




Examining the issues of social and environmental justice among the Indigenous people of Canada through the lens of Sustainable Forest Management

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Abstract. The forests of Canada, spanning vast expanses from coast to coast, serve as more than a collection of trees; they are the ancestral home, hunting grounds, and spiritual core of Indigenous communities across the country, from Barriere Lake in Quebec to British Columbia and Ontario. For these Indigenous peoples, the forest embodies a sacred land ethic, holding profound cultural, social, and environmental significance. However, within the context of Sustainable Forest Management (SFM), the nexus of social and environmental justice issues among Canada's Indigenous populations becomes starkly evident. Policies governing forest governance often fail to adequately address or respect the rights and needs of these communities, leading to a disconnection between policy formulation, industrial practices, environmental advocacy, and the lived realities of Indigenous peoples. The struggle for social justice intersects with the very fabric of forest-related decision-making processes. The absence of meaningful engagement with Indigenous groups in these discussions perpetuates systemic inequities, limiting their ability to protect and sustainably manage their ancestral lands. The impacts of industrial activities, such as logging and resource extraction, disrupt not only the ecological balance but also threaten the cultural heritage and livelihoods of Indigenous communities reliant on these forests.

To achieve true sustainability in forest management, it is imperative to foster inclusive dialogues that center Indigenous voices, honor their traditional knowledge, and integrate their values into policy frameworks. Only through genuine collaboration and equitable partnerships among forest industries, environmental advocates, policymakers, and Indigenous communities can Canada reconcile the intertwined challenges of social justice, environmental preservation, and sustainable forest management.

Keywords: Social Justice, Indigeneity, Forest Governance, Canada

1 Introduction

The rich tapestry of human history is intricately woven with the presence of forests and trees, perpetually portrayed in folklore and mythologies as untamed realms awaiting conquest or communion. This narrative evolved across diverse civilizations,

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representing the dichotomy of nature's wildness against mankind's urge for dominion. As societies burgeoned, forests became symbolic not only of nature's bounty but also of economic progress, as they served as universal sources of goods and services. In this global narrative, the indigenous communities of Canada are emblematic. Like their counterparts around the world, they possess an intimate traditional knowledge of the boreal forests they inhabit, nurturing a profound Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) rooted in an aboriginal worldview of the forest's essence. This TEK holds the potential to inform policies for sustaining forests through the prism of Sustainable Forest Management (SFM), often referred to as Aboriginal Forestry.

However, the historical trajectory of Canada's aboriginal peoples is marked by the enduring shadow of colonialism. Their geographical locations and interactions with colonial forces have shaped their encounters with forests and forest management. These communities have frequently faced exclusion from the administration and preservation of their ancestral forests, sparking multifaceted conflicts over forest utilization. These tensions culminated dramatically in the Oka Crisis of 1990, a pivotal event underscoring the complexities and struggles intertwined with forest access, use, and governance among Canada's indigenous populations.

2 Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are twofold: first, to delve into the intricate realm of forest governance within the framework of Sustainable Forest Management (SFM), scrutinizing its multifaceted dimensions and mechanisms. Secondly, the study aims to illuminate the interconnectedness of forest governance with the broader landscape of environmental and social justice. Central to this exploration is an inquiry into the evolution of societal perceptions of forests, charting how these perceptions have intersected with the political empowerment of indigenous communities. By tracing this convergence, the study seeks to elucidate the pivotal role played by indigenous groups in advocating for environmental sustainability and social equity, positioning forests as a pivotal backdrop for policy formulation and socio-political emancipation.

3 Methodology

This research employed qualitative methods encompassing historical and descriptive research tools to trace the historical relationship between Canadian Indigenous communities and their environment. Additionally, deductive analysis was utilized to scrutinize the intertwined themes of environmental and social justice within the context of indigenous communities, shaping the research framework.

4 Results

The federal government of Canada has categorized the Aboriginal peoples into four broad classifications since Confederation:

i. Inuit: Primarily residing in the northern regions of Canada, the Inuit communities have distinct cultural practices, languages (such as Inuktitut), and historical connections to these Arctic territories. Traditionally, their livelihoods have been tied to hunting, fishing, and other activities adapted to the Arctic environment.

ii. First Nation: Comprising various indigenous groups with unique cultural traditions, languages, and historical backgrounds, First Nations communities inhabit diverse regions across Canada. Each First Nation community has its own governance structures and distinct cultural practices, often tied to specific territories and ancestral lands.

iii. Métis: The Métis people trace their heritage to the intermingling of Indigenous (often Cree or Ojibwe) and European (primarily French Canadian) ancestries. Originating predominantly in the prairie provinces, the Métis have developed a distinctive culture, including the Michif language and a unique way of life rooted in their mixed ancestry.

