

Forest Primeval or Pillars of Sustainability?

The Makah of the Pacific Northwest

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Most children enrolled in mainstream education have been taught a very different picture of pre-European America than actually existed. It is often taught that when Europeans first arrived in the Americas, they stepped foot on an ancient undisturbed land. This is simply not the case. America was a land comprised of many older forests than occur in most areas now, but they were not untouched or unmanaged. As the Europeans began to traverse the landscape they witnessed a great abundance of resources and only saw scattered populations of Native Americans whom they viewed to have little effect on the land. In the European mind the logical conclusion was that there were only a few people at most living off of the land. Management in European opinions translated into heavy use and extensive changes in the landscape. These actions often occurred to the detriment of the natural resource itself and the ecosystem as a whole. For example, many forests were traditionally and to some degree still are, high graded. This means that only the best and most valuable trees were harvested leaving an unhealthy and poorly structured forest. Upon arriving in this vast utopia, in which the Native Americans cared for the ecosystem as a whole not for single products, most Europeans took it for granted that the fishing was plentiful and the forests bountiful (Renker; Whitlock).

Upon seeing the Native Americans, Europeans deemed them “poor” because they led a life that was much less focused on acquiring material goods (Cronon). This is not to say that Native Americans did not have possessions, but the possessions they obtained were for the most part, much more practical. Most of the possessions that Native Americans owned could be easily packed away on someone’s back, carried in hand, or rebuilt at the

new resting place. What the Europeans failed to realize was that it was these very people that they had to thank for the paradise they had stumbled upon.

The Makah Tribe of the Olympic peninsula of Washington state are a prime example of sustainable Native American management that helps facilitate a paradigm shift from the forest primeval, to a pillar of sustainable management. The reigning idea that Native Americans had little impact on ecosystems should be supplemented with the fact that they greatly impacted ecosystems, but in a very different way than was accepted at the time. Native Americans managed the ecosystems to benefit not only themselves, but also the integrity of the ecosystem as a whole. . The Makah demonstrate this through their use of sustainable fisheries which include fish such as halibut and salmon as well as seals, and whales, and their multi-use management of forestlands for timber, non-timber wood products, browse such as berries and nuts, and wildlife.

The Makah continue, although on a smaller scale, to practice sustainable management practices to this day. Sustainable management in forested settings is management that provides for all possible needs of a culture socially and economically while still having great consideration environmentally both in the present and the future. Even though the United States has acknowledged the great influence and impact that these diverse Native American cultures have had on the landscape, the forest primeval still appears to be the reigning perception of Native American resource management. The idea of the forest primeval revolves around the perception that the lands that Europeans first arrived upon were undisturbed virgin forests. This was the impression of most of the Europeans who first arrived in North America. Many Europeans thoroughly believed that

while in some areas there was an abundance of Natives, these people had little to no effect on the landscape. As they moved across the continent this idea was reinforced. By the time they reached the west coast and came in contact with the Makah, these ideas were deeply rooted and created a lot of biased thinking about the Makah and their management of the resources. Three main factors facilitated this way of thinking: the wave of disease that swept the continent, the preconceived notions of forestland prevalent in Europe, and the misinterpretation of the Native American management that was occurring (Renker; Whitlock).

Throughout much of North America the spread of Old World diseases was far quicker than the actual spread of colonists. Due to the well-established trade routes between tribes across the continent, the diseases, especially small pox, were able to spread rapidly even though Americans had not yet been to those areas. By the time that colonists began to arrive in these areas populations were already decimated and some were completely eliminated (Harper, 2009). As it appeared to the Americans, there was no one who could even be managing the land or if people were present, they were not present in great enough numbers to have a significant impact. Even though the Makah were not hit by diseases until over 60 years after they had contact with Americans, by the time Americans made it to the west coast they were already of the firm opinion that the native peoples, the Makah in this case, were having little to no effect on the land (Whitlock; Renker).

