commander of the eight-gun¹ survey vessel *HMS Plumper* from 1857 to 1861 (Figure 1), Richards was responsible for many of the place-names along the British Columbia coast (Akrigg and Akrigg).

The name “Arrowsmith” was Captain Richards’ nod to the famous English cartographers Aaron Arrowsmith (1750-1823) and his nephew John Arrowsmith (1790-1873). While the former produced upwards of 130 maps and an atlas for the Empire, the latter’s maps and charts “were so universally known for their excellence” that in the first half of the 19th century the name Arrowsmith was “synonymous with everything clever and accurate in cartography” (the latter was also a founding member of the Royal Geographical Society)

¹ It has been suggested the British eight-gun warship *HMS Plumper* (launched 1848) was retrofitted to carry twelve guns when it was converted from a military to a survey vessel in 1857, to be used to chart (and name) the coast of what would later become British Columbia, Canada.

(Walbran 24-25). A vital element of colonial placemaking, we return to the subject of mapmaking below.

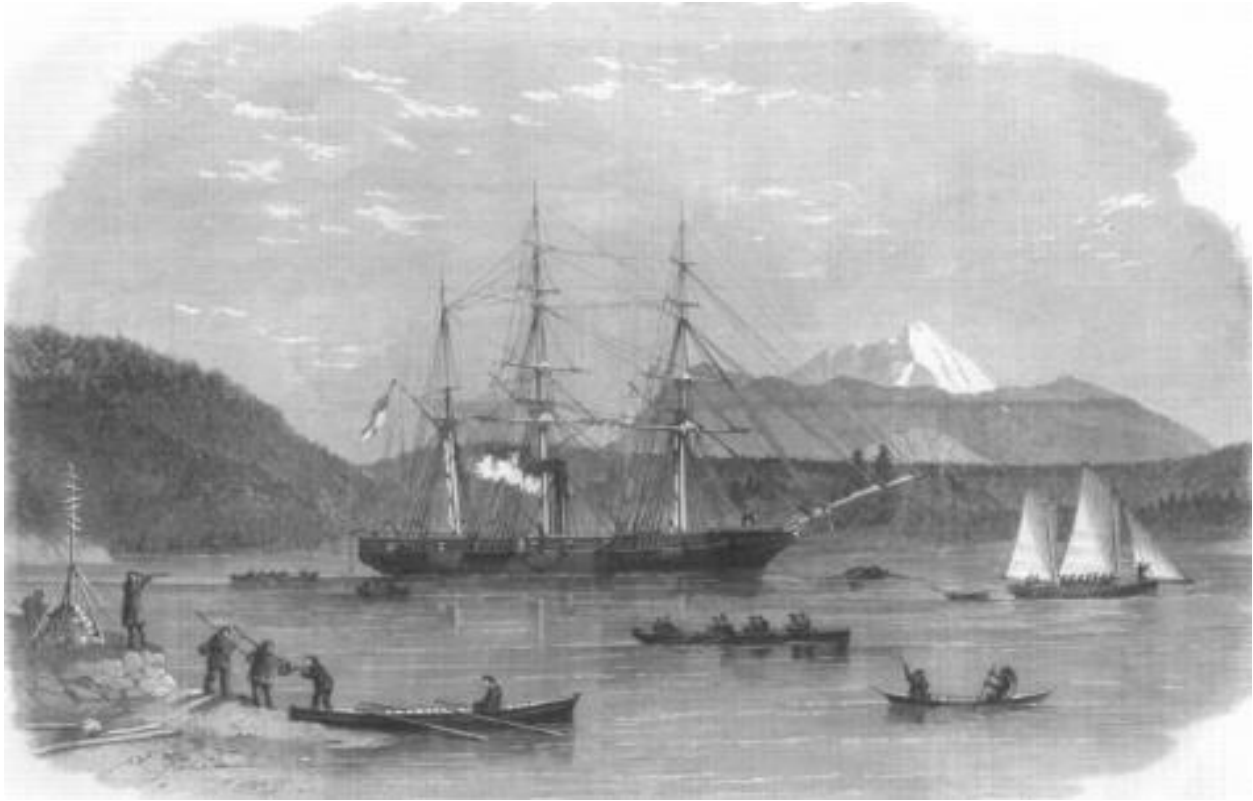


Figure 1. British survey vessel HMS *Plumper* at Port Harvey, northern Vancouver Island, circa 1860. Compare the signposted survey station (datum) at bottom left with Figures 12 and 13. Source: Wikipedia.

The second event is the invention in 1971 by the United Nations of the “biosphere reserve” concept, itself a product of UNESCO’s “Man and the Biosphere” (MAB) program² (Figure 2). At a time of elevated concern over environmental degradation due to increased urbanization and industrial capitalism, biospheres were conceived of as vehicles “to establish a scientific basis for the improvement of relationships between people and their environments” (UNESCO “Biosphere Reserve Information”). This emphasis privileges

² Despite a focused search, we were unable to find any formal critique of UNESCO’s sexist name “Man” and the Biosphere, language which is no longer acceptable in light of the UN’s own goals regarding gender equality.

