

## **"Place membership" in ethnic conflict management: the case of Native Americans and white farmers/ranchers**

Talk at annual meeting of the Association of  
American Geographers (AAG), New York 2001

Zoltan Grossman  
Assistant Professor in Geography,  
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire,  
Ph.D. from Department of Geography, University of  
Wisconsin-Madison, 2002.  
Present e-mail: grossmzc@uwec.edu

Most strategies for ethnic conflict management focus on the state level and the common bond of political citizenship. Yet because state systems tend to be dominated by a "core" ethnic, religious or racial group, citizenship-based strategies have had mixed results. Ethnic conflict managers have not paid adequate attention to local or regional territorial identity as one strategy for addressing socially based conflict in multiethnic settings. The study compares intense water rights and land rights conflicts between Native Americans and farmers/ranchers in Oregon, Montana, and South Dakota, and how a common defense of a local place from environmental threats can provide a way out of the conflicts. A territorially based, multiethnic "place membership" may be more effective than "state citizenship" in lessening ethnic conflict and increasing cooperation between local communities.

The popularized image of "Cowboys and Indians" has been ingrained in the national consciousness, and serves as a cultural template of two archetypal enemies. Yet the portrayal of "cowboys" and "Indians" as eternal foes belies some contemporary realities. Many Native Americans in the West participate in the ranching economy, wear the same cowboy hats, drive the same pick-ups, and can literally change from their powwow outfits into rodeo gear and back again. Many ranchers see their lifestyle as endangered by modern economic trends, in much the same way as tribal members have seen their cultures under siege. Native and non-Native communities in the West are confronted to different degrees by environmentally damaging projects that would not be tolerated in more populated regions.

My dissertation examines natural resource conflicts between Native nations and rural white communities, which were followed by environmental alliances between the same communities to protect the same natural resources. Since the 1970s, these "unlikely alliances" have brought together Native Americans with "white" farmers, ranchers, or fishers who had fought against tribal treaties or sovereignty, but came to see that tribal powers could help defend the common place from an outside threat.

These interethnic environmental alliances opposed projects such as mines, dams, logging, powerlines, nuclear waste, and bombing ranges. I have interviewed more than 80 members of these alliances, from Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Montana, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, asking them how the communities evolved from confrontation to cooperation, how the locale and sense of place affected the evolution, and whether lasting changes in community relationships have resulted.

My AAG presentation last year focused on the 1980s treaty conflict between Wisconsin Ojibwe (Chippewa) spearfishers and white sportfishers, and how it actually set the stage for the 1990s alliance of both groups to protect the fishery from proposed mines. The particularist assertion of their rights helped the tribes begin to equalize with non-Indians, making a more universalist alliance around environmental issues possible. In the process, the two groups redrew mental boundaries of their communities to redefine their former "outsider" adversaries as "insiders" within a mutually defined common place, in order to defend it from new and more threatening "outsiders." In short, they went from conflict based on "geographies of exclusion" to cooperation based on "geographies of inclusion" (Grossman 2000).

In the course of this research, I have become convinced that scholarship on racial/ethnic relations needs to take its logical next steps. Many scholars have studied racial or ethnic conflict, but few have studied examples of interethnic cooperation (Fearon and Laitin 1996). Many scholars and activists are effectively deconstructing social systems based on racial and ethnic dominance, but fewer have discussed what to construct in their place. We can easily document that racial and ethnic domination is alive and well, but the point now is what to do about it.

Existing scholarship on ethnic conflict resolution has serious limitations in taking this next step. It tends to focus on relations among ethnic political leaders or elites rather than among masses or common people, and looks toward resolving ethnic conflict at the state level, rather than at the roots of conflict on the social and economic level. Shantha Hennayake observes that conflict resolution strategies based on state citizenship have had little success, because state systems tend to be constructed and dominated by a single "core" group, such as Sinhalese in Sri Lanka or whites in the U.S. (Hennayake 1992).