Disease was one reason why Americans believed in the idea of the forest primeval, but Americans also had many notions of how properly managed land should look and the Native American way of management did not fit this paradigm. In Europe, woodlands were

viewed as treacherous places occupied by outlaws and villains and were places to be conquered. The vast majority of forests in North America were very open, being easy to traverse even on horseback. In Murray Morgan's book *The Last Wilderness* he writes:

“It is strangely like war. [People] attacked the forest as if it were an enemy to be pushed back from the beachhead, driven into the hills, broken into patches and wiped out. Many operators thought they were not only making lumber, but liberating the land from trees.” (Robbins)

Also, at this time woodlands were becoming scarce in England and other European countries. Much of the forestland that still remained, especially in England, belonged to people of high social status for the purpose of hunting and was not public territory (Harper, 2009). When Europeans found themselves in America in a land of such plenty, it was “managed” with unrestrained exploitation. There was an abundance of land that was open to everyone and all considerations for the ecosystem were thrown out the window. The resources were not seen as finite as they truly were and were exploited as such.

One of the factors that contributed to the Native American's rapid loss of land to Americans was due to differences in views towards private property and land ownership. Most Native Americans believed that you cannot “own” land (Cronon). The Makah had relatively few large establishments and even some of these were seasonal or would only be lived in for 10-20 years before a new location was chosen. For many tribes this occurred when firewood began to run out so as to not completely exhaust the resources of a given area (Demchik 2009). Native Americans did utilize a lot of land beyond their main homesteads, but this was used primarily as hunting grounds. These lands were primarily seen just as land, not property that belonged to any one person. The only Native American

property rights that Americans recognized were Native American villages and agricultural fields. In Europe land was typically delineated by fencing, grazed by cattle, or was established with some form of permanent settlements. Native Americans saw no need for any of these things. They merely lived off of the land and water resources sustainably, supporting the health and integrity of the ecosystem with the understanding that everyone had the right to take advantage of the natural abundance of the land. Hunting, fishing, and foraging lands were available to anyone. The Americans maintained a very different viewpoint and saw nothing but open land that was being “squandered” and “wasted” (Cronon) at the hands of Native Americans.

The last major idea contributing to the forest primeval paradigm was that the settler’s views of Native Americans were very biased and ignorant. Few had ever left their home countries before, but flocked to the Americas at the idea of abundant free land. Upon arrival many colonists commented on the “park-like” appearance of the Pacific Northwest’s forests (Cook, 2009). They were amazed how bountiful all the resources were and how traversable the woodlands were. Unfortunately none of the Americans made the connection that these conditions were due to the management practices of the Native Americans.

What the Americans were failing to see was the Makah’s skillful use of fire to manipulate the landscape and create the clear understory. Burning facilitated a significant increase in berry production, as berry bushes produce an even greater crop of berries in the seasons following a fire. The burning also increased visibility, which served as a passive form of protection from enemies as there were then far fewer places to hide.

Burning also produced a forest that is far easier to traverse and hunt. The game hunting itself was also more abundant as wildlife preferred the open conditions due to the ease of travel and the greater abundance of browse (Dods). The Europeans failed to see all of these advantages because the reigning belief at that time was that the Native Americans burned either for amusement, or fires were started largely by accident. There are many accounts from settlers attesting to Native Americans purposefully setting fires (Whitlock), but again, the real reasons were lost to the settlers.

The misconception that Native Americans did some things, like setting fires, only for enjoyment was also how Europeans viewed Native American hunting. They especially looked down on the men due to the fact that the men would go out hunting all day while the women stayed in the village and worked the fields. This misconception, like many others, stemmed from the preconceived ideas that came over to the Americas from Europe, where hunting was done primarily by the high society solely for sport, not for subsistence, as was the practice of the Native Americans, especially the Makah (Whitlock).

All of these ideas combined to create the idea of the forest primeval, the untouched wilderness. Because these ideas were so deeply rooted they have become difficult to overcome even in present day America. This idea is highly flawed. Much of the exhaustion of natural resources that occurred across the continent began after Europeans arrived in North America. The Makah are an excellent case study for the sustainable management that many tribes across the country have been practicing in some cases for centuries. Their sustainable management can clearly be seen in their management of fisheries and forests (Renker; Miller).