Western science and non-local expertise over place-based governance and Indigenous knowledge.

In this regard, the biosphere program is quintessentially colonial whereby power is consolidated by an elite population who govern from afar. Further, as “learning sites for sustainable development,” UNESCO biospheres also represent the appropriation of the term “biosphere,” meaning a life-sustaining ecosystem, to include economic “development,” now synonymous with industrial capitalism—arguably the greatest threat to life-sustaining ecosystems worldwide. The result of UNESCO’s MAB imperialism is observed today in its global reach with 651 biosphere reserves in 120 countries now using the UNESCO brand.

The third event, the naming of MABR, took place in 2000 when the biosphere received its official UNESCO designation, illustrated in Figure 3. The designation effort was spearheaded by an employee of Canada’s Department of Fisheries and Oceans whose interest resided in aquatic fisheries and landscapes at the watershed scale (UNESCO “Biosphere Reserves”). In this newly named place, “pressures” from logging and urban development were the primary threats to the ecosystem, and the biosphere concept was considered “an ideal framework” to address such problems. However, the local community was largely unaware of and uninvolved in the MABR designation (Alexander “Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere”), and so the placemaking project faltered.



Figure 2. UNESCO's "Man [sic] and the Biosphere" logo has as its centrepiece the ankh, the Egyptian hieroglyphic character for "life." Compare this ancient agricultural imagery with Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region Research Institute's new icon, the honeybee, shown in Figure 5. Source: UNESCO.

To salvage the biosphere designation, it was appropriated by a state institution situated outside of MABR: Vancouver Island University (VIU, formerly Malaspina College) located in the City of Nanaimo. The following year, the university initiated and signed a memorandum of understanding “to support and protect” the biosphere designation, financially and through research (Alexander “Biosphere Reserve”). Soon thereafter, MABR established the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Reserve Research Institute (MABRRI), whose first task was (re)mapping the place, as shown in Figure 4.

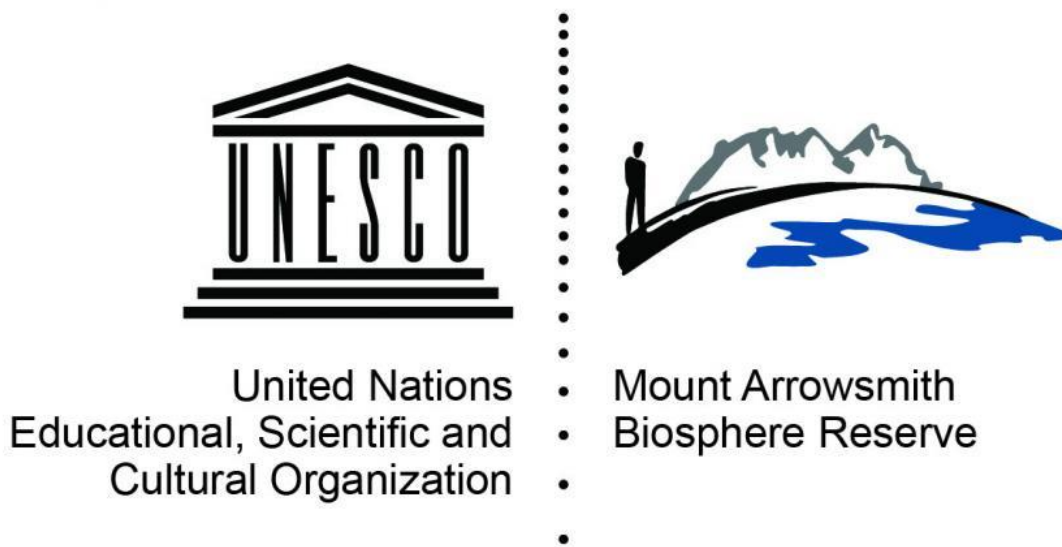


Figure 3. Integrated UNESCO and MABR brands. While the UNESCO logo (left) coopts the ancient Greek architectural form reserved for religious (temple) and state (treasury) buildings, the MABR logo shows a man towering over the landscape. Source: VIU-MABR.

