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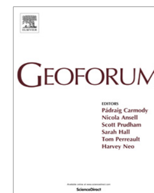

Indigenous water governance: Insights from the hydrosocial relations of the Koyukon Athabascan village of Ruby, Alaska

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ABSTRACT

Water is fundamental to Indigenous ways of life. Specific Indigenous peoples maintain distinct and multifaceted sociocultural relations to water, yet the legacy of colonialism globally means that communities around the world face similar challenges to protecting these relations. The role of Indigenous peoples and their sociocultural relations to water is currently under acknowledged in the water governance literature. Through a case study of the Koyukon Athabascan people of Ruby, Alaska, this article examines how the explicit analysis of hydrosocial relations facilitates conceptualization of Indigenous water governance. Participatory research methods involving semistructured interviews and traditional use mapping were employed to document the hydrosocial relations of the people of Ruby, which water law and policy in Alaska does not adequately recognize. This study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, an engagement with the hydrosocial literature makes explicit the distinct sociocultural relations to water maintained by all human communities and the existence of these multiple normative orders within the same political space, where the hydrosocial relations of some populations are privileged over others. Second, it contributes to the conceptualization of Indigenous water governance by exploring the extent to which Indigenous peoples in the Yukon River Basin, including the people of Ruby, are engaging in multiple strategies to assert their sovereignty. These strategies include recognition-based approaches such as litigation to gain legal recognition of Indigenous water rights and Indigenous alternatives without reference to state recognition such as the development of community-based water monitoring programs.

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Introduction

Indigenous peoples[2] are in the process of asserting various roles in water governance in order to protect their relationships to water (Phare, 2009; Thorson et al., 2006; von der Porten and Loë, 2013), which are challenged by water scarcity, impaired water quality (Gleick and Cooley, 2009; Rosegrant et al., 2002) and ongoing colonialism (Boelens et al., 2006). Water governance is defined as "[t]he range of political, organizational and administrative processes through which communities articulate their interests, their input is absorbed, decisions are made and implemented, and decision makers are held accountable in the development and management of water resources and delivery of water services" (Bakker, 2003, p. 3). Given the incredible amount of diversity within each of these traditions, it would be overly simplistic to assert that there is an essential dichotomy between Indigenous and Western approaches to water governance. However, Indigenous conceptions of water governance do tend to differ from mainstream Western approaches (Boelens, 2003; Boelens et al., 2006; Perreault, 2005, 2008), which view water as a resource available for human exploitation (Bakker and Cook, 2011). These approaches differ from the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, who often value water as a living entity that carries deep spiritual and cultural meaning (for example, Barbera-Hernandez, 2005; Blackstock, 2001; Boelens et al., 2006; McGregor, 2012). Furthermore, Indigenous peoples' worldviews influence their patterns of water use and management, and their relationships to water, as well as other elements of the environment, fundamentally contribute to their distinct identities (Barbera-Hernandez, 2005). Without explicit acknowledgement, sociocultural relations to water that differ from mainstream Western perspectives and community strategies to protect them, go unrepresented within water

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[2] Indigenous peoples around the world are diverse. I use the term Indigenous peoples to refer to these populations for two reasons: First, to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples are members of "Nations," however complex this term may be to define; second, to refer to Indigenous peoples' shared experiences of colonization and resistance (Corntassel, 2003; Smith, 1999). Where necessary, I use the legal term Alaska Native to refer to Indigenous peoples recognized under the *Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act* (ANCSA), which will be discussed in detail later in this article. I use specific names when referring to a particular community. For example, I refer to the people of Ruby as Koyukon Athabascan rather than Alaska Native or Indigenous in order to acknowledge their distinct identity.

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governance literature. Using a case study of the hydrosocial relations of the Koyukon Athabascan village of Ruby, Alaska, the objectives of this paper are twofold: First, to examine how the explicit analysis of hydrosocial relations can facilitate understandings of approaches to Indigenous water governance. Second, to draw on novel concepts from the Indigenous governance literature to make explicit the ways that Indigenous peoples are currently engaging in Indigenous water governance, often in spite of legal recognition by colonial states.

Indigenous water governance

The Indigenous governance literature is essential to any discussion of water governance. Indigenous governance refers to a vast field of study related to Indigenous peoples and decision making that is generally considered to include Indigenous identity, sovereignty, self-determination, values, ways of knowing, and race, as well as historical and ongoing colonialism and the resulting consequences of marginalization (Alfred, 2005; Corntassel and Witmer, 2008; Coulthard, 2008; Ford and Rowse, 2012; Porter, 1998; Simpson, 2000; Smith, 1999; von der Porten, 2012). The ability to choose how they relate to water and other resources is a fundamental sovereignty issue for Indigenous peoples (Boelens et al., 2006). Therefore, concepts from the Indigenous governance literature are essential in order to avoid the problems found in the collaborative water governance literature, where Indigenous peoples are often treated as "stakeholders" rather than self-determining or sovereign peoples (von der Porten and Loë, 2013).