Makah life as it can be studied today began about 4,000 years ago (Renker). At that time they occupied seven distinct villages each of which focused on and was able to pursue a very sustainable way of life with the ecosystem and resources available in the surrounding area. These main villages had well established housing and were typically occupied year-round. In addition the Makah also maintained smaller non-permanent villages, which corresponded to the seasonal spawning of halibut and salmon or migrating birds (Miller).

One of the reasons the Makah were so successful was because they were often able to build up large stores of food and materials. The tribe had such a bountiful food supply for two reasons. First, they had many resources to utilize that were all located within a relatively small area. Second, and more important, they were able to sustainably use all of the resources at their disposal. The Pacific Northwest in general is a very fertile area having high levels of rainfall supporting large areas of temperate rainforest. The Makah are currently located on the northwestern tip of the Olympic peninsula in Washington on a 27,000-acre reservation. This is essentially the same area they have inhabited for the past 4,000 years; however, they reside on a much smaller parcel of land due to the Treaty of Neah Bay in 1855 (Renker).

Due to the great abundance of food the Makah were able to develop a very complex society. Many people were able to specialize and create very diverse song, dance, and arts. The family unit was also very important. Everyone was assigned a rank corresponding to their importance and various duties within the unit. When marriage occurred the new

couple would often choose to associate themselves and work mainly with the family in which they would receive the highest ranking (Renker).

Part of their diverse social culture included holding potlatches, or large social gatherings, which served to bring people together to conduct business, standardize laws, and pass on important stories, ceremonies, and oral traditions. Potlatches were of utmost importance, as the Makah did not have any formal written language. Everything was passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation (Renker). Another use of the potlatch was to maintain or improve one's status within the tribe. The practice of gifting often redistributed tribal wealth, as there were often competitions to see who was the most generous (Harvard University. 1999).

The Makah are best known for their whaling practices, which at one point made national news. Up until the early 1900s, the Makah were avid whalers for subsistence and ceremonial purposes. Subsistence use is simply general daily consumption, while ceremonial uses played a very spiritual role in the life of the Makah. This tradition began immediately in the life of a newborn member of the Makah tribe, when they would place a piece of whale blubber in the baby's mouth. In 1920 they voluntarily stopped whaling as they felt populations were getting too low due to commercial fishing that was being practiced by the large commercial whaling industry (Renker).

The Makah made the news on May 17, 1999, when the tribe conducted its first whale hunt in over 70 years. This was a much-anticipated event although it was surrounded by much controversy. The hunt was adamantly opposed by countless animal rights activists and there were many conflicts between activists and the tribe. Despite this

opposition the tribe was successful and for the first time in generations a large gray whale was towed ashore. This hunt was slightly different from the traditional hunt however in that instead of using the traditional “killing lance” a high power rifle was used shortly after the traditional harpoons hit the whale in order to ensure a more humane kill. While the traditional methods have changed “none of the spiritual, physical, and mental preparations needed to harvest a whale are interrupted by the substitution and implementation of this technique” (Home of the Makah People). This quote demonstrates how the Makah are able to adapt and continue to practice sustainable management today. The Makah are very aware of how their actions are viewed by the public and must make these decisions in a way that does not conflict with societal goals. In this case society demanded that if a hunt were to be conducted a more humane approach was necessary and the tribe was able to provide this while still meeting the needs of the tribe (Home of the Makah People).

The Makah have never relied solely on aquatic resources; a large percentage of their food and products have always come from the terrestrial environment. They managed, harvested, and utilized the woodland environments heavily, but sustainably. Woodlands were managed to increase the amount of game animals and forage as well as wood products. Western Red Cedar was exceptionally important in the Makah culture as a source of everything from clothing to canoes (Stryd). The Makah continue many of these traditions today although some of the old ways have been put aside for newer technologies (Miller). One of the best examples of this is the substitution of metal barbed hooks in place of hooks carved from cedar. This has not changed any of the practice itself merely the instrument used to implement it, much like the substitution of the killing lance used in whaling in favor of a high power rifle to make the kill more humane.

