

Ho-Chunk Environmental Alliances and the Effects of White Racial Advantage

Zoltan Grossman
Evergreen State College

The Environmental Justice movement is not only concerned with the placement of toxic wastes in “minority” communities, but with the wide array of advantages that U.S. white communities possess to avoid or mitigate environmental threats. In response to a growing interracial environmental alliance, companies and government agencies often use a social-spatial “shell game” to minimize environmental burdens on a white community, while keeping burdens on a “minority” community. The resulting division of the alliance is often justified or masked as the result of neutral geographic or scientific factors. The cases of Native American alliances with non-Indian farmers against military flight and bombing ranges in southern Wisconsin illustrate the choice that white alliance members had between their own short-term (racial) interest and the alliance’s long-term (environmental) interest. Interracial unity strategies based solely on universalist commonalities (such as environmental protection) tend to fail without a concurrent process of equalization that respects particularist differences (racial/ethnic rights).

Since the 1970s, a surprising number of natural resource conflicts between Native American and rural white communities have been followed by environmental alliances between the same communities to protect the same resources. These “unlikely alliances” have brought together Native people with white farmers, ranchers, or fishers who had fought treaty rights, but came to see that tribal legal powers could help defend the common place from an outside environmental threat, such as mines, dams, powerlines, nuclear waste, jet flights, and bombing ranges. Some alliances led to environmental cooperation between Native and non-Native governments. Some even extended to cultural or economic cooperation (Grossman 2001, 2002).

But other alliances did not. This article examines Native/non-Native alliances against military projects in southern Wisconsin, and whether “outside” environmental threats would help remove some of the “inside” barriers to Natives/non-Native cooperation. Would non-Indians see Native rights as benefitting only the tribes, or as benefitting the common environmental cause? Would they defend the interests of their Native neighbors, or only their own interests? The differing responses of local white residents pointed toward two distinct paths in their relationship with the Native community.

Military ranges

Southern Wisconsin forms most of the homeland of the Ho-Chunk Nation, formerly the Wisconsin Winnebago Tribe. In the mid-1800s, many Ho-Chunk were forcibly removed to the west, but many hid out to avoid the ethnic cleansing or walked back to their homeland, later establishing tiny, scattered land holdings in Wisconsin (Wisconsin Cartographers' Guild 1998: 8-9).

Many Ho-Chunk tribal members have since 1955 lived under a military jet flight path to the Hardwood Bombing and Gunnery Range in Juneau County in south-central Wisconsin. In 1994, the Air National Guard proposed the expansion of the Hardwood Range, as well as new flight paths for its jets over a larger area in southwestern Wisconsin (Smith 1995a).

The Ho-Chunk voiced their major concern over the proximity of the bombing range to tribal homes and a casino, the possible impact of range expansion on gathering rights and on sacred mounds (CORE 1995). Tribal legislator Ona Garvin complained that the military "didn't even know that Indians lived under these flights" (Conway 1995).

By 1995, the Citizens Opposed to Range Expansion, or CORE, brought together Ho-Chunk tribal members with white neighbors in the immediate vicinity (Smith 1995b). Garvin told white landowners about, "The reason we had empathy for those people was the government policies that the Indian nations always had to follow, which meant the loss of land. Now it's the Department of Defense that's taking your land. So we understand where you are.... That's what really hit them...That did a lot more for cultural understanding than if we had sat there and talked to them until we were blue in the face."

Also in 1995, opposition grew to the closely related proposal for flight paths throughout southwestern Wisconsin. Unlike the Ho-Chunk-led alliance against the bombing range expansion, the Citizens United Against Low-Level Flights (or simply "Citizens United") was led mainly by white farmers (Smith 1995c), including longstanding dairy farmers and more recent organic and Amish farmers who feared the flights as an unhealthy intrusion into the rural landscape.

The Ho-Chunk Nation had 45 percent of its Wisconsin tribal members living in counties under the flight corridors (Ho-Chunk Nation GIS 1995). The tribal elders' council voiced concern that the flights would disrupt religious ceremonies. Ho-Chunk concerns, however, were more pronounced about the Hardwood Range expansion that directly affected their villages.

While the Ho-Chunk had built bridges to white opponents of the bombing range expansion in south-central Wisconsin, they found difficulty in making strong links to southwestern Wisconsin opponents of low-level flights, who felt that the Hardwood issue would divert from the flights issue. Citizens United and CORE finally co-sponsored a joint prayer rally, but the unity was too little, too late (Slattery 1995).

