

Student Essay

Environmental Studies 303: Human Ecology and Sustainability

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Essay 2

Question 1: Compare and contrast the ways three or more groups viewed the ecology of Whidbey and Camano Island. What were the results or consequences of these views?

As political and social control of Island County passed from group to group, the dominant views over the natural bounty of the area, and more importantly—what should come from that bounty, changed drastically. Generally, as the area was populated with more settlers, emphasis slid from a reverent connection to the land to haphazard exploitation of non-renewable resources. Island County provided many different facets of survival and subsistence, but these resources were increasingly ill-maintained. The first Salish people on the Islands managed to live sustainably, but the arrival of eager farmers and then even more eager loggers changed the bounty of Island County from a plentiful forest into an over-used, nearly useless wasteland.

The Salish People controlled the coastal region of Island County for more than five hundred years, from 1300 A.D. till the white invasion in the 1850s. The predominant attitude of these horticulturalists towards the land they lived on was one of reverence and inclusion. Humans were not the only important component of the system, but “plants and animals too on a religious as well as an economic significance”, and spirits that were believed to inhabit the land made their connection to it significant (White, 14). This distinction granted the Salish people two cultural relationships with their local environment that later settlers would lack completely; a curiosity for their natural world, and a sustainable relationship with the resources available to them.

Comment [RG1]: What was non-renewable?
That's the crazy part – timber, salmon, soil... all are renewable.

Comment [RG2]: Nice pt!

The Salish people relied heavily on the available resources, consuming many varieties of dependable, as well as loosely cultivating natural vegetables like camas and bracken. The Salish did partake in some destruction of the natural landscape, a fallen tree or a deliberately started fire greatly helped the Salish people, but did not negatively impact the ecosystem as a whole. In these ways, they did not in a sense exploit nature, but rather manipulated some natural processes to provide for themselves, generally taking their cues directly from nature. They existed in what Moran deemed a transitional stage between complete hunter/gatherer society and a dependence on agriculture, and so natural change in subsistence pattern changed little over the Salish reign in Island County because “the human population was between exploiting wild sources and beginning to change the plants and animals in permanent ways” (Moran, 49). Overall, the natives were able to live in peace on Whidbey and Camano Island for five hundred years, leaving little noticeable trace on their longtime home.

Comment [RG3]: good

This slow shift was drastically interrupted with the first widespread arrival of white settlers in the 1850's. These early arrivals saw the beautiful bounty of Island County, and understandably believed that they would be in excellent shape to cultivate their own crops. They did not, however, see prosperity in the same way that the natives had. The Donation Land Law of 1850 allowed settlers to snap up large parts of the prairie for cultivation (White, 37). Initially they attempted to grow crops that were not at all suited to Washington's temperate climate, but even so they quickly discovered grain, potatoes, and other crops were more suitable (44). However, the inclusion of these crops brought in foreign plant species that followed the settlement's paths and began competing with natural flora, “changing the distribution of plant species” (40). This was not of large concern to the settlers, however, who generally viewed natural species as pretty nuisances, and did not heed the wisdom of the already dwindling Salish population. Largely unable to even name the plant species that the Salish relied upon, the settlers quickly set about clearing and plowing the land. Local bracken made this difficult, as plows snagged in the roots. However, with teams of oxen the settlers succeeded in plowing the land.

Comment [RG4]: How did they see it?

This practice brought massive changes in the local soil composition. The loss of native cover increased erosion rates, and breaking up the naturally compact soil allowed water to drain even more. Some soils were able to remain fertile, but others declined so much that crops visibly suffered (43). Imported pigs flourished on the islands, destroying even more natural cover. The settlers did not necessarily see themselves as taking advantage of nature, simply ridding themselves of and controlling an obstacle, the value of which would not be fully realized until decades later. Had they paid attention to the lifestyle of the Salish people, perhaps the destruction would not have been so complete, but as it stands these early farmers were the first to begin taking advantage of the islands. Unfortunately they would not be the last.