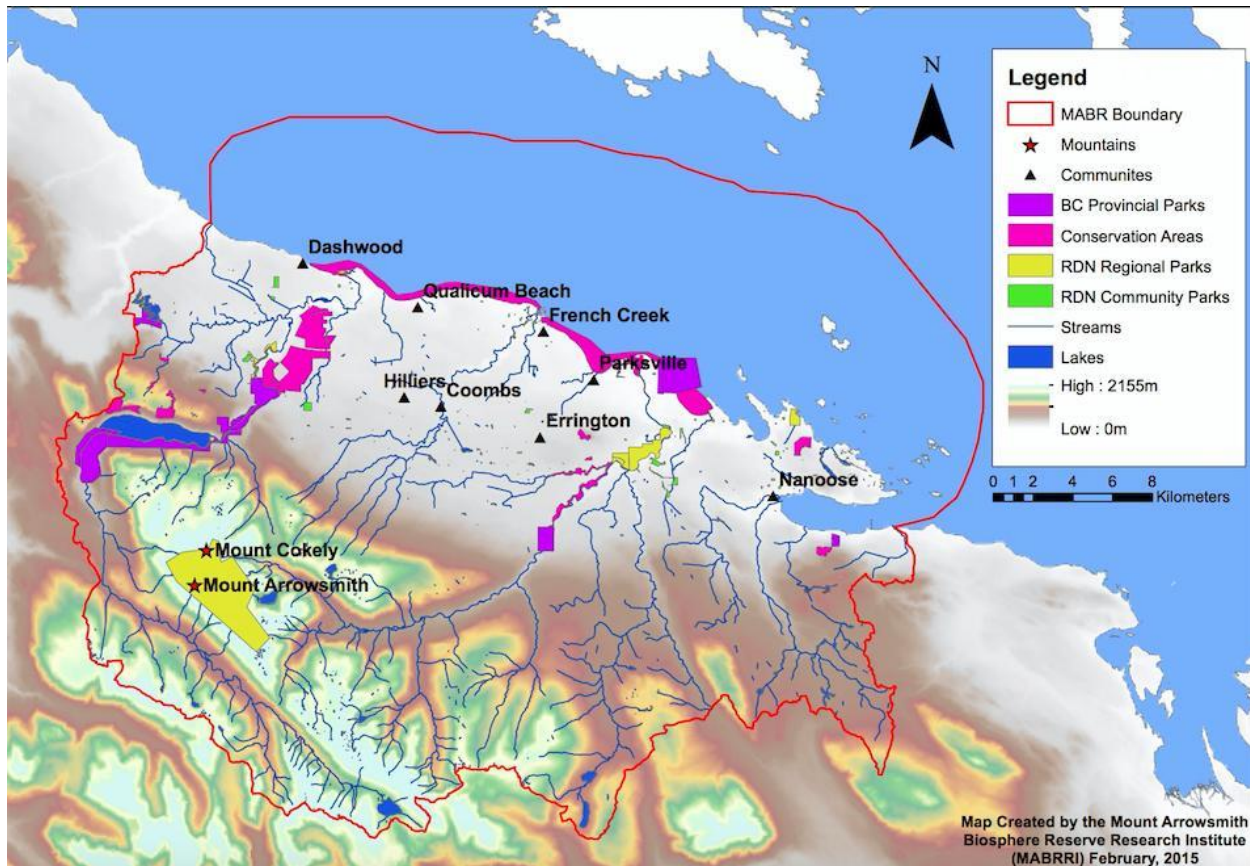


Figure 4. MABR as mapped by MABRRI in 2015. Note the emphasis on parks, conservations areas, and natural features. Cities are rebranded as “communities.” Source: VIU-MABR.

Finally, in 2015, MABR was renamed Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere “Region” because the word reserve has “negative connotations for First Nations” in Canada and could prevent MABR from “working together” with these potential partner communities (VIU-MABR “The Biosphere Region”). This word replacement is significant: “reserve” implies a space held back, protected from and/or saved for; however, “region” has no such connotations of conservation. Instead, it may be considered a *neutral* term used to delineate state space (e.g., the Regional District of Nanaimo).

This renaming negates the idea of biospheres as environmental conservation or protection, opening up the “region” for economic development. As such, the newly named MABRRI was renamed the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere *Region* Research Institute (MABRRI), a rebranding that included the adoption of the honeybee as their logo (Figure 5). Another form of naming, this icon is more culturally-relevant for European agricultural

societies than for Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast, where salmon or cedar are far more relevant symbols.



Figure 5. The logo for the newly named Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region Research Institute (MABRRI) has as its centrepiece the honeybee, an agricultural icon reminiscent of the Egyptian ankh used by UNESCO for the MAB (Figure 2). Source: VIU-MABR.

Ultimately, the renaming of already-named Indigenous territories to suit colonial and capitalist interests reflects the power Judith Butler describes above: the power to name is the power to define, to capture, and to control. How this power is manifest in MABR is the subject of our survey and discussion.

Lifting the Veil: Ground-Truthing MABR Online and In-person

When our team goes exploring in the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region or overseas for a conference, we want you to know about it! Read about our adventures, enjoy original photos and learn useful tips that can enhance your experience should you be looking for an interesting way to spend a day or two.

VIU-MABR, “Home”

The above quote provides valuable insight into how MABR “team-members”—that is, VIU professors and students centred outside the biosphere—view MABR as a place. As we

illustrate below, MABR's mission is to capture, brand, and market the "adventure" and "discovery" associated with "exploring" wilderness through ecotourism. This, we maintain, is not simply a recreation of *terra nullius* (i.e., landscape devoid of human presence, or "wilderness") but is its late modern manifestation, characterized by consumption and hypercapitalism.³ It is only in this colonial context that one can begin to make sense of MABR's attempts to scientize and catalog (i.e., name) every aspect of this 1186 km² (458 mile²) landscape.