Ethnic conflict managers have also not paid adequate attention to the role of territorial identity. Robert Kaiser notes that most literature conflates ethnic regions with their largest ethnic group, without examining place attachment to an ethnic "homeland" (Kaiser 1994: 3-32) First Nations, with a tiny role in the North American workforce, a goal of sovereignty rather than assimilation, and a territorial rather than a placeless strategy, may view most conflict resolution strategies as limiting or harmful.

A different direction in racial or ethnic conflict management would focus on relations among ordinary people, based on a common place rather than simply a common state, and fully integrate territorial identity not only as a cause of conflict, but as a potential tool to overcome conflict. In a multiethnic place, a common territorial attachment or "place membership" may be a more effective strategy than state citizenship in lessening interethnic conflict. An excellent illustration is provided by two groups strongly attached to place-Native Americans and white ranchers and farmers in the Northwest and the Northern Plains.

In the Northwest, the treaty fishing wars have since the 1970s been largely resolved in favor of the tribes. Not only have federal court decisions recognized a tribal share in the allocation of salmon and steelhead, but ruled that the state of Washington must co-manage the resource in partnership with tribal governments. Under the threat of treaty-based lawsuits, Washington and to some extent Oregon have also recognized a tribal role in preventing the

degradation of fish habitat by logging and agriculture. Co-management has helped institutionalize the tribes' role in their ceded territories, and built more respectful government-to-government relations between the tribes and state and federal resource agencies.

Yet after almost two decades of government-to-government cooperation, painfully little of the relationship has trickled down to non-Indian communities. A few brave fishing groups, such as Trout Unlimited and the Puget Sound Gillnetters, have worked together with tribes on fish allocation and habitat protection. But the anti-treaty movement continues to recruit among rank-and-file fishers, and new gaps have opened between tribes and white sportsmen. Even some tribal members, who belong to traditional bands of "river people," feel left out of high-level talks undertaken by their tribal governments. Resentment at the base of both communities may not reverse the progress made by co-management, but could begin to unravel it.

One promising direction is the unprecedented alliance of tribes, fishing groups, and environmentalists for the breaching of Snake River hydroelectric dams. The issue has brought together the former treaty adversaries in a common cause to restore salmon and steelhead to the Columbia River Basin. Yet even this strong alliance involves mainly the professional staff of the tribal, state and national groups and agencies working to protect the salmon, rather than social and cultural interaction between tribal and non-tribal fishing communities. It has been difficult for these groups to construct a place attachment to the enormous Columbia Basin or its legendary mainstem.

Less publicized has been a deeper cooperation occurring at a smaller scale, within single, well-defined watersheds that are home to Indian tribes and non-Indian farmers and ranchers. Perhaps the best example is in the Umatilla River watershed in northeastern Oregon. The federal government had promised the river's water to the Umatilla Tribes in an 1855 treaty, and to white irrigators in the 1902 Reclamation Act. Government irrigation dams diverted water and dried up the river during fish runs, and farmers' and ranchers' land use practices also caused siltation in downstream fish habitat, in effect denying the Umatilla Tribes their treaty-based fishing rights.

In the late 1970s, Umatilla threatened a water rights lawsuit that would have pitted tribal interests against the irrigators. Senator Mark Hatfield held a Pendleton hearing on Umatilla water rights, and said that it was "the most argumentative and contentious hearing" he had ever seen, and that he "was lucky to get out of that hearing room alive" (Kelley 1991, Hiers 1996). Some rural whites threatened the same anti-Indian violence that had earlier been inflicted on Washington tribes.

Yet in the early 1980s, the Umatilla Tribes and Pendleton-area non-Indians began a dialogue on restoring water to the Umatilla River to meet fishing needs under the treaty, while reserving enough water for agricultural needs. The Umatilla Basin Project piped in mainstem Columbia water for irrigation, and funded joint projects to protect streambeds from erosion. Rural whites who previously opposed the treaty today are accepting tribal work crews on their property to repair their riparian areas. Salmon and steelhead runs that had been extinct for 75 years have returned, and the Umatilla has become the first successful model of fish run restoration in the Northwest (Shelley 2000).

