

Student Essay

Environmental Studies 303: Human Ecology and Sustainability

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Essay 2 - Question 1

In Emilio Moran's book, *People and Nature*, he says many people have different views of an ideal environment. Some desire a "pretty landscape" while others seek desire a mix of forests, agricultural land and human habitations (Moran, 2006, 57). Between the settlers, Salish Indians and the stump farmers, presented in White's book, *Land Use, Environment and Social Change*, large distinctions arise between each group's view of the environment around them, thus defining dynamic and dramatically different ways in which each group interact with the ecology of Island County.

As we learned in class, cognitive anthropology is how humans interpret their relationship with the environment, often based on beliefs (Green, Jan. 17, 2013). White notes that the Salish populated the land with spirits (White, 1992, 14). With this view they were able to manipulate the land to meet their needs without voiding it of its ability to sustain this cultural system (White, 1992, 25). The white settlers sought out to fulfill their own beliefs through biblical teaching, which meant dominating and often altering the natural environment that they found (White, 1992, 23).

Moran discourages the dichotomous thinking, of the settlers and stump farmers, which pushes people to view themselves separate from the environment, called to control the land for human purposes (Moran, 2006, 8).

In Island County, some of these human purposes for the settlers were largely rooted in creating "improved land," and pursuing products of the environment that could yield for the largest market economic gain. An example of this is the way in which the white settlers chose their crops based on competition in the agriculture market. Therefore, they changed crops annually, and negligently cared for the land on which they depended. Soil erosion, soil exhaustion and European weeds degraded the landscape to a point which was unsuitable for agriculture (White, 1992, 76).

Surprisingly, there were some common viewpoints shared by both the Salish and the white settlers. In early farming, both groups subsisted off the land. In class discussion, we discussed how both groups also used land resources for trading. They also both took part in various manipulation of the land, such that the Salish manipulated the proportions of the native flora and fauna (White, 1992, 22). Thus, the Salish encouraged nettle, camas, and bracken which altered Island County out of its pristine natural state, if there is such a thing. Similarly, the settlers pushed for the cultivation of many agriculture commodities not suited for the ecology of Island County and coincidentally produced failed crops.

White writes of how the farmer found he could not do whatever he wanted to with the land. White notes that while some exotic plants adapted, some soils deteriorated, and noxious weeds spread, the settlers failed to connect these changes with their actions, (White, 1992, 53). In Jared Diamond's book, *Collapse*, he cites that one failure of group-decision making is the inability to recognize and perceive problems when they are present (Diamond, 2005, 421). This category is applicable to the white settlers, in that they perceived themselves to be dominators of the natural world around them and failed to recognize the problems they created. White notes that they became "[victims] of the natural world," (White, 1992, 57). They may not have fallen victims of the ecological collapse Diamond warns of, but they were victims to creating land that could not sustain agriculture, grazing, forest regeneration.

Speaking of forest regeneration, the stump farmers viewed the forested land through a lens impacted by their society and creation-myths. The "back-to-the-land" movement emphasized how fertile the soil was because it could grow all of the trees, unaware of the varying acidity levels in the soil unfit for agricultural farming (White, 115). It's also important to note the push towards cultivating the stump forest for agriculture uses, rather than regeneration of forested land. As we discussed in class, this is also based in cognitive anthropology, as timber farming isn't a concept presented in Genesis. This ties back to "humans as dominators" of the landscape, and this domination is rooted in cultural and societal perceptions of ecology. As more and more people moved into the stump forest, motivated to clear the land for farming, Island County saw the effects of this perception. Poverty and isolation struck the stump farms, as they were unable to live off the stump land and lacked aspects of a community such as, roads, school, etc. (White, 1992, 134). In terms of the environment, the soil of the stump forests suffered greatly by the removal of the stumps White notes that a National Resources Board Survey found surface soil removal of 25 to 27 percent (White, 1992, 135).

The Salish Indians, white settlers, and the stump-farmers all approached the ecology of Island County in different ways, but their own belief systems and societal pressures guided them. As we discussed in class, all groups influenced the landscape within their own societal, political and cultural boundaries, such that it fell from the pristine nature mentioned in *People and Nature*.