In a kind of perverse echo of Salish wisdom, the Whites once again turned to the area's abundant natural resources as a source for subsistence. This time, however, the results were nowhere near as benign. The enormous Douglas Firs of the region created a profitable logging industry that boomed even before any sort of laws allowed such a trade (White, 77). The value of the forests came directly from their application as timber, and thus there were little legal efforts to protect the ancient growth. The very first loggers had little impact on the immense forests, even the first logging companies in the area found that "the size of individual timbers allowed [them] to fill orders by cutting only a few huge trees" (81). However, as these companies grew, and many locals grew indebted to them, political pressure dictated that they cut as many trees off their land as fast as possible. New technology increased ecological devastation and waste. The introduction of "bull team loggers wasted immense amounts of timber," leaving over half of the tree behind to rot. This waste encouraged pronounced fires that killed both standing timber and prevented new Douglas fir from growing, instead favoring the less desirable hemlock. This ecological shift did not serve as a warning to the loggers to slow down, and is a beginning step in explaining why the logging culture of the island eventually collapsed, as the community "failed to perceive a problem that has actually arrived" via their own hand (Diamond, 424).

Comment [RG5]: Good. They also saw the highest use for land as being agricultural

Comment [RG6]: Why so? Explain how the loggers perceived the land in ways that shaped this industry. . .

With mostly cedar, some small remaining fir, and hemlock left on the market for loggers, new donkey engine technology only served to tear up the forest even more. In time “the dominant species of the area, the Douglas fir, had been locally eliminated and the two trees of lesser commercial value, the red alder and the hemlock, had replaced it (White, 109). Overall loggers permanently changed the composition of the long standing forest, destroying what could have been one of the few remaining old growths left to us today.

Overall, after the decline of the Salish and their spiritual connection to the land, the settlers’ and loggers’ investment in the land was exploitative and damaging. The progression from a local subsistence community to focuses on extracting and exporting local resources for trade reflected a growing disconnect between the biodiversity and beauty of the virgin Island County into what would later be marketed as “Romantic Whidbey,” even though it’s natural beauty was all but destroyed.

Works Cited

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3. Examine the factors in Diamond's theory of societal collapse in light of three or more Island County groups discussed in White's case study. What aspects of their society supported or retarded the potential for collapse?

The Island County area has seen vast changes in the societies that populated it in a relatively short amount of time. After the long lasting rule of the Salish Native Americans, the mass arrival of white settlers quickly brought about a series of economic patterns and cultures that seemed promising, but ultimately were not able to achieve a sustainable pattern on the islands. The Salish themselves, the first farmers who settled in their lands, and the high tech logging companies that claimed the remaining forests on the island each contributed in some way to the eventual passing of that particular economic and social model.

The Salish people managed to do very well on their own on the islands for over three hundred years. By maintaining separate tribes with friendly and helpful interrelations, the Salish were able to live sustainably, manipulating natural processes they observed on the island to loosely cultivate and forage from plentiful food sources. However, their reverent connection with nature may have been their own undoing. The arrival of the more powerful white settlers brought about their ruin, although there was little that the Salish could have done. They became so used to their lifestyle that they did not even perceive the arrival of white settlers as threatening to their lifestyle, modeling Jared Diamond's first marker for societal collapse (Diamond, 421). Any change that they could have gained from the settlers "was as much a product of the weakening of the old ways... as it was a conversion to the white's vision of the land" (White, 34). The settlers in and of themselves, even though they largely did not seek to eradicate the Salish, were hostile neighbors in that their arrival brought about the cultural shifts and disease that degraded the Salish society. This, coupled with the Salish people's inability to adapt or

respond to the intrusion into their home, brought about their collapse as a society, culminating in their relocation to a reserve off the islands.

This is not at all to say that the white settlers fared much better. Indeed, they were unable to support a population as large as the Salish Natives had established until the early 1900's. The early farmers fell prey to many mistakes that limited their success on the island, although they did not really experience societal collapse on the same magnitude that the Salish did. When they immigrated to Island County, the settlers had extremely limited knowledge of local flora and fauna. However, they viewed the lush prairies of the islands as prime farmland, suitable for crops foreign to the region. They settled for a "false analogy," believing that their favorite crops would prosper like it had in other prosperous fields back home (Diamond, 423). However, they completely overlooked the climatic conditions and soil capabilities, and many of their original crops, such as tomatoes and wheat, failed in the temperate climate.