The Umatilla Tribes used a "carrot-and-stick" approach—shaking a legal "stick" to assert their sovereignty and treaty rights, while dangling a "carrot" that promises a future based on common environmental values. The same pattern can be seen the nearby Wallowa Valley, where non-Indian residents have welcomed back the Nez Perce—who were ethnically cleansed from the area in the 1870s—to establish a fisheries program, reclaim parcels of land, and construct a powwow grounds (Tizon 1997).

Tribal cooperation with local non-Indian landowners has created stronger ties than collaboration with regional fishing groups or government agencies. Tribal members had established some kind of social interaction with local farmers or ranchers (whether positive or negative), by going to the same schools, rodeos, basketball games, or businesses. It has been easier to construct a place-based identity around a single subbasin watershed such as the Umatilla or Wallowa, than around the almost subcontinental Columbia Basin. The more localized the relationship, the stronger its potential to survive inevitable tests.

In the Northern Plains, like in the Northwest, state governments have attempted reconciliation with the tribes within their boundaries. The state governments of Montana and South Dakota at various times have promoted years of reconciliation, conferences on interracial understanding, and a rewriting of state histories to incorporate a few prominent Native figures. The state governments are again reviewing their versions of Native history in preparation for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial in 2003.

Though these efforts have built some new public understanding of Native cultures, they have done little to promote an understanding of tribal sovereignty or treaties. Anti-Indian groups continue to organize, particularly in Montana. Various Lakota (or Sioux) bands in South Dakota continue to have a contentious relationship with state and local governments, over issues such as police violence and liquor sales. A multiethnic statewide identity has not taken hold, perhaps because each state is so large, its tribes or bands so diverse, and its history of U.S.-Indian warfare so recent and unresolved.

Yet ironically, the Northern Plains have also seen some of the earliest and most highly developed Native/non-Native environmental alliances in the country. Unlike in the Northwest, these alliances in Montana and South Dakota were founded in clear opposition to government and corporate policies—an ideal framework for independent-minded rural communities that have mistrusted outsiders even as they have been in conflict with each other.

In the late 1970s, Northern Cheyenne tribal members worked with southeastern Montana ranchers, led by the cowboy poet Wallace McRae, to stop plans for coal mining and coal-fired power plants. Under the federal Clean Air Act, the tribe redesignated the air over its reservation as Class I air, supported by the white agricultural community as a way to protect the area from pollution. The Alliance canceled coal leases on the reservation, and prevented new plants from being built in the Tongue River Valley outside the reservation.

Meanwhile, in western South Dakota, the Black Hills Alliance brought together Lakota Indians with white ranchers and environmentalists against uranium and coal mining in the Black Hills. This alliance developed only six years after the American Indian Movement, or AIM, battled government forces at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Some white ranchers who feared the drawdown of groundwater by mines and coal slurry pipelines were eventually attracted by the AIM message that "the sacred Hills are not for sale" (Matthiessen 1980). The Lakotas avoided a treaty conflict with white residents by emphasizing that their treaty does not claim private property but only state and federal property. The Black Hills Alliance stopped the mining plans in court in the early 1980s.

In both Montana and South Dakota, it was the ironically the most strongly traditionalist and nationalistic Native activists who built the first bridges to their white rancher adversaries. The issue of water rights had at times brought tribes into conflict with local governments and ranchers, but the Native activists told the ranchers that if the two communities did not unite, there may not be drinkable water left to fight over.

After the successes of the early Native/non-Native environmental alliances in Montana and South Dakota, the communities again grew apart, but did not return to the state of tension and animosity that had existed beforehand, but the precedent of the alliances also made later alliances easier to form.

In Montana in 1986, white ranchers and farmers joined with the tribal opposition to gold mining plans in the Sweetgrass Hills. Congressman Pat Williams observed, "Just as these hills are significant to generations of ranchers and farmers, they have been among the most sacred of places to Great Plains Indian Tribes for thousands of years." In 1997, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt visited the Sweetgrass Hills, and withdrew them from gold mining for 20 years (Abel 1997).

