

Environmental Romanticism: The “Protection” of Nature Perpetuates Erasures of Indigenous Existence from Their Traditional Territories

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Clifford Atleo’s Resource and Environmental Management (REM) 407: *Indigenous Governance and Resource Relationships*. The assignment asked students to engage with a subject of our choosing, related to any of the themes raised in class in greater depth. The paper uses APA citation style.

The essay investigates how environmentalism of the late 20th- and early 21st-century is embedded with the sentiment of keeping the *wild* intact. However, this conception of the natural environment as uninhabited and *wild* negates Indigenous presence on the land. Thus, environmental romanticizations of nature invalidate Indigenous self-determination while authorizing erasures of Indigenous existence in their unceded traditional territories. The paper explores the themes of Indigenous resource relationships, co-management, and environmentalism through case studies in Clayoquot Sound and Bella Bella, British Columbia, Canada.

Introduction

Late 20th- and early 21st-century environmentalism is deluged with discourse surrounding keeping the *wild* intact to prevent “destructive humanity” from exploiting *pristine* natural landscapes. Bruce Braun (2002) explores environmentalist’s binary logic that argues, since nature is untouched and *wild* it should be protected from destructive human uses. However, this binary logic is harmful to Indigenous communities because it constructs a false narrative that

natural spaces are uninhabited, which perpetuates the erasure of Indigenous territoriality through white settler's environmental activism. This misinformed and harmful logic is fuelled by environmental romanticism. In the environmental context, romanticism is defined as a detached viewpoint of the natural world. A romanticized view of the natural world means that people perceive nature as an uninhabited place, existing “out-there” away from civilization. The romanticization of nature is a pernicious practice because it understands nature through a purely aesthetic view, which instinctually insinuates a duality: *pristine* nature pitted against destructive humanity. An aesthetic view of nature is damaging to Indigenous cultures and histories because it negates their existence in the natural environment; Indigenous existence opposes the binary logic serving environmental romanticism. Furthermore, environmental activism by non-Natives perpetuates Indigenous erasure because it authorizes environmentalists to speak in defense of nature, effectively silencing the voices of Indigenous communities that inhabit the territories in question. Through two case study analyses, this paper asserts that environmental romanticizations of nature invalidate Indigenous self-determination while authorizing erasures of Indigenous existence in their unceded traditional territories.

The Nuu-chah-nulth in Clayoquot Sound

Clayoquot Sound is located on the West Coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. The Sound's landscape is characterized by clusters of islands and old-growth forests. As Braun (2002) notes, Clayoquot Sound does not fit the romanticized image of nature, as it is far from unoccupied. The Sound is home to three First Nations—*aahuusʔath* (Ahousaht), *hišqʷiʔath* (Hesquiaht), and *ʔaʔuukʷiʔath* (Tla-o-qui-aht)—that are a part of the *nuučaanulath* (Nuu-chah-nulth) Nations (Figure 1) (Braun, 2002; Friends of Clayoquot Sound, 2014). There is also a non-Native population in the Sound, however, they nearly exclusively reside in the village of Tofino (2002). The “Nuu-chah-nulth communities are centralized at four village sites: Ahousat, Opitsat, Hesquiat, and Esowista. All but the last are accessible only by boat or float plane” (Braun, 2002).