Our survey of MABR, presented here in photo-essay format, was designed to identify patterns and processes in placemaking. We drew first on a web-based investigation of MABR, followed by a landscape survey to ground-truth MABR's representations. However, this was complicated by the fact that MABR is essentially a non-existent place: online sites are limited to MABR's official website and a few news articles, and we found no material record on the landscape to indicate that we were ever inside "MABR." Thus our survey was literally of a digitally "imagined community" (Anderson). As we discuss below, the way a place is imagined—beginning with how it is named—is significant.

³ For perspectives on *terra nullius* and the cultural construction of "wilderness" (i.e., "natural" heritage spaces) in North America, see Spence, Cronin, Nash, and Woolford et al.

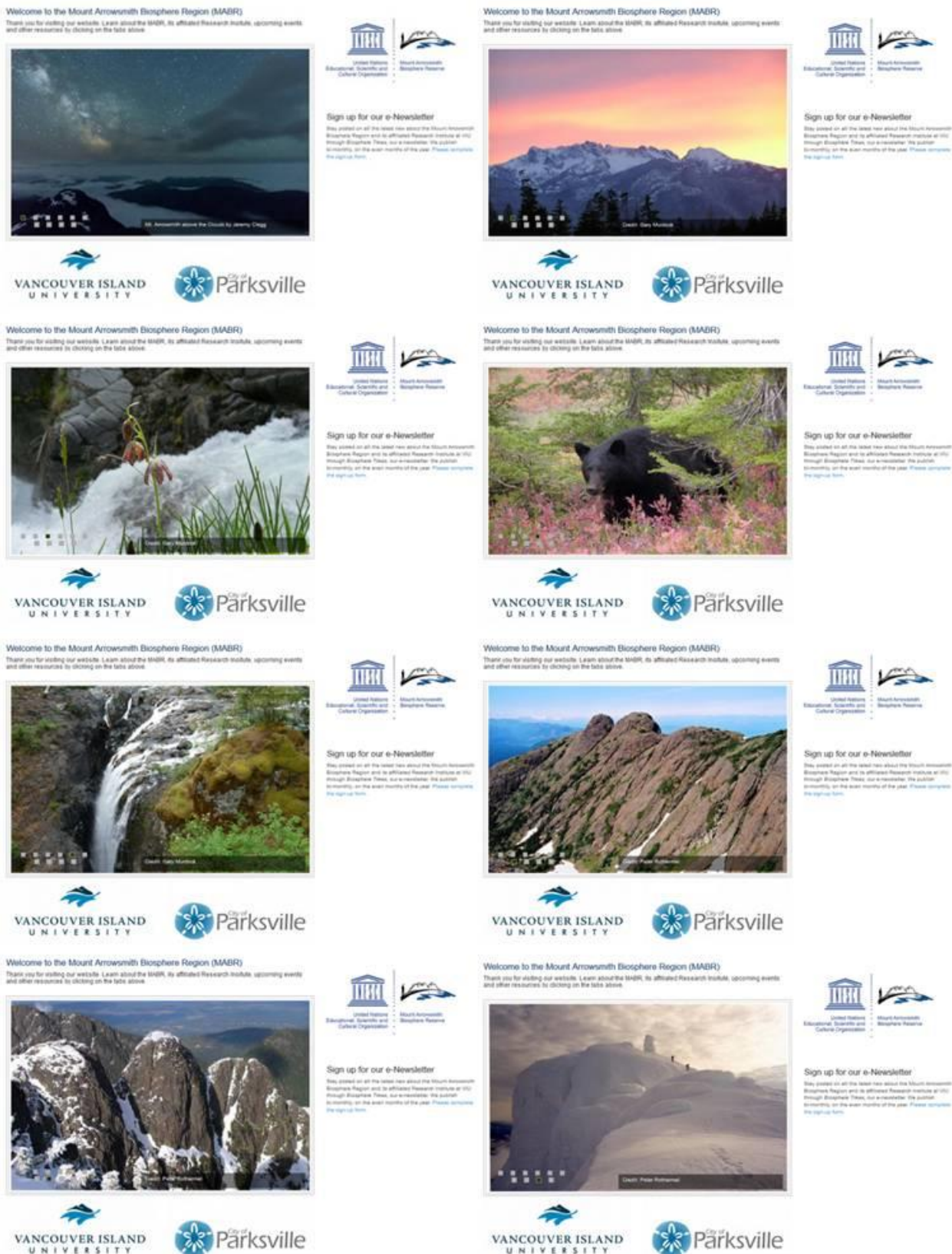


Figure 6. Revolving images from MABR’s homepage. Source: VIU-MABR.

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Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

MAB
Man and
the Biosphere
Programme

VANCOUVER ISLAND
UNIVERSITY

Parksville

**THE BIOSPHERE REGION
IN YOUR BACKYARD**

Fall Community Course with Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region staff

**Saturday, September 26 | 1pm-3pm
Milner Gardens | Magnolia Room**

Learn about the Mount Arrowsmith UNESCO Biosphere Region where you live, work and play. Join us for an engaging workshop that includes mini lectures, fun activities, a 'world café' style discussion, and stunning visuals.