In South Dakota in 1987, a similar alliance grew in opposition to a Honeywell plan to open a weapons testing range near the town of Hot Springs in the Black Hills (Secter 1987). Local ranchers questioned the project's noise and its use of Depleted Uranium munitions, and worked with Lakotas who feared the destruction of ancient petroglyphs. Former AIM activists built tipi camps on the site, with help from the ranchers. They began describing their loose coalition as the Cowboy and Indian Alliance, with "CIA" as its poignant acronym. The white ranchers and Lakotas drove to hearings in Pine Ridge and Hot Springs, presenting a united front in both communities. Honeywell soon dropped its proposal, and the site was turned into a wild horse sanctuary.

The areas of the most intense treaty rights conflicts seem to be those where the later environmental alliances made the most headway. Native militancy in the 1970s put tribal activists at odds with ranchers in the short term, but also helped in the long term to bring out the tribes' legal powers to protect the land. The ranchers initially emphasized how tribal sovereignty might benefit their environmental cause, but later came to learn more about Native cultures, and to allow their new Native allies to learn more about their land ethic. Environmental alliances have expanded in Montana and South Dakota, most recently against coal train routes. Their ultimate success will be judged by how much they translate environmental cooperation into economic and cultural cooperation.

There is something profound about Native alliances with non-Indians living on their claimed historic lands. After all, Native Peoples claim a "primordial" attachment to the landscape of the Black Hills or the Sweetgrass Hills that non-Indians do not share. It was in fighting for the Black Hills that the Lakotas constructed a national identity in the 1870s, and rediscovered it in the 1970s. Why would they want to share that sacred landscape with others?

Environmental protection may under certain circumstances provide a counterargument to the divisions of ethnic or national identity. If a threat arises to a significant natural features, both groups that value the place must band together to prevent its loss. A common belief in the sacredness of a place often divides religious groups, as in the cases of Jerusalem or Ayodhya. Yet a common belief in a sacred place can instead overcome divisions, if the beliefs coincide in a non-exclusive way that allows the co-existence of the other group. In this case, sacred hills are not being used to "prove" the nationhood of either the U.S. or Native peoples, but the landscape's "sacredness" is being taken seriously enough to work with the other group to protect the land from outside threats.

Place membership. The alliances between the former landlords of North America and the descendants of white settlers offer some lessons for groups engaged in ethnic or national conflicts elsewhere in the world. Why did the unlikely environmental alliances achieve so many successes?

First, they were constructed as grassroots oppositional alliances of land-based peoples, rather than only as joint projects of tribal, state and federal agencies. As in any peace process, an improved relationship between ethnic or national leaders must be matched by increased social and cultural interaction at the groups' base. Indians and whites originally come together to counter an outside threat, but then began to redefine their relationship to each other. The alliances are carving out their own mutual space on the local level, rather than waiting for "reconciliation" between their political institutions. Because local bonds are forged between individuals and communities in the course of their everyday lives, they can become deeper than bonds developed between political leaders operating at larger scales.

Second, the alliances effectively used place—the object of contention between Natives and non-Natives—as a tool to resolve ethnic conflict. The players effectively turned battles over natural resource allocation into alliances for natural resource protection, using a common defense of the local place as a catalyst to lessen ethnic conflict. Instead of sustaining a social or ethnic definition of place, they used a territorial definition of place, and redrew their mental boundaries to encompass both ethnic communities. As Steve Pile and Michael Keith write, "The unity of communities of resistance is formed through the production of location as much as through the uncovering of location within the fantasies of multiple power relations. Engagements in the politics of location...involve the definition of boundaries...these are not to be seen as fixed, impermeable, and permanent" (Pile and Keith 1997: 28). They further contend that "resistance may reterritorialise space in various ways, in order to transform its meanings...and enable territory to become a space...of freedom-within limits" (Pile and Keith 1997: 30).

