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It is a pleasure to contribute to the conversation on contemporary sustainability issues as part of the larger Maya Symposium. I regret that I have been unable to participate in the ongoing faculty seminar, but I look forward to engaging with many of you and learning from your discussions and experiences. My research explores the intersection of Indigenous environmental governance and Indigenous environmental knowledge and practices—primarily, but not exclusively, in settler state contexts (the United States, Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and Australia). I study the ability of Indigenous nations to assert sovereignty over their lands and the extent to which this enables the perpetuation and continuation of unique ecological perspectives, knowledges, and practices. This focus situates my long-term research agenda to develop a sovereignty-based political-ecological approach to Indigenous environmental issues.

I received my doctorate in Environmental Science, Policy and Management from UC Berkeley, working with Dr. Nancy Peluso. This training gave me a foundation in political ecology, an interdisciplinary subset of the field of human geography that draws from biophysical ecology, political economy, ethnography, critical environmental history, power/knowledge studies, development studies, and other areas in order to understand social/environmental issues. Political ecology is largely concerned with the use, access, management, allocation, and control of natural resources, and how cultural, socioeconomic, political, and ecological factors shape these practices (Robbins 2004; Agrawal 2005: 210). The field emerged from the need to counteract explanations of environmental issues that neglected the influence of political economy and tended to view local peasants as the source of environmental degradation (see Blaikie 1985; Blaikie and Brookfield 1987). The interdisciplinary work of political ecologists offers alternative explanations to environmental problems by asserting that “the environment” is a political thing.

I am also firmly grounded in the field of American Indian studies, which could be characterized by its analysis of the history, arts, literature, and politics of American Indian nations and individuals as they relate to both shared experiences of settler colonialism and tribally specific traditions, languages, religions, and homelands (Kidwell and Velie 2005). My emphasis within this field concerns Indigenous relationships to land/environment in the context of histories of dispossession, and the subsequent imperative of claiming territory as both a reaction to this dispossession and as a need to carve out space to enable the perpetuation of land-based practices and beliefs. Thus, within American Indian studies, I find it more effective to invert the above perspective from political ecology by stressing the inherent environmental concerns of American Indian political struggle (i.e., “the political is environmental,” as opposed to “the environmental is political”).

In common with other Indigenous peoples throughout the globe, American Indian political struggles always come back to the issue of land and the degree of our connection to it. The many ills that disproportionately plague American Indian communities in the United States, such as psychological distress (e.g., high suicide rates), alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, cancer, diabetes, poverty, and language loss are all political problems when viewed within the context of settler colonialism, which Patrick Wolfe has aptly identified as “a structure, not an event” (1999: 2). Each could be addressed through renewing connections to the land, revitalizing traditional diets, supplementing meager income with natural foods and products, and reducing environmental pollutants and risks. Yet these activities are often constrained by the degree to which American Indian nations can reacquire land, manage their own resources on their own terms, formulate and enforce tribal environmental policy within and beyond tribal land bases, and protect and perpetuate traditional ecological knowledge and practices. The root causes of these problems are all found in the political economy of settler colonialism, which is inextricably linked to the exploitation of Indigenous lands (see Wolfe 2011).
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structures—both historically and in the present—play a crucial role in reasserting control over tribal natural resources. I am particularly concerned with examining the paradox that emerges when tribal resource managers must reconcile bureaucratic practices with traditional teachings that view “the environment” in a fundamentally different way than contemporary Western state resource management agencies. My research shows that emerging environmental governance in the Cherokee Nation involves a continuum of resource-based and relationship-based approaches.

I view this process through the lens of my long-term and ongoing relationship with a group of Cherokee elders and knowledge keepers in northeastern Oklahoma—to whom I have served as a facilitator since the group’s formation in 2008. This group came about as a result of interviews I had been conducting since 2004 on a tribally-funded ethnobotanical project designed to incorporate traditional ecological knowledge into tribal environmental policy. In bringing my interviewees together with the Cherokee Nation Natural Resources Department staff, an important partnership emerged to confront the noticeable decline in the transmission of traditional ecological knowledge —specifically knowledge pertaining to traditional medicine. This partnership has taken strides to address the absence of the relationship-based approach in Cherokee Nation policy by providing a forum for dialog about environmental issues. Presently, the elders group serves as an advisory council to the Cherokee Nation Office of Administration Services, which reports directly to the Principle Chief. The partnership represents a formal reintegration of traditional and bureaucratic forms of governance that has not existed in Cherokee politics since before Oklahoma statehood in 1907.

By looking closely at Cherokee negotiations of the resource- and relationship-based approaches to environmental governance, I illuminate the transformative production of a unique political formation—one that draws from dominant configurations of power (the state form), but is able to nurture Cherokee traditions of governance and environmental values. Building upon an established body of literature devoted to particular understandings of state formation (Corrigan and Sayer 1985; Abrams 1988; Corrigan 1990; Joseph and Nugent 1994; Hansen and Stepputat 2001), I propose a line of study devoted to Indigenous state transformation, which focuses on the use and modification of state structures by Indigenous nations. I assert that Indigenous nations, through their transformation of state structures, have the potential to redefine the state in ways that align with Indigenous conceptions of social identities, moral orders, and processes of relating to one another and to the non-human world. In this manner, Indigenous nations are working to create and maintain the political, physical, social, and ideological space for the protection and stewardship of their environments on their own terms.

While this insular approach has proven necessary in order to defend tribal homelands against outside resource exploitation, Indigenous nations also have the opportunity to teach the world valuable lessons about environmental governance. Indigenous state transformation presents the global state community with alternative forms of governance that both recognize the persistence of the state system and foster within it norms of deliberative democracy, hybridized economies that value subsistence practices, and relational approaches to environmental management and sustainability. In this light, American Indian nations have a central role to play in the global ecological crisis. While I contend that American Indian communities possess deep and intimate knowledge of their lands, a presumed innate ecological wisdom is not the basis on which I make this claim. Rather, I propose that potential Indigenous contributions lie in systems of governance that can translate the foundational values of these knowledge systems and demonstrate what these ethics look like in practice (see also Richardson 2009).

For this Symposium, I am eager to start a conversation with colleagues about the implications of the above perspectives from political ecology and American Indian studies for sustainability studies (including our central focus on how archaeology informs this field). Questions I am interested in exploring have to do with how sustainability studies can contribute to or complement American Indian (or more broadly, Indigenous) political struggles—most commonly collectively defined as “decolonization.” Given the recent focus by scholars on Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge as a way of knowing that can complement Western scientific approaches to environmental problems (Berkes 1999; Menzies 2006; Ross et al. 2011), to what extent does the pursuit of ecologically sustainable lifestyles entail social justice for Indigenous peoples? In light of works by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars alike, which stress the
imperative of knowing and relating to place through and with the Indigenous peoples of that place (Burton 2002; Deloria 2003 [1973]), to what extent is sustainability entirely dependent on furthering Indigenous self-determination?

Notes:

9

Works Cited


Other Relevant Works


