

**RMES 500 Q**  
**Traditional Ecological Knowledge**

**Term Essay**  
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**On reaching this earth the first people are believed to have prospected for suitable settlement sites, places where salmon and olachen could be caught, and if possible, near side valleys where berries were abundant. Here they released the animals and plants, which they had brought with them, on which they thenceforth subsisted, in accordance with the supreme deity's instructions. (McIlwraith 1948: 131)**

Introduction:

Scholars of Northwest Coast First Nations, principally anthropologists, ethnobotanists, ethnographers and historians, have gathered substantial evidence that describes traditional land tenure and ownership patterns for this region. A considerable portion of the collection of essays in Deur and Turner's (2005) Keeping it Living argues for the reconsideration of aboriginal plant use and redefinition of 'cultivation' practices that might illuminate previously overlooked anthropomorphic alterations and improvements of these traditional territories (29). This volume was assigned reading for Charles Menzies' 2007 course in Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and it provided much of the inspiration for this essay. Ultimately, this is a brief exploration of land tenure and ownership patterns among Northwest Coast First Nations as compared particularly with the Nuxalk of the Bella Coola valley. Along with the authors and voices cited, this study hopes to demonstrate, at least in a preliminary way, the crucial linkage between the evidence of territoriality in Northwest Coast First nations and aboriginal title. The range of time and evidence provided for these ownership patterns follows that outlined and provided by Turner (et al. 2005: 152) and colleagues in the field (Lepofsky 1985; McDonald 2005; Suttles 1985, 2005) who relied on the words of contemporary elders, and the early reconstructive ethnographic descriptions (e.g. McIlwraith 1948). Other

methods for identifying territoriality include ecological arguments, linguistic and archaeological evidence, as well as historical documentation (Sutton 1975: 27). To broaden the view and to underline the notion of stewardship embedded within indigenous ownership and control patterns, Dunlap (1999) and Lewis (1994) contextualize the Euro-Canadian and American settlers' contrasting views of nature, 'wilderness', and the agrarian ideal in a way that corroborates these similar themes in Deur and Turner (2005).

#### Northwest Coast First Nations Ownership and Control: Overview

Significantly, Turner (et al. 2005: 171) cite *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* in characterizing land ownership and aboriginal title:

For us, the ownership of territory is a marriage of chief and the land. Each Chief has an ancestor who encountered and acknowledged the life of the land. From such encounters come power. The land, the plants, the animals and people all have spirit-they all must be shown respect. That is the basis of our law...By following the law, the power flows from the land to the people through the chief; by using the wealth of the territory, the House feasts its Chief so he can properly fulfill the law. This cycle has been repeated on my land for thousands of years. [Gisday Wa and Delgam uukw 1989:7-8]

In previous work on ownership, Turner and Jones (2000) provide a detailed overview of "Patterns of Territoriality and Resource Ownership" that draws from a range of scholars and differentiates Northwest Coast cultural and linguistic groups (3-6). From this, Turner and Jones (2000) depict two models of land and resource proprietorship with varying degrees of access and control over those resources (6). Perhaps drawing from Suttles (1987) working hypothesis of a south-to-north gradient of an "increasing tightness of structure" (57), we can begin to relate the more punctuated seasonal abundance of the northern traditional territories with their correspondingly more rigid and "kin-group" (Turner et al. 2005: 175) ownership patterns. Turner (et al. 2005) identify the range of

these ownership rights as the following: general recognition of communal territory defined by seasonal movements; authority over specific resource sites and locations; ownership rights held by individuals, kinship groups, larger village and ethnic groupings; ownership rights may be limited to certain resources-fish, clams, berries, roots; rights to use contingent upon their sustainable management and sharing of resources with other group members (152). Turner and Jones (2000) list common features of these ownership practices and systems among Northwest Coast First Nations and indigenous peoples elsewhere as reasons for ownership, boundaries, harvest and exclusion rights, succession, and obligations and responsibilities (16-17).