As societal goals and ideas have changed throughout the years, the tribe has had to shift its ways of managing some facets of their traditions. In the case of whaling, the tribe has continued to hunt sustainably while providing for their own needs and the desires of society at large. The Makah were able to adapt to living in American culture, while still retaining their traditional culture. Cary Collins states that “maintaining vigorous whaling, sealing, and fishing activities that had sustained their ancestors for centuries allowed for their continued self-sufficiency and preserved their cultural autonomy” (Collins). Whaling has allowed the tribe to have pride in their heritage to this day. The hunt was such an integral part and it was essential to the continuation of the tribe in order to maintain this tradition.

The changes in resource management began occurring in 1788 when the first Europeans arrived on the west coast (Renker). Trade began readily as the Europeans had a strong desire for furs and animal skins, namely the sea otter and seals that were abundant up until this time. In this trade the Makah gained guns and metals which were previously unavailable. As both the demand for furs and the profits from their sale were high, European fur traders hunted these animals to dangerously low levels.

Disaster struck in 1852 when an outbreak of smallpox swept through the Makah nation causing one of the original seven permanent villages to be abandoned altogether (Renker). In 1855 the Makah were consolidated and brought further into American culture with the Treaty of Neah Bay. In this treaty the tribe gave up some of its land holdings in exchange for whaling rights, as well as education and healthcare systems (USFWS. 1855). These rights provided the Makah with modern schools and hospitals. The systems were

not extensive, but it was still beneficial to have school and healthcare available in some capacity. However, there were a few negative impacts. Many efforts were made by the U.S. government to try and dissuade the Makah people away from their traditional ways (Miller). At one point potlatches were even outlawed, but the government was never able to effectively enforce this law due to the Makah's pride in their culture and dedication to tradition.

The education centers or reform schools set up on the reservation by the U.S. government also attacked Makah culture. The schools essentially became centers for forced assimilation. Students were taught modern American ways of life and the traditional culture was discouraged. The goal was to fully integrate them into the American life and stray away from traditional Makah culture (Miller). The ultimate goal was to acculturate the Makah to a high enough degree where reservations as a whole would no longer be necessary. These efforts continued without success for quite sometime, but the Makah would not abandon their culture. Then in 1934 congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act, which gave tribes the option to write a constitution and establish their own government, regaining control of their own land. Finally, the Makah were able to ratify a constitution in 1936(Collins).

Throughout the years the Makah have been able to maintain a life that is still somewhat foreign to us both in its methodology and ideology. While the times have changed greatly they have been able to continue practicing sustainable management of their land for over 4,000 years of recorded history. This can most clearly be seen through their management of their forest and aquatic resources.

The Makah are well known for their sustainable management of forest resources. Remnants and artifacts of the Makah's sustainable forestry still exist scattered throughout Washington. Some parts of this area of forestland are living museums to cultural forestry practices of this tribe. The predominantly utilized tree of the Makah was the Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*). The Makah often used other trees such as yews to supplement the products provided by the cedar. Western Red Cedar was referred to as "The Tree of Life" due to the vast amount of products that could be obtained from these hearty trees. Every piece of the cedar can be used for some purpose and the Makah were experts at utilizing these trees, letting nothing go to waste (Renker).

Wandering the woods of the Olympic Peninsula, partially logged trees and partially constructed canoes can be found scattered throughout the landscape. It is believed that these artifacts were in progress and only partially completed when the wave of Old World diseases hit the area and the projects were abandoned or their workers were lost to the outbreak. One of the most interesting artifacts left by tribes in this area are the culturally modified trees or CMTs. A CMT is "a tree which has been intentionally modified by aboriginal peoples as part of their traditional use of the forest" (Stryd). CMTs were used for everything large to small. Whole trees would be felled in order to make canoes for fishing and travel. This process was no small task and usually took a crew of people several days in order to complete. Once the tree was on the ground the work was still nowhere near complete. Hollowing out a cedar tree for a canoe took an incredible amount of time and energy from many tribe members. The inside of the canoe would slowly be burned away with heat stones, which would be kept warm by fanning them. In this way, over time, it was possible to make canoes that were incredibly strong and long lasting while at the