In 1996, the Air National Guard dropped the plan for new flight corridors, but retained the existing flight corridor over Ho-Chunk lands and kept its plans to expand the Hardwood Range. Citizens United leaders declared "victory" and sponsored barn dances to celebrate the "defeat" of flight range expansion. The Ho-Chunk viewed the "deal" as a segmentation of the flight and bombing range issues, warning that the bombing range expansion would be the first step toward a future resurrection of low-level flights (Hillsboro Sentry-Enterprise 1996). The Ho-Chunk maintained opposition to Hardwood expansion through 1997, joined by only a few flight opponents. Without a focus a large geographical area, the opposition lost statewide exposure. The regional Native/non-Native alliance had been divided and conquered.

Tribal land claims

A new set of alliances was formed in the late 1990s, as the Ho-Chunk Nation pressed for returns of parcels of its treaty-ceded territory. The land return proposals centered on a former dam site in the Kickapoo River Valley and a former munitions plant site in the Wisconsin River Valley. The varied response of local white residents and environmentalists to these proposals pointed toward different frames of co-existence with the tribe.

In 1961, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had planned a flood control dam on the Kickapoo River in Vernon County. In 1975, the U.S. Senate halted the dam for environmental reasons, but only after local white residents had been displaced for dam construction (Anderson and West 1999). The 8,600-acre evacuated area grew over into a forest, claimed by both the Ho-Chunk (for their sacred sites) and by displaced white residents.

Some white valley residents viewed the tribe as not "local" to the county, because only a handful of tribal members still lived there. Yet Ho-Chunk representatives sought dialogue with white residents because, as one reporter noted, they "share a bitter story with the federal government. In the 1960s, federal land agents scoured the valley, evicting dozens of farmers from the land for a dam. More than a century earlier, Ho-Chunk...were evicted" (Smith 1997).

After years of conflict, the federal government in 1997 agreed to give the land to the State, and 1,200 acres of it to the Ho-Chunk Nation, to establish the Kickapoo Reserve. The land parcels together are today managed by a board that include tribal, state, and local representatives, committed to protecting both natural and cultural resources.

The Kickapoo Valley agreement provides a precedent to another proposed land return farther east in Ho-Chunk ceded territory, in Sauk County. The controversy centers on the 7,400-acre Badger Army Ammunition Plant, closed by the Army in 1998. The site on the Sauk Prairie was claimed by the Ho-Chunk, and by white families evicted in World War II for plant construction. Land return proposals were complicated by massive groundwater contamination from years of Army waste dumping, and schemes to reopen the plant for industrial use.

The Ho-Chunk Nation asked the federal government for parts of the Badger site, to restore prairie plants, introduce buffalo, and protect cultural sites. The U.S. Department of Agriculture also requested part of the site. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, on the other hand, expressed interest in making the entire property a state park (Fuller 2001).

Some residents and environmentalists objected that the Ho-Chunk could build a new casino on the site, even though it had no intention or legal ability to do so. They also expressed the opinion that the Ho-Chunk were not "locals," even though the county had the second-highest Ho-Chunk population in the state (Ho-Chunk Nation GIS 1995). Some environmentalists backed full State control of the site, arguing for the ecological viability of a single contiguous prairie. Yet with a trust relationship to the federal government, the tribe could better pressure the Army to clean up the groundwater.

Other local residents backed "collaborative management" of state, federal, and tribal parcels by an integrated board (Olah 1999, CCCSP 1999). In 2001, a planning committee proposed that "uses and activities at the Badger property contribute to the reconciliation

and resolution of past conflicts involving the loss and contamination of the natural environment, the displacement of Native Americans and Euro-American farmers, and the effects of war" (Badger Reuse Committee 2001). The future of the Sauk Prairie had potential to be like the Kickapoo Valley, marked by Native/non-Native cooperation (Seely 2002). But the lack of federal agencies' honoring their trust responsibility to the Ho-Chunk makes a collaborative future less likely (Weier 2003).

Conclusions of case studies

The fluctuating alliances between the Ho-Chunk and white farmers offer important insights. Different community interests can play themselves out through environmental politics. These differences are exhibited spatially, with each group protecting different places or resources from an environmental threat. In turn, the company or agency providing the environmental threat may also act spatially, making geographic decisions that happen to coincide with racial/ethnic hierarchies on the landscape.

In meeting the demands of rural white residents, but maintaining the "threat" to Indian lands, a company or agency is able to spatially mask an ethnically biased decision with a neutral face. It can claim that the decisions only took physical or technical concerns into account. The response of the rural white community to such a decision—whether it keeps up the battle even though its own primary demands have been met—is the true test of an interethnic alliance. Wisconsin whites twice had the opportunity to have their primary environmental demands met, at the expense of the Native community, and had two very different responses.

In the earlier alliance, the military met the demands of white farmers to end low-level flights, without meeting Ho-Chunk demands to end Hardwood Range expansion. While no "smoking-gun" memo can prove an intentional Guard strategy to manipulate geography, the clear effect of the decision was to divide the alliance by reinforcing the historic advantages of the white community. The military, knowingly or unknowingly, took the path of least resistance.