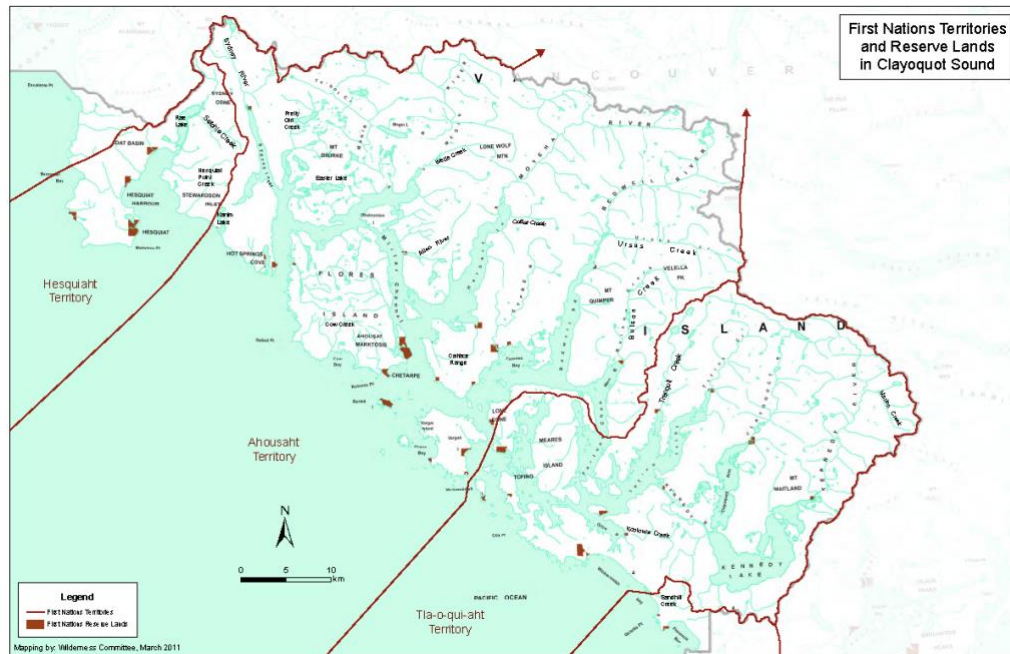


Figure 1. First Nations Territories and Reserve Lands in Clayoquot Sound (FCOS, 2014).

The Romanticization of Clayoquot Sound and the “War in The Woods”

Indigenous presence—since time immemorial—complicates any *wilding* of Clayoquot Sound (Braun, 2002). However, non-Natives continue to dismiss Indigenous sovereignty when it comes to issues such as resource extraction and environmental protection in the Sound (Braun, 2002). This dismissal of Indigenous existence in the natural landscapes of the Sound is precipitated by environmental romanticism. The romanticization of Clayoquot Sound as *wild* falsely paints a mosaic of stunning emerald valleys of old-growth forests that need to be protected because they are untouched (Nature United, 2021). In 1993, after years of conflict between the Nuu-chah-nulth Nations and the Canadian state, the Provincial government issued a land-use plan for the Sound—without seeking consultation from Indigenous communities (Nature United, 2021). The Clayoquot Sound Land Use Decision allocated 40 percent of the area for logging and other resource extraction (Clayoquot Alliance, 2004). Another point of contention within the plan was that it did not consider various cultural, environmental, and economic practices of the Nuu-chah-nulth groups who reside in the Sound (Braun, 2002). Upon the publication of the land-use plan, First Nations groups were outraged at being left out of critical decision-making processes that directly

impact their traditional territory (Clayoquot Alliance, 2004). Environmental groups were also outraged because the plan permitted extensive logging of old-growth in the *pristine* Sound. The narrative surrounding the controversial land-use plan was shifted away from Indigenous management issues; the spotlight was placed on the environmental conservation of old-growth forests in Clayoquot Sound. Protests against the logging of old-growth ensued and were known as the Clayoquot protests or “War in the Woods” which garnered media attention worldwide (Tindall & Robinson, 2017). These protests were largely successful in preventing wide-scale industrial logging in the Sound; yet the systemic issues surrounding the government’s lack of Indigenous consultation were left unaddressed once victory over the logging industry was declared (Tindall & Robinson, 2017).