Course # MGWM 010 | \$5 members | \$15 non-members

CALL TO REGISTER: 1-866-734-6252

Figure 7. Flyer announcing a public MABR event Vancouver Island University's elite Milner Gardens property, Qualicum Beach. Source: VIU-MABR.

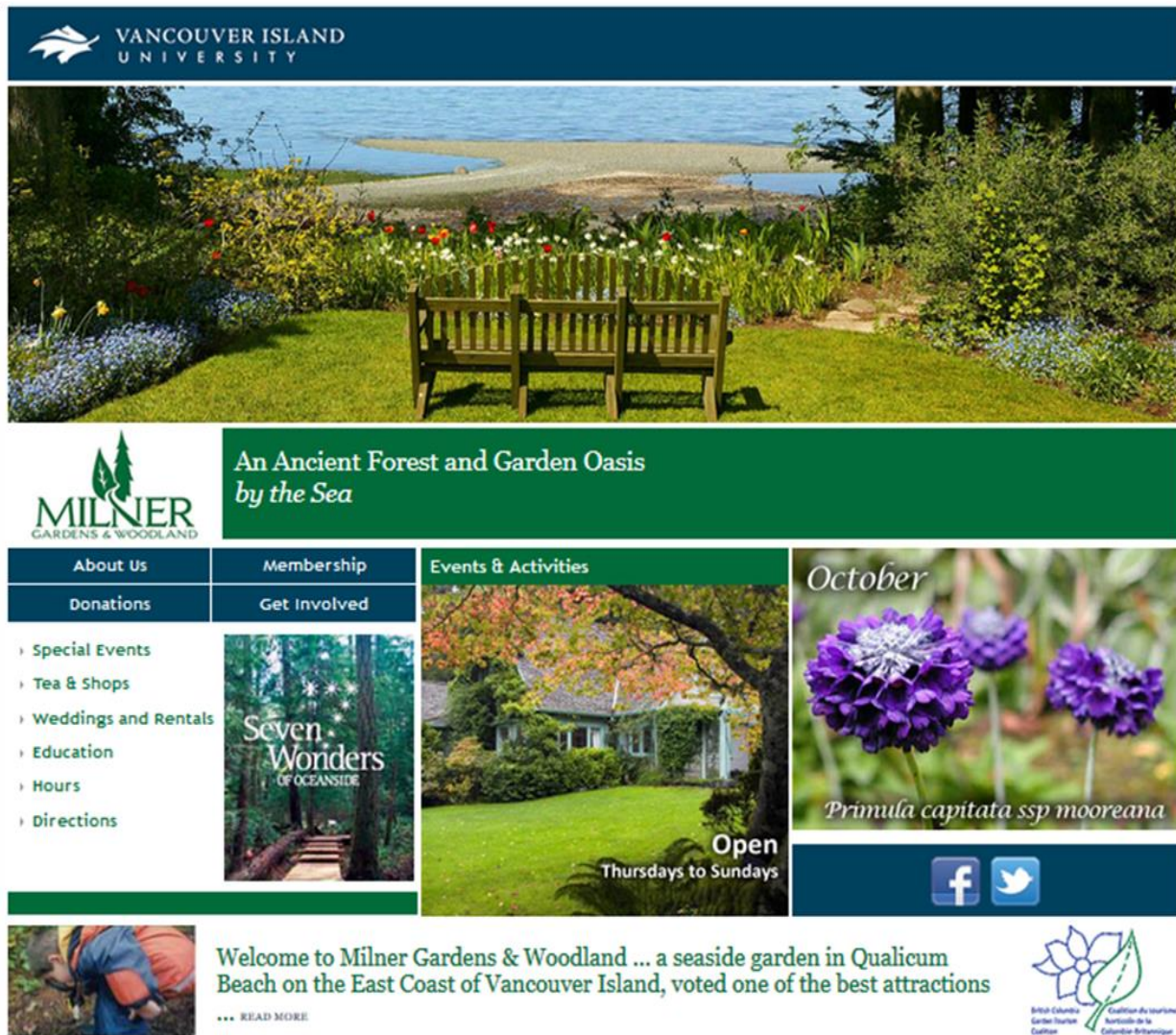


Figure 8. Screenshot of Milner Gardens homepage. Once the home of British elites, Milner Gardens boasts having been host to British politicians and royalty. Now owned and operated by VIU, Milner Gardens is marketed as “An Ancient Forest and Garden Oasis by the Sea.” Source: VIU-Milner Gardens “Homepage.”



Figure 9. Screenshot of Qualicum Beach’s “Welcome to Qualicum Beach” website showing an aerial view of the northern portion of our MABR survey area—a view that betrays MABR’s wilderness narrative. Mount Arrowsmith is located at top-right, below the word “fun.” Source: Town of Qualicum Beach “Welcome.”



Figure 10. Described as a “seaside garden,” Vancouver Island University’s multi-million dollar Milner Gardens property is associated with an ancient First Nations settlement not mentioned in any official literature. Named by Canadian Geographic Travel as “One of the Ten Best Public Gardens in Canada,” Milner Gardens—the site of the September MABR event—is a highly exclusive space: a large portion of the property is fenced off to keep out native species deemed “invasive.”