The failure to back tribal demands may ultimately prove self-defeating for the rural whites. The expansion of Hardwood may result in a future expansion of low-level flight ranges, just as excluding the Ho-Chunk from the Badger site would have weakened efforts to clean up the groundwater.

But in the later Kickapoo Valley and Sauk Prairie alliances, local white leadership did not end up backing full state control over the sites. Inclusive leadership wove together Native and non-Native environmental/cultural concerns into a single cooperative vision of land use. This cooperation continued in a recent alliance opposing a Perrier springwater pumping plant in Adams County (Midwest Treaty Network 2000). At Hardwood, the Kickapoo Valley, and Badger, organizers linked the historic Native dispossession of the land through federal removal policy, and more recent white farmers' dispossession through eminent domain policy.

Ho-Chunk and white farmers' priorities could easily be seen as mutually exclusive, yet both "insider" cultures are tied to the land. Tribes can build closer ties with white neighbors not by limiting their land claims, but by asserting these claims in tandem with the environmental/ economic concerns of local non-Indians, based on a return of the land to those who respect it the most. This relationship is best built not through attorneys or

government officials, but through cultural leadership. Co-management of land prioritizes the place itself over social categories, and begins to undermine racial/ethnic hierarchies in the name of place.

Interethnic alliances

The contrast between these two outcomes brings up larger questions of what ultimately unites or divides ethnic/racial communities. Should so-called "minority" rights be delayed until after "more pressing" issues are dealt with, to avoid "alienating" whites? Is simple "unity" between the communities enough?

These questions are rooted in the larger question of the relationship between "particularism" and "universalism." In this contemporary U.S. context, "particularism" asserts the particular differences of groups based on social identities, such as ethnicity or race. Conservative and progressive commentators alike have denounced particularist "identity politics" as "balkanizing" society into separate enclaves.

"Universalism" emphasizes the similarities between distinct social groups. These similarities may lie in a common state citizenship, a common class consciousness, or a common environment. Universalism usually gets better press than particularism, because it brings together disparate people in a common cause. Yet even in the midst of this cooperation, social inequalities continue to reemerge.

Advocates of interracial "unity" often urge communities of color to subsume their particularist identities within an overarching universalist framework. They ask why we can't all get along, and simply set aside our differences. This view portrays group conflict as the result of groups floating in a social vacuum, accidentally bumping into the ethnic "Other," who we don't like only because they are "different."

But we do not live within a social vacuum. U.S. society has always been based on a racialized "pecking order" of power relations. Theories of white racial construction view racism not only as directed against people of color, but also as a social control mechanism directed against lower-ranked European Americans, to "deflect" them from their economic interests. Interracial rebellion has historically been prevented or controlled by redirecting working-class whites' economic anger downward to people of color rather than upward to the state or elite institutions (Allen 1997, Roediger 1994, Ignatiev 1995). This internalized "dual consciousness" often frustrates interracial alliances, such as in the labor movement (Hill 1984, Bonacich 1972).

The vacillation between class and racial loyalty creates contradictory actions or "swings" in racial attitudes. White workers, for example, may join with African American or Latino workers in a powerful multiracial strike. But when the management meets the demands of white employees, but not demands of African American and Latino employees in lower job categories, the strike is divided unless the whites continue it on behalf of the entire workforce (Ignatin 1970). Downplaying race does not eliminate racism as a force within universalist movements, but merely sweeps it under the rug. Directly addressing and defusing racism helps to level the playing field, creating lasting shifts in consciousness rather than taking a lowest-common denominator approach for temporary gains.

This approach cannot be adequately accomplished on a personal level, with individual whites renouncing their own so-called "white skin privilege." It is difficult, if not

impossible, to tell poor whites that they are beneficiaries of an absolute racial "privilege" (especially when the admonitions come from more "privileged" academics or activists). But it is critical to note that they possess a relative privilege, perhaps more accurately understood as a racial "advantage."

A strong assertion of so-called "minority" rights is a necessary prerequisite to building ties to whites around common concerns. But it is not realistic to wait for full equality before launching a universalist project. The necessary condition is a process of equalization-clear signals that society is moving toward equality. The communities can then cooperate on a more equal basis, in effect using "particularism" to make "universalism" more attainable.

Environmental justice movements

Theories of white racial advantage have mainly studied racial divisions within the working class. But the theories can also be used to examine how other common identities can be divided-such as identities based on the local place or environment. Is a "universalist" defense of the environment possible without confronting racial/ethnic hierarchies?