Environmental Romanticism’s Role in the Clayoquot Protests

The romanticization of nature played a pivotal role in the “War in the Woods” because it impassioned non-Native environmentalists from all over the world to rally together to protect the old-growth, temperate rainforest of the Sound. Although “alliances with environmentalists [can] bring advantageous attention to Indigenous causes” (Willow, 2012), there is the risk of the environmentalist’s voices and agendas being prioritized above those of the First Nations. In the case of the Nuu-chah-nulth communities in Clayoquot Sound, they were not all in opposition to logging (Goetze, 2005). However, any attempts at respectful deals between logging stakeholders and the Nuu-chah-nulth were dashed by the agenda of non-Native environmentalists. The Clayoquot Protests act as a hallmark example of non-Native voices being prioritized and Indigenous self-determination being sidelined. The non-Native environmentalist action in Clayoquot Sound is complicit with Indigenous displacement, as the “rhetoric of wild and nature” displaces Indigenous peoples for whom these *wild* places are home (Braun, 2002). Amplifying non-Native interests, over those of the Indigenous people inhabiting the territory being protested on, serves environmental romanticism which led to the Clayoquot protests, and simultaneously attempted to erase Indigenous peoples from their traditional territories in the Sound.

The Heiltsuk in Bella Bella

Bella Bella is located on the East Coast of Campbell Island in British Columbia. The landscape of Bella Bella is part of the Great Bear Rainforest which is dominated by forests of Sitka spruce and red cedars along the central coast.

Although the natural landscape persists seemingly untouched on most of Campbell Island, it is not to be romanticized as a *wild* place. Bella Bella is home to the Hailtzaqv (Heiltsuk) and over half of the Heiltsuk Nation's population resides on the island (Figure 2) (Heiltsuk Nation, 2015). The main village site of Bella Bella is the largest regional centre in the area and is located on the "Inside Passage," a protected water route used by marine traffic to avoid the rough waters of the outer Pacific Ocean (Davis, 2011). The community is remote and can only be accessed by ferry or plane.



Figure 2. Heiltsuk Territory (Heiltsuk Nation, 2015).

Bella Bella and The Great Bear Rainforest Romanticized as a “Global Treasure”

From time immemorial, the Heiltsuk have inhabited Bella Bella and their homelands have never been surrendered, and no treaties have been signed (Davis, 2011). Since the early 1990s, the Heiltsuk’s traditional territories have become increasingly frequented by environmental and conservation groups. These groups are working to “protect” the *pristine wilderness* of the Great Bear Rainforest which overlays the unceded traditional territories of the Heiltsuk and many other coastal First Nations (Davis, 2011). The environmentalists working in and around Bella Bella have called the landscape a “Global Treasure,” which has helped mobilize their environmental protection goals (Davis, 2011). This rhetoric harms the Heiltsuk because it places them under the gaze of external actors who have ‘discovered the ‘global treasure’ of their homelands” (Davis, 2011). The romanticization of nature—as being uninhabited by Indigenous communities and being a precious entity needing protection—perpetuates settler colonial erasures of Indigeneity because it separates the Heiltsuk peoples from the natural spaces they have relied on and called home for innumerable generations. Furthermore, it subjects the forest to administration from distant actors who view it as an entirely separate entity from its Native inhabitants (Braun, 2002), which creates tensions in the Heiltsuk-environmental group relations.

Environmentalism’s Stereotyping Impedes Heiltsuk Self-Determination

A common challenge expressed by Indigenous groups is dispelling the stereotype of the *ecological Indian*—“the suggestion that the goals of First Nations perfectly parallel those of environmental groups” (Davis, 2011). This stereotype is fraught with problems and is intimately linked to environmental romanticism because it serves the false narrative that Indigenous peoples want to “protect” the natural environment from destructive humanity. Instead of empowering Indigenous communities, environmentalists present their own agendas and deploy the *ecological Indian* stereotype to represent Indigenous peoples as having innate spiritual connections to the environment that urge them to unfailingly act to conserve it (Willow, 2012). Although it might be true that Indigenous people harbour spiritual connections to their traditional territories, it is not fair for environmentalists to dictate how that connection presents itself because Indigenous people have the right to self-determination. In Bella Bella, the Heiltsuk have developed relationships with non-Native environmental and conservation groups which are met with varying degrees of success and failure. There are documented failures

that highlight environmental groups' inability to recognize and respect Heiltsuk traditions, knowledge, and ethics which have caused considerable resentment of environmentalists among the Heiltsuk (Davis, 2011). One critique from the Heiltsuk is that many environmentalists came into their territory with a moral superiority, which presents an ignorance toward the Heiltsuk culture and history (Davis, 2011). Understandably, confrontational situations with environmentalists who institute their own agendas are unproductive for the Heiltsuk. Many environmentalists think they are not doing any wrong by advocating for the preservation of the natural world; yet, what they are doing is presenting itineraries that silence Indigenous voices and erase Indigenous presence from the landscape. Thus, environmental romanticism is reenacting earlier colonial displacements (Braun, 2002).