#### Nuxalk Ownership and Control: Brief Characterization

McIlwraith (1948) explains the land tenure among the Nuxalk as intrinsically linked with ancestral family names (131; and Turner et al. 2005: 158). From the opening quote above, first peoples gave sacred sanction to land ownership and possession (McIlwraith 1948: 131). Among the Nuxalk, hereditary chiefs had greater access and control over the production and distribution of food resources than the remainder of the population (Lepofsky 1985: 64). These preferred food resource territories distributed by the first peoples became the property of their immediate descendants, or their offspring (McIlwraith 1948: 131). In her thesis on Nuxalk Settlement Systems, Lepofsky (1985) attributes the locations of settlements in the Bella Coola valley to those preferred sites with an abundance of salmon, other aquatic resources, plant resources, animal resources, mineral resources, trade, shelter from the elements and protection from raids (187). The river's mouth and lower valley represented the greatest concentration of resources for the

Nuxalk, therefore maximized energy (Lepofsky 1985: 188). In this respect, these preferred territorial settlements of the Nuxalk would be socially and geographically comparable to the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en, in that ownership would have been maintained through a House group and often followed watershed boundaries (Turner et al. 2005: 169). According to the patterns of ownership and control, these settlements would have been owned and controlled by descent groups with a common ancestor as determined from a single origin story with authority invested in a chief or other designates (Turner and Jones 2000: 4; Turner et al. 2005: 158). Disruption to the system of traditional ownership and control over resources for the Nuxalk came with the loss of their sovereign territory:

“Since the concentration of the tribe on a small reserve and the beginning of agriculture, a system of individual ownership of cultivated land has spring up. It is realized that if a man clears and cultivates a field, the produce is his own, and he can will this land to whomever he pleases. Likewise a man who rings a tree for firewood is the sole owner. (McIlwraith 1948: 133).”

#### Linguistic and other forms of evidence: Is there a relationship between ownership and stewardship among Northwest Coast First Nations?

For the Nuu-Chah-Nulth, *hahuulhi* indicates sovereignty, and is used by hereditary chiefs for aboriginal right, ownership, and territory (Turner et al. 2005: 151 citing Ahousaht Hereditary Chief Earl Maquinna George, 1996). *Hahuulhi* also signifies reciprocal rights and responsibilities to steward the land and people within the territory (Turner et al. 2005: 163). Among several groups of Coast Salish speakers, a suffix meaning “of or belonging to”, *-ulh/*, identifies specific locations within a group’s territory (Turner et al. 2005: 155). These ownership rights were seen as conceptually different from Euro-Canadian notions of exclusive property, and were generally group

inclusive (Turner et al. 2005: 155). Tsimshian elder, Lucy Hayward used the term, *laxyuup*, with its traditional meaning of ‘House lands and estates’ to also depict a storage box of food (McDonald 2005: 242 citing interview, 1980). Similarly, the Nuxalk terms for preferred resource territories are *sol’ loam or sixsnimsta*, which means “Food Supply” (McIlwraith 1948: 131). In Keeping it Living, Turner and colleagues make the case through linguistic, ethnographic, and ecological evidence that intrinsic to the ownership rules among the Northwest Coast First Nations, was a respect for the limits of their food (and other) resources as well as an understanding of strategies to enhance productivity and distribute resources without hoarding (Turner et al. 2005: 175; McDonald 2005: 245). Turner and Peacock (2005) draw the following conclusion from their ethnobotanical evidence:

“Whether recognized at the community level or at the level of the clan, family, or individual, the right to harvest and to control the harvest of other people at highly valued places for high-value resources were widely established. Such proprietorship resulted in intensive monitoring, harvesting, and managing of sites and resources, and, we would argue, ultimately led to sustainable resource use (130).”

