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Political ecology of emotion and sacred space: The Winnemem Wintu struggles with California water policy

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ABSTRACT

Western water policy in the United States has favored urban and agricultural development over American Indians' needs, demonstrating little understanding of, or concern for, the affective ecologies of landscapes. Using a qualitative approach focusing on in-depth interviews of members of the Winnemem Wintu tribe in California, we uncover how culturally hegemonic meanings of natural resources and landscapes privilege the water needs of modern development and deny the importance of Indigenous emotional connections to sacred places by limiting access to and protection of ancestral territories. Ninety percent of Winnemem ancestral lands along the McCloud River were flooded in 1945 when the Shasta Dam was completed for the federal Central Valley Project. In 2000, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation began investigating a proposal to raise Shasta Dam to increase surface water storage capacity for agricultural production. This proposal would destroy remaining Winnemem sacred spaces that offer deep emotional connections crucial to maintaining their cultural identity and ancestral memories. This paper presents a political ecology of emotion perspective to examine the emotional geographies associated with sacred spaces within ancestral landscapes and related struggles against hegemonic approaches to resource management. We argue that an investigation of sacred spaces reveals intimate links between emotion, memory, and identity and exposes the devastating consequence of institutional approaches to land development that favor meanings and practices of the dominant culture and political structure.

1. Introduction

Indigenous communities have a range of diversity and culture around the world, but they often value certain natural sites as sacred spaces integral to their way of life. These spaces shape cultural identities and originate from ancient traditions and histories (Anderson, 2010; Xu et al., 2005). Each culture holds different meanings about and has different experiences of interaction in these environments, such as the Aboriginal peoples of Australia who revere the sacred hill of Nhulun (Papayannis, 2009). Exploring these various meanings and experiences offers deep insight into the cultural perspectives on these landscapes and subsequent efforts to protect them from economic exploitation and environmental degradation. However, despite this potential for insight, cultural meanings associated with lands subject to natural resource development are considered only minimally, if at all, in land-related policy decisions. Under U.S. federal law, for example, development projects involving public agencies require that environmental impact assessments evaluate the effects on cultural resources (Reclamation, 1998), which includes both the physical resources and their less tangible social and cultural attributes. However, such considerations rarely acknowledge the less quantifiable emotional connections of American Indians to the ecology of their ancestral landscapes, or the effects of (further) destroying that ecology. This has been particularly true of western water policy in the United States (Cassuto, 2001; Goldsmith and Hildyard, 1984; Worster, 1985), which has favored urban and agricultural development over American Indians' needs, desires and knowledges, demonstrating little understanding of or concern for the affective ecologies of landscapes.

This paper examines the emotional geographies associated with sacred spaces in ancestral landscapes and related struggles against hegemonic approaches to resource management that values resource development over non-dominant cultural meanings. Starting from Arturo Escobar's work on the importance of cultural meanings in understanding environmental conflicts (Escobar, 2006a,b, 2010), we take an emotional geographic approach to

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understanding the role of emotional attachment to place in the context of conflicting meanings of the land. Using a case study of the Winnemem Wintu tribe in California, we illustrate how ancestral landscapes and the sacred spaces within are essential components of their traditions, understood as necessary for the people's continued existence. We argue that the emotional, spiritual and intellectual connections to these sacred spaces reveal the intimate links between emotion, memory, and identity. Exposing these links shows how the currently limited access to Winnemem sacred spaces creates despair as community members struggle with cultural, social, and ancestral losses as a consequence of institutional approaches to land and water development that favor the more utilitarian meanings and practices of the dominant culture and political structure.

2. Towards a political ecology of emotion

In this paper we employ a political ecology framework to examine the emotional geographies associated with American Indian[1] ancestral landscapes and related struggles against hegemonic resource-based approaches to land use decisions. We argue that the conflict over natural resources between the Winnemem Wintu and environmental management agencies are a form of what Escobar calls a "cultural distribution conflict" (Escobar, 2006a: 8). Building on Escobar's work to develop a cultural lens for understanding environmental conflicts, we take an explicitly emotional geographic approach to understanding the Winnemem Wintu's struggle to maintain access to sacred spaces.