Additionally, the early farmers brought more ecological ruin to the area by introducing foreign and invasive species to the islands. While the Salish migrated across the islands while still blending into their surroundings, the settlers established familiar roads for ease of access. Primitive though they were, "they became avenues for invading plants by stripping away native vegetation... [providing] an opportunity for the spread of floral invaders from one cluster of settlements to another" (White, 40). This was an unforeseen consequence of establishing a familiar settlement, but the settlers also directly cultivated another invasive species that had a much more pronounced impact on the local ecology. With the arrival of the first barge-load of domestic herd animals in 1852, the ecology of the islands shifted negatively once again (White, 48). The vegetation ignored by the whites provided abundant food for the hogs, and they quickly rooted up much of the local vegetation. Without natural predators in the area, they hogs' activity quickly spiraled out of control, even threatening the crops of the farmers who had

Comment [RG7]: Needing a bit more citation in this essay!

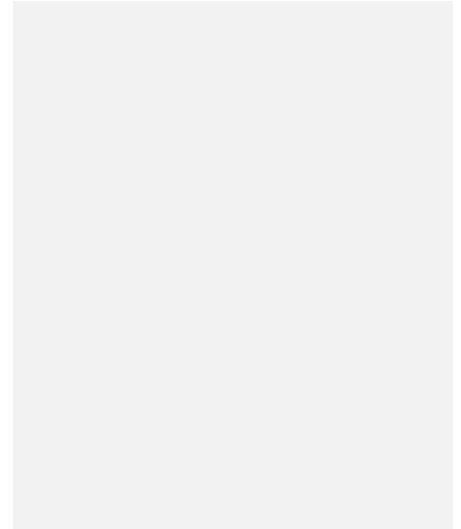
Comment [RG8]: Great pt!

introduced them (49). However, farmers did not need to provide their own feed for pigs and other livestock, and although this was initially beneficial, in the long run they caused permanent shifts in the island that would hinder their own development. This damage inflicted on the ecosystem is another of Diamond's theories on ecological collapse, that the introduction of foreign invasive species, whether intentional or not, is a method of "self-inflicted ecological suicides" (M5.L1).

But even these farmers did not participate in as deliberate destruction of the local ecosystem as another economic culture that took prominence on the island at the same time. The introduction of bull team logging and later donkey engine logging allowed these lumberjacks to topple the regions' prominent Douglas firs at breakneck speeds. Some reforestation techniques were even successful. After bull team logging became common place, "selective logging and successful regeneration restored the forest landscape so quickly that, within a few years... [it] looked untouched to a casual observer" (White, 91). However, this success was not a priority, as the main focus within the confines of the island's forests was not preservation, but economic advancement. Even though some logging companies recognized that they were destroying one of the county's most precious natural resources faster than it could be reintroduced, taxes on standing trees and other economic pressures stopped them from checking their tactics. While this seems unintuitive to many, Diamond asserts that "societies often fail even to attempt to solve a problem once it has been perceived" (427). The fact that there were even viable solutions to the logger's impending issues shows just how little value standing forest had during this time. With the introduction of donkey engine logging, loggers simply left waste wood where it fell, and the machinery itself cut large hummocks into the landscape, making it unusable. It was only so long before these practices proved fatal to the logging industry, and most companies in the area had stopped their practices not too long after they'd begun.

Comment [RG9]: Great point, would have worked very well in last essay too!

It is a wonder that after such intense abuse from white settlers the islands still managed to retain enough natural beauty to become major tourist attractions for Seattleites from across the Sound. After three hundred years of peaceful existence on the islands, the Salish left little physical evidence that they had been there at all, while the farmers and loggers managed to completely change the natural landscape and ecosystems within a few decades. Each society, however, did have a hand in playing into its own effective collapse on the island, although it can certainly be argued that the Salish people experienced the worst cultural devastation after the white's invasion and manipulation. This case study should serve as an example as to the unforeseen consequences of exploiting a natural ecosystem without paying heed to environmental stewardship and care.



Works Cited

Comment [RG10]: Tie to other readings like Liu, Moran, or the increase of energy use (cook) and it's role here, or make connections to other case studies!

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