Third, instead of looking to reconciliation on the U.S. or state scale, the alliances are looking to the subregional or local scale. Geographers often assume that the local "hearth" is constructed around a monoethnic local place, and that a more expansive or "cosmopolitan" view promotes a more multiethnic perspective. But even an isolated valley may in fact have more diversity on the ground than does a vision of a larger state centered on a "core" ethnic or racial group. As one example, for a resident of the multiethnic Kosovo city of Pec to expand her or his scale of identity may mean expanding to a larger but monoethnic Greater Serbia or Greater Albania. Expansion of scale does not necessarily promote inclusion, nor does promoting a smaller scale view necessarily promote exclusion. A multiethnic local or subregional place can be more inclusive of difference than a larger but more exclusive political entity.

Fourth, the alliances did not try to utilize or reform notions of state citizenship as a way to resolve ethnic conflict. Native Americans were not willing to subsume their national identities after the 1924 Citizenship Act. It was in fact through strengthening their own national identities since the 1970s that Native nations have been able to create a more level political, cultural and economic playing field with their white neighbors. Simply integrating Native peoples into the functioning of state, provincial or federal governments may give them a greater voice as individuals, but could undermine the national identities they have defended for so long.

A territorially based, multiethnic strategy may be more effective than "state citizenship" in lessening ethnic conflict and increasing cooperation between ethnic groups. I call this strategy "place membership," because it is based on people living in a particular natural place rather than within a particular political boundary. Some environmentalists may use the term "bioregion," but I feel this narrow ecological term omits the cultural, economic and religious significance that human beings attach to places, and which carve out their territories of belonging.

A "place membership" at the scale of the Umatilla Basin or Wallowa Valley or the Black Hills may be more inclusive of Native histories and cultures, and thus more effective as a tool for

ethnic conflict resolution, than a citizenship-based loyalty to an Oregon or a South Dakota or even a United States. These first- and second-level states were politically constructed by the white majority, and in turn have helped to construct an exclusive white American identity. It is perhaps easier to redefine a watershed or mountain range as an inclusive multiethnic territory. In this way, the same lands and resources that have been contested between ethnic groups can become a means used to defuse interethnic conflict.

## References

Abel, Heather. 1997. "Montana on the Edge: A fight over gold forces the Treasure State to confront its future." *High Country News* (Dec. 22).

Fearon, James D., and David D. Laitin. 1996. "Explaining Interethnic Cooperation." *American Political Science Review* 90(4), pp. 715-35.

Grossman, Zoltan. 2000. "Geographies of Inclusion: Interethnic Alliances for Rural Environmental Protection." *North American Geographer* (Fall).

Hennayake, Shantha. 1992. "Interactive ethnonationalism: An alternative explanation of minority ethnonationalism." *Political Geography* 11(6), pp 526-549.

Hiers, Becky. 1996. "Water Conflict Resolved Cooperatively" (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Policy Analysis).

Kaiser, Robert 1994. *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*. Princeton University Press

Kelley, Beverly. 1991. "Umatilla project addresses needs of irrigators, fish." *Capital Press* (May 10).

Matthiessen, Peter. 1980. "High Noon in the Black Hills." *New York Times Magazine* (July 13).

Pile, Steve, and Michael Keith, eds. 1997. *Geographies of Resistance*. London/New York: Routledge.

Secter, Bob. 1987. "Indians, Ranchers Oppose Black Hills Weapons Tests." *Los Angeles Times* (Aug.30).

Shelley, Christopher W. 2000. "The Resurrection of a River: Re-watering the Umatilla Basin." Paper presented at the American Society for Environmental History Conference (March).

Tizon, Alex. 1997. "Nez Perce invited back to Land of Winding Rivers." *Seattle Times* (May 25).

Zoltán Grossman is a Ph.D. Dissertator in the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Geography. He currently has a Morris K. Udall Dissertation Fellowship and University of Wisconsin Fellowship. He is also a professional cartographer, and was chief editor of Wisconsin's Past and Present: A Historical Atlas (University of Wisconsin Press, 1998) and contributed to Mapping Wisconsin History (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 2000).