Figure 11. State-sanctioned placemaking: renamed the “Discovery Coast” for tourists, the region is connected via the welcoming “Heritage Discovery” route, known locally as Highway 19.



Figure 12. Capitalist placemaking: resort sign on the main “Heritage Discovery” route in Parksville designed to simplify the landscape for outsiders.



Figure 13. Capitalist placemaking: resort sign just off main “Heritage Discovery” route in Parksville.



Figure 14. Qualicum Beach Chamber of Commerce’s vision of the coast. Source: Qualicum Beach Chamber of Commerce “Home.”

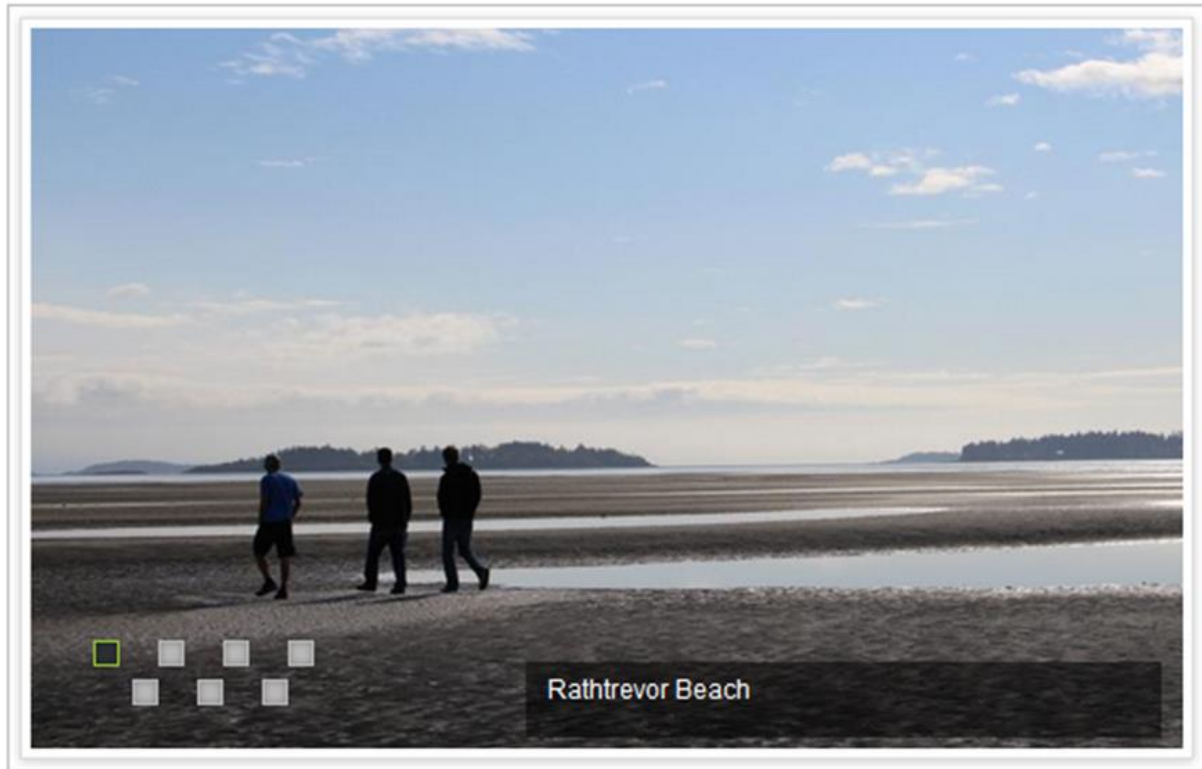


Figure 15. MABR's vision of the coast at Rathrevor Beach. Source: VIU-MABR.



Figure 16. Our view of the coast at Rathrevor Beach, looking slightly right of the view shown in Figure 15.