same time also surprisingly thin. These canoes were able to take a heavy beating and could navigate the turbulent waters of the Pacific Ocean (Renker). Canoes were the only time that a tree actually needed to be killed in order to harvest the desired products, which meant that there was never any risk of overharvesting making this a very sustainable system.

This was only the beginning of the extent to which the Makah were able to take advantage of the cedar. The Makah had an extensive knowledge of the cedar, which allowed them to use each tree to its fullest extent. Many trees could be used without ever having to kill the tree. One of the most common uses of cedar trees was planking. Long rectangular planks could be pried away from trees creating long boards, which were often used in the construction of long houses. When done properly it was possible to harvest a tree in this manner up to two or three times without ever killing the tree. Since cedar is a very rot resistant wood, some of these planks can still be found today. The tough inner wood was also used to make everyday tools such as bows and even dishes. Cedar roots were used to make baskets and cradles. The branches were often used for “making heavy-duty rope, fish traps, and baskets” (Stryd).

Cedar bark had many different uses. The Makah were able to use the bark incredibly efficiently as they would break it down into two smaller components. The bark could be separated into the fibrous inner bark and the much rougher outer bark. The Makah were excellent craft workers and were able to use the fibrous inner bark much like Europeans used cotton or thread. In this way they could make everything from clothing and various arts and crafts to much more practical everyday essentials such as rope and

diapers. The outer, rougher bark made perfect roofing material for the long houses. It was also very suitable for canoe bailers and canoe covers, which were necessary when a canoe was under construction and needed to be protected from the elements (Stryd).

This system was very sustainable and was able to supply the Makah with many of their necessities. They only harvested what they needed from the trees not taking any excess. In addition they were skilled enough to be able to harvest trees several times without killing them. Felling an entire tree was a rare event, usually only for the construction of one of their large whaling canoes. The skillful use of the cedar yet again exemplifies the sustainable management practices of the Makah.

The Makah have also been sustainably fishing the coast for well over 2,500 years, and much of the tribe continue to fish this area today. The tribe has always been aware of the impact they can have on an ecosystem and therefore they took great care not to overuse any of their resources. The best example of this was their cessation of whaling when they noticed population levels rapidly decreasing due to commercial whaling. Traditionally the Makah fished for halibut, salmon, ling cod, herring, and smelt. The main fish harvested by the Makah was halibut as it was available year round in great abundance near the villages. This was an invaluable resource as it could be eaten fresh or smoked for future consumption throughout the year. Salmon were a seasonal treat whenever they would travel upriver to spawn. During this time, the Makah set up villages specifically to take advantage of this resource. In order to catch both salmon and halibut, the Makah used a variety of tools: cedar hooks, harpoons, spears, bows and arrows. Ling cod, as well as the occasional bass, were lured into the shallows and then speared. Herring and smelt were

caught using nets made of cedar wood fibers. These nets were very labor intensive to make and, though effective, needed special care to prevent rot. It is important to note that while this harvesting was done very effectively, it was also done very carefully and with great consideration given to the amount of fish that was being removed from the waters. The Makah were people of subsistence harvesting only what resources were essential for survival and maintaining their people with the least amount of impact on the environment. Minor amounts of fish were harvested and stored in event of an emergency, but overall they took only what they needed to survive (Renker).