Rebuttal: The Benefits of the Heiltsuk's Relationships with non-Native Environmentalists

Although there are significant failures from many environmental groups who attempt relationships with Indigenous communities, the Heiltsuk case study offers a rebuttal to the traditionally negative connotation of Indigenous-environmentalist relations. As Lee identifies, it is only when Indigenous peoples are free to choose what alliances they form, that those relationships will benefit both sides (2011). When engaging with environmental and conservation groups, the Heiltsuk emphasize their right to self-determination, self-sufficiency, and control over their territories and resources (Davis, 2011). The Heiltsuk identify four potential assets that environmental groups can offer them: “money, contacts, political mobilization, and professional expertise” (Davis, 2011). Davis conducted interviews with a Heiltsuk leader, and they stated that they wanted a relationship with someone “who provided financial or technical resources to assist the Heiltsuk in pursuing their own agenda” (Davis, 2011). A key takeaway from these potential assets is a good relationship with environmental groups, for the Heiltsuk, is one that not only shares their agendas but one that is willing to go further by making additional contributions—such as monetarily—to meet those goals.

Indigenous Self-Determination Through Co-Management

Indigenous peoples are faced with the need to reassert their way of life to prevent getting lost in the binary logic of environmental romanticism (Norman, 2017). As seen with both the Nuu-chah-nulth in Clayoquot Sound and the Heiltsuk in Bella Bella, environmental romanticism impedes self-determination and perpetuates

Indigenous erasure from their traditional territories by falsely authorizing environmentalists to speak on behalf of a non-existent *pristine* nature. There needs to be transformative approaches to environmental protection, from non-Native actors, because the narratives perpetrated by romanticism continue to silence Indigenous ways of doing, being and knowing (Temper, 2019). The perpetuation of oppression against Indigenous peoples happens when relationships with environmentalists are built upon an asymmetrical status quo; this predestines promising partnerships for eventual disintegration because non-Natives try to exploit Indigenous peoples to further their own agendas (Lee, 2011; Willow, 2012). A suggestion for future relationships between Indigenous communities and environmental actors is co-management. Traditionally, co-management is seen from a resource-centred perspective, however, it can be a strategy for creating equitable relationships between Indigenous peoples and environmentalists. In this context, co-management is not only about resource use, but it also focuses on redefining relationships between stakeholders who have varying interests in, and varying degrees of authority over the resources (Goetze, 2005). According to Goetze, co-management can be used to address Indigenous self-determination because it gives Indigenous communities increased control over traditional territories within liberal democratic state systems (Goetze, 2005). Furthermore, co-management, in this capacity, is a type of shared governance that recognizes the rights of Indigenous peoples to participate in the control and management of their traditional lands, and participate in decision making processes (Stronghill et al., 2015).

Conclusion

“Nature is not a physical place to which one can go, nor a treasure to fence in or bank, nor an essence to be saved or violated” —Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters”

The two case studies—the Nuuchahnulth in Clayoquot Sound and the Heiltsuk in Bella Bella—reveal that environmental activism, performed through a purely aesthetic viewpoint, perpetuates Indigenous erasure by sidelining Indigenous agendas in favour of environmentalists’ goal to “protect” nature. As the quotation from Haraway illuminates, there is no such thing as *pristine* nature or *wild* spaces; this acknowledgement invalidates the binary logic of environmental romanticism because without a *wild* to “protect” the logic collapses on itself. To validate Indigenous existence in their unceded traditional territories, environmentalists must abandon their aesthetic perspective of nature and adopt a new discourse

surrounding environmental conservation that honours Indigenous people's permanence in natural spaces.

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