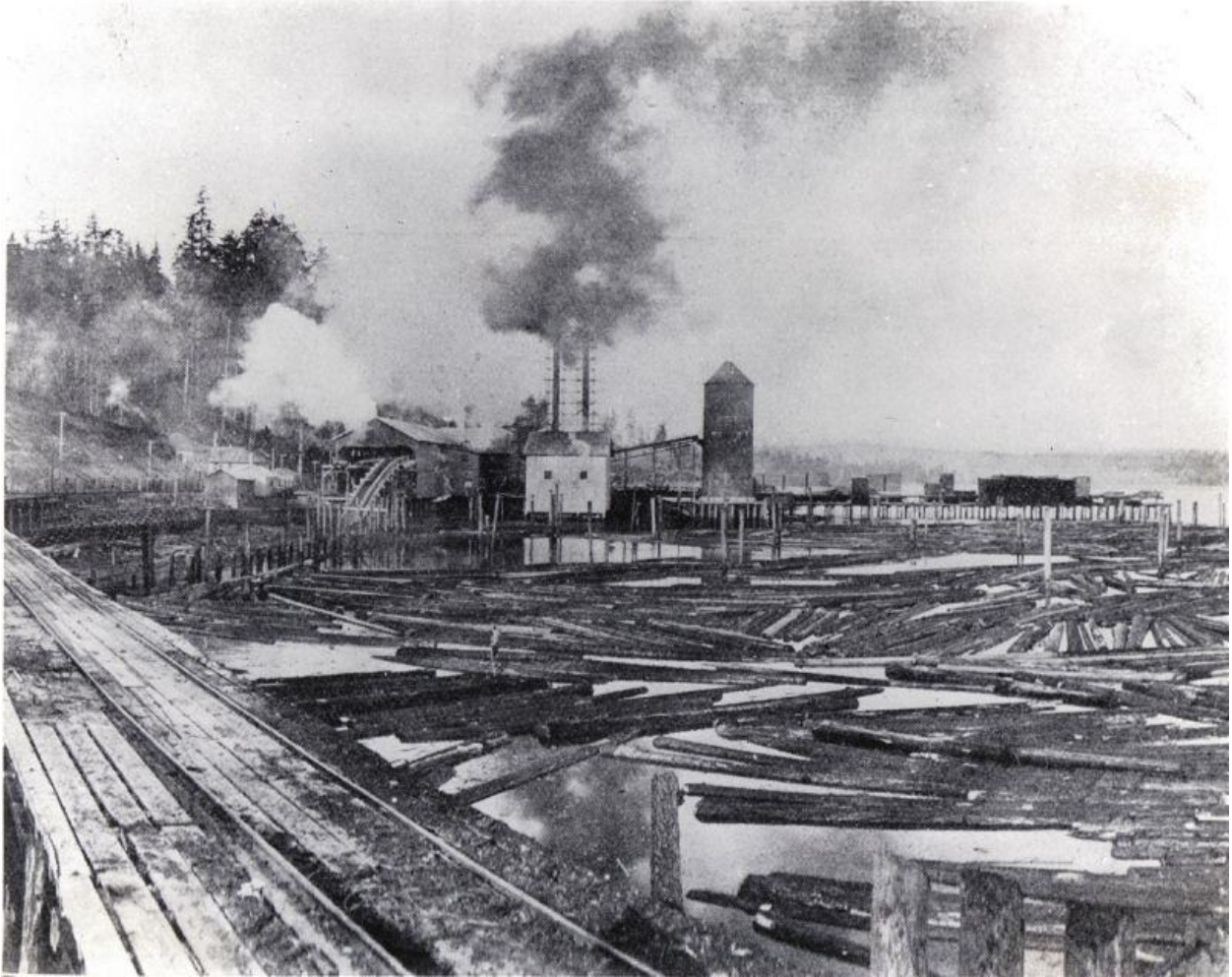


Figure 17. Nanoose waterfront mill, early 1900s (note person at left centre for scale). Source: Parksville Museum & Archives “Home Page.”



Figure 18. Land clearance near Parksville, early 1900s. Source: Parksville Museum & Archives “Home Page.”



Figure 19. One perspective of “nature” in MABR, complete with construction debris, clearcut logging scars, and power lines crosscutting the landscape.



Figure 20. The settler owned and operated “Qualicum Trading Post” located just west of Coombs, a stereotyped vision of the role Indigenous people play in the colonial imagination.



Figure 21. “Shop, Play, Eat, Stay”—this official tagline of Qualicum Beach links tourism (shop, play, eat) with amenity migration (stay).



Figure 22. “Live, Work, Play.” The official tagline of Parksville.



Figure 23. DROUGHT CONDITIONS CONTINUE. At present, MABR's population and culture are unsustainable, and it is unclear how ecotourism and amenity migration might resolve these problems.

Discussion: MABR as Colonial Placemaking and Economic Development

We are drawn to products that make us feel good about buying them... The term “greenwashing” has been coined to refer to the phenomenon of eco-exaggeration.
Michelle Diffenderfer and Keri-Ann C. Baker, “Greenwashing”

As one of the most important and recognizable forms of cultural heritage, the potential for names to become political currency is “great” (Bodenhorn and Gabriele vom Bruck 12). Our research into the history and landscape of MABR confirms it to be a place imagined by outsiders and elites, managed by outsiders and elites, and marketed to outsiders and elites—all ultimately to the benefit of outsiders and elites. As shown here, names are vital in this dynamic, for they establish the “agenda.”

This should not be surprising. Pacific Coast geographer Cole Harris writes that, “from their earliest encounters, Europeans had begun to remake this territory in their own terms: mapping it, renaming it, claiming possession of it, bringing it within reach of the European imagination” (Harris 161). Science and technology were used to create a “cartographic and conceptual outline of what, for them, was a new land, placing its coast and principal rivers on their maps, identifying the land as wilderness and its peoples as savages.” Mapping has always been central to state control of space and the people therein, as it establishes the framework for how that place is to be conceived, legitimized, and used, and by whom (Anderson 163-164). Mapping continues to be a priority for MABR team-members, who are considering the creation of an atlas to further advertise the biosphere, VIU, and UNESCO (VIU-MABR “The Biosphere Region”).