Environmental justice advocates seek to integrate "particularist" identity issues with "universalist" environmental issues at all scales. Many scholars trace the emergence of "environmental justice" to the moment they first became aware of it-the 1982 African American rallies against toxic waste dumps in the South. Native American environmental justice advocates look far earlier to conflicts over mining, damming, and the destruction of forests, prairies and buffalo since 1492 (LaDuke 1999).

The goal of environmental justice scholarship in the 1980s was to document the correlation between polluting industries and so-called "minority" communities. But more recent studies document advantages that enable whites to avoid or move away from environmental problems.

Laura Pulido used the social concept of "positionality" to examine the different responses of mainstream white environmentalists and communities of color to the same environmental issue. Pulido asserts that positionality, or "a person's location within the larger social formation, including one's class position, gender, and racial identity...is key to how people experience, articulate and respond to environmental issues" (Pulido and Peña 1998: 34). Whereas Chicano farmworkers viewed pesticides as a human health issue, white environmentalists viewed pesticides as a scientific issue affecting wildlife and consumers (Pulido 1996).

Andrew Hurley examined "positionality" as a social and a spatial concept in his study of the multiracial alliance against U.S. Steel mill pollution in Indiana. African American industrial workers and neighborhood residents initially joined with white industrial workers and middle-class residents. The whites, however, could gain access to cleaner workplaces and healthier neighborhoods (Hurley 1995: 123). Hurley observed that "as manufacturers shifted wastes from the air and water to the land, the effect of environmental reform was to shift the burden of pollution to low-income groups and racial minorities. Thus, it was no coincidence that the age of ecology corresponded with the rise of environmental inequality" (Hurley 1995: 172).

Social and spatial variations can likewise help clarify different approaches by Native Americans and their white neighbors to an environmental problem. First, the political or economic weakness of a group may cause companies or agencies to locate harmful projects in or near reservations (Cole and Foster 2001: 134-150).

Second, reservations may be located in a poorly drained area with limited access to water, whereas rural whites have greater options in resource access. Reservations were usually established on relatively poor lands, while white settlers claimed the healthiest real estate.

Third, although the local white residents can move away from a polluted landscape to a better location, Native residents are less likely to abandon their ancestral homes. Their relationship to the land is not only based on economic or environmental considerations, but also on political, cultural, and spiritual ties.

Fourth, a company or agency may redirect the impacts of a project to minimize the impact on whites. Responding to pressures from their white constituencies, political leaders may pressure an industry to shift the burdens to a less powerful constituency, such as Indians.

The social-spatial "shell game"

Industry proposals for waste dumps or electrical transmission lines may become "racialized" if the target areas have different demographics. Even in fixed-site projects such as mines, companies can float waste management proposals that differentially affect Indian and non-Indian lands.

In this way, white racial advantages can be played out on the landscape. Military agencies can move their flight ranges around like pieces on a chess board, to minimize public criticism. The Wisconsin National Guard was able to set white farmers' interests against Native interests, simply by pitting the air against the land. Whether Guard officers intended to create a wedge issue is beside the point. The point is that whites who abandoned the fight against the Hardwood Range, or who opposed the Ho-Chunk claim to Badger Munitions, assumed there was a conflict between their environmental interests and Native environmental interests.

When whites celebrate a "victory" that does not include the tribes, they reinforce historic Native resentments, and allow outside interests to divide and weaken the common front. Just as white workers in a multiracial strike have to choose whether between their class consciousness or their racial consciousness, white residents in an alliance will invariably face a choice between their environmental loyalty and their racial loyalty.

The clash between racial and environmental interests plays out not only as a split between Native and white communities, but also as divisions within the white community, such as over the Hardwood or Badger plans. It can also play out as "dual consciousness" within individuals, which as David Harvey notes, are "bundles of heterogeneous impulses, many of which derive from an internalization of 'the other' within the self" (Keith and Pile 1993: 63). A white resident may work to stop a harmful project, while working to defeat Native treaties that can legally block the project. On the flip side, a white farmer who is hostile to Native rights may make "exceptions" to this attitude at critical times.

A cooperative effort that only appeals to universalist values-what the two groups have in common-will fail to dismantle these often unspoken racial attitudes. If communities of color are subsumed or homogenized into a "greater" universalist whole, or represented by white allies, they will not be able to make their fullest contribution to the alliance.

The environmental alliances have achieved success when they interweave particularist and universalist strategies, supporting Native rights while promoting an inclusive vision of a common human and natural world. Environmental "unity" between Native and white communities is not possible without "environmental justice" for Native communities. Conversely, as Lani Guinier notes, justice may be aided by making links to the experiences of some whites (Guinier and Torres 2002). But even if they stand together with Native peoples to defend the environment, whites who stand in the way of Native rights are standing in the way of long-term protection of the common environment. Mere "unity" is not enough.

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