Another example of sustainable fisheries was the manner in which the Makah harvested fur seals. Fur seals were also seasonal, but the Makah were able to make what little they harvested last them throughout the year. Seals were hunted in boats that were about 25 feet long and designed for two very skilled hunters. These boats, combined with expert navigational skills, meant that hunters could approach a group of seals without a sound. Fur seals were highly prized as they provided the tribe with many valuable resources. Seals provided the tribe with an abundant source of warm furs, blubber, and seal meat that they were able to make last throughout the year. Unfortunately, this resource began to dwindle as the seals became increasingly popular for their furs and more industrial hunters, in search of greater profits, exploited seals to dangerous levels. This is when the Makah again demonstrated their commitment to promoting the overall health of the ecosystem. Their utilization of seals slowed as the industrial hunt increased and seal populations dwindled. Due to the introduction of heavy industrial sealing, by the mid-1800s, the fur seal population was in trouble. Recognizing the dangerously low population

levels, the Makah sought the products they received from the fur seal from other sources and eliminated it as a major part of their way of life (Renker).

The last and most important part of the sustainable Makah fishery was whaling. Whaling remains a huge part of Makah culture and is present in most of their art, song and dance. The Makah have been whaling for 2,000 years and prior to the introduction of commercial whalers the tribe was doing so quite sustainably. Much like their utilization of other resources, they were very aware of the impact that their actions can have on the ecosystem and will not undertake any exploitation of resources unless it is done soundly and out of necessity (Collins, Renker). The Makah state that, “We will only permit whaling if there is an unmet traditional subsistence or cultural need for whale in the community” (Home of the Makah People). This is the attitude Makah have always lived by and are hoping to be able to continue living by, pending the approval of their whaling plan and environmental impact statement put before the Secretary of Commerce in 2005. Once this is approved the Makah will be issued a domestic permit much like they had in 1999 (Home of the Makah People). Now that gray whale population levels have been restored to pre-commercial whaling levels (around 17,000 whales), it has been determined that up to 366 whales could be harvested annually and still retain a sustainable system. The Makah are currently asking to be able to harvest 5 per year, at a maximum, if it is necessary for subsistence (Home of the Makah People). The Makah culture is a culture in which sustainability has been a great consideration and excess and unrestrained use of resources remains nowhere in their scope of thinking.

To the Makah the whale hunt was more than just a means of acquiring food; it “imposes a purpose and a discipline, which benefits their entire community” (Home of the Makah People). The hunt itself has always and continues to be a very spiritual practice. The

hunters themselves would spend as much as several months prior to the hunt praying and preparing themselves. Each hunter had their own ritual, but they each took it very seriously (Home of the Makah People). The day of the hunt was also chosen very carefully as all conditions had to be just right in order to increase the chances of a successful hunt and ensure the safety of the hunters. When weather and ocean conditions were right, hunters paddled out in cedar canoes in teams of eight. The kill could take an incredibly long time depending upon the whale with some expeditions lasting over night as the crew was pulled miles away from shore. The Makah were excellent navigators so this was not an issue, it just meant more work when the kill had to be towed into shore supported by floats made of sealskin. The hunters would be greeted on the beach by the tribe where there was much prayer and ceremony (Home of the Makah People).

Whaling is an integral component of Makah culture that many tribe members feel is lacking today. In the past 70 years the Makah have only conducted two whale hunts, one in 1999 and one in 2000. Only the hunt in 1999 was successful. Much of the tribe feels that the loss of whaling from their culture has been a big detriment to their traditions. Some members of the tribe maintain that it has even affected their health. The Makah continue to fight to bring whale hunting back, as they feel its return will assist in the re-building of their culture (Home of the Makah People).

For years an imperfect or incorrect picture has been painted regarding Native American land management. As evidenced earlier this misconception clearly stemmed from several factors including the wave of disease, preconceived European ideals, and misinterpretations of Native American land management. The Makah have always been and continue to be a shining example of sustainable practices. Their careful use of water

resources such as fish, seals, and whales, as well as their expert forest management is anything but primitive. On the contrary, the Europeans practiced a far more exploitative management of the natural world from the time they arrived on the continent. William Cronon said it best when he wrote, “ecological abundance and economic prodigality went hand in hand: the people of plenty were a people of waste.” The Europeans who thought they knew what was best for the land only knew the best for themselves. The Native Americans were able to balance both of these facets in what was a truly sustainable system.

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