2.1. Political ecology: resources and meaning

Political ecology is a broadly defined field that seeks to link ecological concerns with social theory (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987). Political ecologists commonly examine resource conflicts that arise over access to and control of natural resources, examining the power relations between different actors and the decision-making processes associated with the environment in the context of broader political, social, and economic structures (Blaikie, 1985, 1994; Peet and Watts, 1996; Robbins, 2004). Political ecologists have also explored how the outcomes of decisions that involve the natural environment are not distributed equally, either spatially or socially, and thus the political, social and economic effects are not felt in a homogenous way (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Bryant and Bailey, 1997). Water development in the western United States, for example, has been characterized as a top-down process dominated by state control (Worster, 1985), however development decisions and the ensuing environmental impacts result from "complex interaction between various actors with different power relations" (Crifasi, 2002: 12), which often reinforces or widens existing cultural inequities. Yet, as Escobar has recently argued, political ecology has paid inadequate attention to the meanings or cultural values and practices associated with various natural environments and spaces (Escobar, 2006a,b, 2010). Although many works of political ecology have documented how political and economic forces can alter the meanings people associate with different landscapes (see Carney and Watts, 1990; Carney, 1993; Moore, 1993; Neumann, 2005), these studies have focused on changes in access to, or control of, land-based resources. As such, they fit squarely within the political ecology tradition. Recent work by Sultana (2011) has paved the way to discuss the emotions of people as they struggle with access to resources such as clean water, but little work has examined how emotions attached to places are altered by changes in control of, access to, and use of landscapes as sacred spaces.

While Escobar does not directly address the issue of emotion, he lays the groundwork (Escobar, 2006a,b, 2010) for considering the role of emotional attachment to place in a political ecological framework. According to Escobar, environmental conflicts arise from three inter-related rubrics of economic, ecological, and cultural factors. While it is clear that economic and ecological factors have received much attention in the political ecology literature, cultural meanings of nature have been largely unexplored. Indeed the very term "resources," as commonly used in the political ecology literature, implies a particular conceptualization of nature as a thing to be managed (Linton, 2010).

California's water in particular has been constructed as a resource to be developed and used to supply urban demands and support water-intensive agricultural production, devoid of cultural and ecological meaning (Linton, 2010; Postel, 2000). Sheridan (1995) adds that the federal government's quest to continually provide more water results from complex interactions between agencies and interest groups, driven by consumer expectation for an abundant, cheap supply (49). The result is a "landscape of waterworks, transportation networks, capital flows, energy exchanges, and commodity production" in which the significance of nature has been lost (Sheridan, 1995: 52).

As Escobar (2006a) notes, anthropologists have been at the forefront of documenting how various social groups "construct" nature and hence understand it in quite specific ways that are missing in other worldviews. "In many non-modern or non-western settings, the strict separation between the biophysical, the human, and the supernatural worlds that characterizes urban-based, modern societies does not exist… nature is an integral component of the human and supernatural domains" (Escobar, 2006a: 9). Indigenous worldviews, for example, have been defined as "about mutual reciprocity, 'a give-and-take relationship with the natural world… which presupposes a responsibility to care for, sustain, and respect the rights of other living things, plants, animals, and the place in which one lives'" (Cajete, 2000; cited in Herman, 2008: 76). The land "is the very charter on which a tribal culture is based, the resting place of ancestors, and the source of spiritual power" (Goldsmith and Hildyard, 1984: 29). To cast American Indians as living "in perfect harmony" with the land, however, misrepresents their perception of and relationship with the landscape (Krech, 2005; Nadasdy, 2005). Historian Norris Hundley (2001: 4–5) notes that California Indians used the land in ways that maintained the essential ecological integrity on which their survival depended, rather than develop the landscape for material gain. In contrast, western worldviews, in the context of this paper, encompass the American culture influenced by Europe, the product of a colonial era which supported capitalism through an embedded separation between nature and society that "enabled the colonization of the world and the commodification of nature" (Herman, 2008: 73). Edward Said (1978) and Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) argue the resulting Western discourse depends upon fixed ideas of those "not Western", which fosters distorted and Eurocentric perspectives.

This discourse tends to lump cultures of a particular region together and to ignore the uniqueness of differences and separate identities, thus "reducing the rich diversity of their beliefs, values, social relations, and practices to a one-dimensional caricature" (Nadasdy, 2005: 293). As a result, environmental conflicts may begin from cultural struggles. Escobar refers to these as "cultural distribution conflicts" (Escobar, 2006a: 8). He argues that:

[1] The Winnemem Wintu tribe identify themselves as California Indian(s) and American Indian(s). As such, these terms are used when referring to these populations as a collective group and the term Indigenous when discussing Indigenous research and/or cultures around the world.