In stark contrast, Dunlap (1999) describes the push from nineteenth century settlers as an imposition of European models into new lands and uncharted territory:

“In less than a century Americans and Canadians built towns and farms across two-thirds of a continent, Australians and New Zealanders pastoral empires across their lands. Farmers and ranchers pushed into new country with high hopes and little information. Some were ruined by drought, frost, or heat, others failed as their farming or grazing techniques exhausted the land (46).”

While Nuu-chah-nulth speak of *hishuk ish ts’awalk* (Turner et al. 2005: 176), meaning the equality of all life forms, Euro-Canadian and American settlers were driven by the Biblical injunction that praised dominion over nature and subordination of “wilderness” (172).

### Discussion and Conclusions:

“Seen through European eyes, neither the Aboriginal peoples’ use of the land, nor their ownership of it was considered valid or legitimate, perhaps because it was so different from their own. In most cases, the newcomers recognized only large, permanent settlements and highly visible agricultural modification as criteria for land ownership. This demonstrates the important connections between land ownership and the question of cultivation and land management (Turner et al 2005: 172)”.

To draw parallels from land tenure and ownership patterns of Northwest Coast First Nations to that of indigenous ownership patterns elsewhere, Sutton (1975) generally characterizes these in terms of how the land is held, and in terms of the rights of use or permission of others to use (5). An exercise of caution is a minimal prerequisite for drawing universal conclusions from generalized systems for indigenous land ownership and tenure. However, from the literature reviewed in this brief study among Northwest Coast First Nations, evidence suggests that underlying indigenous ownership patterns is a fundamentally different worldview and system of values than those of Euro-Canadian and American property rights. The Douglas Treaties, in which traditional territories of Northwest Coast First Nations were surrendered, laid the legal framework for the century and a half that overlooked traditional ecological knowledge and stewardship of vital resource territories in the name of what would become industrial agriculture and resource extraction (Turner et al. 2005: 172). Euro-Canadians and Americans largely saw “agriculture” as a necessary beginning for true civilization and part of a blueprint for a progressive development that mirrored natural law (Lewis 1994: 9). Henry Rowe Schoolcraft claimed:

“Civilization...cannot permanently exist without the cultivation of the soil. It seems to have been the fundamental principle on which the species were originally created, that

they should derive their sustenance and means of perpetuation from this industrial labor (cited in Lewis 1994: 9).”

Deur and Turner’s Keeping it Living (2005) unpacks the misconception that Northwest Coast peoples were limited in their subsistence practices to hunting and gathering and wandered about in *terra nullis* (Mc Donald 2005:269). Rather, the collection asserts that there is strong evidence of sophisticated ownership and knowledge systems, as well as deeply embedded cultivation and stewardship of traditional territories. Mc Donald (2005) summarizes the subsequent changes to Tsimshian traditional territory as the creation of a “new wilderness” and defines the myth of empty lands as follows:

“The stereotype of the great Pacific wilderness is a colonial concept that blinds a new nation (Canada) to the sovereign control of an older nation (Tsimshian) and allows governments in Ottawa and Victoria to disregard the rights of the Tsimshian, as if the lands were truly *terra nullis*, an empty land (269).”

Further South, the sentiment was echoed by the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, who claimed the Indians ignored God’s dictum to “improve the land” and left the lands as a *vacuum domicilium*, or wilderness waiting to be properly possessed and settled (Lewis 1994: 11). The Land laws that sprung up around the newcomers to the North American continent intended to recognize only those claims of ownership that served the new regime (Dunlap 1999: 48). While settlers everywhere made virtue of their individual efforts and domestication of the wilderness, Dunlap (1999) concludes this taming and subordination was a means to of taking nature to the market for an expanding industrial society (49). A significant contribution from the collection of essays from within Deur and Turner’s Keeping it Living, with respect to aboriginal title, might be the extensive catalogue of evidence for the ownership,



maintenance, and enhancement of important plants throughout the traditional territories of Northwest Coast First Nations (Turner et al. 2005: 176).

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