Emphasizing wilderness and downplaying past and present industry, names and representations of places within MABR narrate a selective version of reality that caters to mostly white, upper-middle class values (i.e., potential tourists and amenity migrants); this echoes regional colonial government and business interests centred around ecotourism. In this regard, MABR as a brand is contributing to and defining an authorized heritage discourse (Smith 11-43). This has been a successful retail strategy: the area has almost twice the number of aged 65+ residents than any other region in Canada (VIU-MABR “The Biosphere Region”). Marketed as an ideal retirement community, outsiders are encouraged to visit and settle, practices that are inherently unsustainable.

Instead of the depopulated and dehumanized nature and wilderness depicted by MABR, we found a colonized landscape where the narrative of elite escape into the country (La Salle) lies in stark contrast to the region’s working class industrial history. Not long after being mapped and named by Captain Richards, the region was settled by European developers who quickly deforested the landscape for lumber and agricultural land, a process greatly enhanced by the construction of a main road in the late 1800s and a railroad in the early 1900s. Indeed, industry, particularly forestry, remains central to the region’s economy today: nearly 94% of lands within MABR’s boundaries are privately owned by logging companies (VIU-MABR “The Biosphere Region”). However, instead of focusing on

this industry, MABR proponents emphasize small-scale farming and horticulture in their research and events.

MABR exemplifies the *ecotourism-extraction nexus*, where (a) ecotourism, (b) environmental conservation, and (c) industrial resource extraction are all taking place “in the same spaces, often supported by the same institutions” (Büscher and Davidov 1). This dynamic is captured in Bram Büscher and Veronica Davidov’s list of contradictions or dichotomies associated with the ecotourism-extraction nexus (Table 1). Although the dichotomies may seem simplistic, the story told about MABR by its team-members falls almost exclusively into the left-hand column, conveying a highly selective version of reality that is politically and economically motivated. The right-hand column constitutes that which has been erased by MABR. We have added to this list the “colonialism” binary, rightfully situated between mainstream and capitalism.

Table 1. What’s in a name? Contradictions and dichotomies associated with the ecotourism-extraction nexus. After Büscher and Davidov (17, Table 2.1)	
<i>MABR story told (named)</i>	<i>MABR story not told (unnamed)</i>
Nature	Society
Sustainable (pure/pristine)	Unsustainable (degraded/spoilt)
Space of attraction	Space to avoid
Adventure/romantic	Ordinary/mundane
Hope	Despair
Altruism/virtue	Responsibility/guilt
Good	Bad
Post-industrial	Industrial
Primitive	Modern
Green	Brown
Ecological holism/integrity	Ecological alienability
Pre-/post-capitalist	Capitalist
Pre-/post-colonialist	Colonialist
Alternative	Mainstream

In this regard, MABR reflects the late modern heritage environment wherein the primary function of the neoliberalized state—including its academic institutions—is the creation of new market opportunities for capitalist investment. Indeed, VIU is already promoting the “sustainable development” ideology through its World Leisure Centre of Excellence, a program aimed at increasing tourism in British Columbia. MABR is both a purveyor and product of this ideology.

Conclusion: MABR™ as Brand Name and Worldview

With naming comes knowledge, and with knowledge, power: the power not only to use, control, and possess but also, just as important, to define. Thomas F. Thornton, *Being and Place*

MABR is an exercise in colonial branding. Efforts by Vancouver Island University to portray MABR as a mythical, ancient, and empty wilderness is a familiar “New World” narrative. Veiled in the tired and easily deconstructed language of “community” and “sustainability,” MABR exemplifies neoliberal placemaking, where the landscape is commodified and commercialized, (re)invented for wealthy ecotourists and amenity migrants.

MABR is an imperial hegemonic project designed to simplify or make “legible” (Scott 2-3) for outsiders what is otherwise a foreign landscape. This is the essence of colonial placemaking: through naming and branding, the foreign is made familiar. MABR’s creation of “nature” or *terra nullius* erases culture, particularly Indigenous culture, which opens up the landscape for tourism and settlement (La Salle). Operating under and veiled by the seemingly incontrovertible logic of “sustainable development,” MABR “legitimate[s] further capitalist expansion, both in general and specifically regarding capitalist extension into nature” (Davidov and Büscher 5).

Rather than fostering sustainability in the periphery, neoliberal states manipulate and erase names—thus places—to foster reliance on and subservience to the core. MABR, like most state-sanctioned naming projects that came before it, seems “driven by a colonial

desire for land, resources, and the perpetrator's motivation to dominate and subsume the oppressed" (Logan 154). MABR team-members and Vancouver Island University are gaining control over and ultimately profiting from a geography, population, and heritage not their own. Because VIU-MABR's prime directive is to protect the biosphere designation, there appears to be little interest in understanding how their representations of this place, its history, and its names constitute colonial forgetting and co-optation. Instead, MABR proponents envision a future where all VIU students are involved in research in the biosphere, asking not whether MABR *should* exist, but only *how much bigger* MABR should get (VIU-MABR "The Biosphere Region"). "Entangled in history" (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 1), such colonial placemaking represents no break with the past.

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