Self-determination and sovereignty are critical concepts within this field. In the *Indigenous Peoples Kyoto Water Declaration*, self-determination for Indigenous peoples is defined as "the right to control [their] institutions, territories, resources, social orders, and cultures without external domination or interference" (UNESCO, 2003). While many Indigenous scholars employ the term self-determination (for example, Alfred, 2005; Coulthard, 2008; Tully, 2000), others, especially in the United States, use the concept of sovereignty in a similar manner (for example, Barker, 2005; Brooks, 2008; Lomawaima, 2013; Ouden and O'Brien, 2013; Rickard, 2011; Simpson, 2011; Warrior, 1992).

Sovereignty is a concept of European origin that assumes states exercise the ultimate authority over a given territory, yet absolute sovereignty no longer exists due to increasing interconnection between domestic and international politics (Shaw, 2008; Wilkins and Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2011). The role of sovereignty in decolonization has been much debated (von der Porten, 2012). According to Alfred (2001, 2006), sovereignty should not be the goal of Indigenous communities because it is a European concept rooted in an "adversarial and coercive notion of power" that depends on recognition from colonial states (2006, p. 325), and seeking recognition perpetuates dependent and reactionary relationships between Indigenous peoples and the state (Alfred, 2001, 2006; Coulthard, 2008). Sovereignty has also been redefined or "rearticulated" in ways that are meaningful to Indigenous peoples, in spite of the colonial legacy associated with the term (Barker, 2005). Audra Simpson emphasizes the importance of sovereignty in the strategies employed by Indigenous peoples: "Indian sovereignty is real; it is not a moral language game or a matter to be debated in ahistorical terms. It is what they have; it is what, in the case of the United States, they have left; and thus it should be upheld and understood robustly—especially as Indians work within, against, and beyond these existing frameworks" (2011, p. 211). While critiques of sovereignty raise important issues about developing Indigenous alternatives without dependence on or reference to colonial states or agendas (Alfred, 2001, 2006; Coulthard, 2008), Simpson (2011) refers to the idea that sovereignty is achieved through employing multiple approaches that include strategically seeking state recognition while simultaneously building Indigenous alternatives.

Indigenous water governance is often approached via the topic of water rights. State recognition of Indigenous water rights and sovereignty varies widely between contexts (Boelens, 2003; Boelens et al., 2006; Goodman, 2000; Phare, 2009; Thorson et al., 2006). However, it is crucial to begin with the assumption that Indigenous peoples hold inherent water rights, which flow from their relationships to their traditional territories and include the "power to make decisions, based upon [their] laws, customs, and traditional knowledge to sustain [their] water, for all life and future generations" (Phare, 2009, p. 46). In other words, water rights are not conferred upon Indigenous peoples by colonial governments; rather, "[t]ribes exercise rights based on their original and indigenous sovereignty" (Wilkins and Lomawaima, 2001, p. 121). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) affirms this notion through the recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples to their "lands, territories and resources" (Article 26), including the right to determine the development course for these lands, territories, and resources, including water (Article 32) (2008). While these rights do not lose their meaning when unrecognized by colonial governments, acknowledgment by other legal regimes can make inherent rights more effective.

Indigenous hydrosocial relations

Interdisciplinary literature regarding relationships between humans and water (for example, Orlove and Caton, 2009; Strang, 2004, 2009) is useful for understanding the ways that human relationships to water are socially constructed, or ascribed meaning and values within a given context, and the influence of these meanings on people's actions must be considered (Budds, 2009; Orlove and Caton, 2010). Human relationships to water simultaneously comprise material and socially constructed dimensions (Orlove and Caton, 2010). Three concepts from this literature combine social, cultural, and ecological relations to water: First, the term "waterscape," analogous to the term landscape, was coined in the 19th century to refer to "the culturally meaningful, sensorially active places in which humans interact with water and with each other" (Orlove and Caton, 2010, p. 408). Eric Swyngedouw (1999) popularized the term, and it has been used extensively since (For example, Adams et al., 2010; Budds and Hinojosa, 2012; Stansbury, 2007). Second, the totality of relationships between people and water, or hydrologic connectivity, in a given context has been referred to as a "waterworld" (Hastrup, 2009), a concept that implies human interactions with water can delineate the borders of human communities (Orlove, 1993; Orlove and Caton, 2010). Third, the existence of both the material and the socially constructed dimensions of water, and the interactions between the two (Budds, 2009; Linton and Budds, 2014), reveals a hybrid or "hydrosocial cycle" of water, contrasting with hydrologic notions of water, which conceptualize water as a material or physical substance (H_2O) circulating through the hydrologic cycle (Forsyth, 2003). The hydrosocial cycle is not politically neutral; rather, it is shaped by interactions among water users based on power differentials and cultural politics (Boelens, 2014). Each of these three concepts—waterscape, waterworld, and the hydrosocial cycle—highlights the existence of both material and sociocultural relations to water and can be used to differentiate the distinct ways human communities relate to water.

The sociocultural significance of water for Indigenous peoples and their knowledge of water and water management have been documented in a variety of contexts (Adams et al., 2010; Basdeo and Bharadwaj, 2013; Blackstock, 2001; McGregor, 2012; Rawat and Sah, 2009). For Indigenous peoples, Indigenous knowledge is crucial to understanding hydrosocial relations. While there is no concise definition of Indigenous knowledge, the term is generally used to refer to the distinct bodies of knowledge, values, beliefs,

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