These classifications represent diverse and vibrant indigenous communities in Canada, each with its own cultural richness, historical narratives, and connections to the land. The federal government's recognition of these categories has aimed to acknowledge and respect the unique heritage, languages, and cultural practices of the Inuit, First Nations, and Métis peoples as integral components of Canada's multicultural fabric.

5 Inuit

The Inuit, encompassing approximately 100,000 individuals worldwide, are a predominantly homogeneous Indigenous people residing in the Canadian Arctic regions of Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, Northern Quebec, and Northern Labrador. The term "Inuit" translates to "people" in their native language, Inuktitut, reflecting their communal identity and interconnectedness. Within Canada, an estimated 25,000 Inuit individuals live across these northern territories[1]. Linguistically, they primarily communicate through Inuktitut, a language integral to their cultural heritage. Historically, the Canadian Inuit were divided into eight primary groups, each with distinct regional affiliations: Labrador Inuit, Ungava or New Quebec Inuit, Baffin Island, Igloodik, Caribou, Netsilik, Copper, and Western Arctic Inuit, reflecting the diverse tapestry of Inuit communities across the vast Arctic expanse.

6 First Nations

The term "First Nations" denotes a vital segment of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, recognized distinctly alongside the Inuit and Métis in the Constitution Act of 1982.[2] Embracing a diverse array of indigenous communities across the country, excluding the Arctic-residing Inuit and individuals of mixed European-First Nations descent known as Métis, First Nations constitute a mosaic of unique linguistic and cultural groups. While the overarching term "First Nations" is utilized, many of these

communities prefer to identify themselves by their specific nations, such as Mohawk, Cree, or Oneida, preserving their distinct heritage and identities. This group holds a profound and distinctive relationship with the Crown and Canada, rooted in historical agreements, treaties, and inherent rights enshrined in legal documents like the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and various treaties negotiated between 1701 and 1923. Currently, Canada recognizes over 634 distinct First Nations communities, representing more than 50 cultural groups and languages, spread across the nation, notably concentrated in provinces like Ontario and British Columbia, reflecting the rich diversity and cultural tapestry of Indigenous nations across the country.

7 Metis

The Métis, recognized as one of Canada's Aboriginal peoples under the Constitution Act of 1982, trace their lineage to the descendants of early European settlers and First Nations individuals.[3] The term "Métis," derived from the French for "mixed blood," historically referred to the offspring of unions between European fur traders and Indigenous women across different regions of Canada. This merging of cultural and ancestral backgrounds resulted in the emergence of distinct Métis communities with their own unique cultural traditions, language (Michif), and way of life. As a dynamic Aboriginal group, the Métis people evolved, marrying among themselves and forming separate communities distinct from both European and First Nations societies, fostering a collective consciousness and identity as a nation within Canada's cultural mosaic.

The population of the Métis in Canada has shown substantial growth over the years. The 2001 census counted 292,310 Métis individuals, representing approximately 30% of the total Aboriginal population. This demographic has significantly expanded, with almost 400,000 people identifying as Métis in the 2006 Census and surging to 451,795 individuals by the 2011 Census, comprising 2.3% of the total Aboriginal population and 14% of Canada's overall population. Predominantly located in the western provinces and Ontario, Métis populations vary across regions, contributing 8% to the total population in the Northwest Territories, 6.7% in Manitoba, and 5.2% in Saskatchewan.

Urbanization has played a significant role in the demographic distribution of the Métis population. Almost 70% of Métis individuals reside in urban centers, with substantial concentrations observed in cities such as Winnipeg, Edmonton, Vancouver, Calgary, Saskatoon, and Toronto. Moreover, urban Métis populations often inhabit smaller urban centers, representing a substantial portion of the population in various locations across provinces like Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. Conversely, rural and hinterland areas within the mid-Canada corridor from northwestern Ontario to the Peace River district also boast significant Métis communities, each with its unique culture, territory, and systems of governance. Notably, regions like northwestern Saskatchewan and the eight Métis Settlements in northern Alberta serve as strongholds for Métis-majority

communities, reflecting the diversity and richness of Métis heritage across different landscapes in Canada.

8 Coming of colonialism in Canada and different worldviews

The arrival of Europeans in Canada ushered in a significant period of colonialism that forever altered the socio-cultural landscape of the indigenous communities inhabiting the region. European colonial endeavors initially stemmed from the quest for alternative trade routes to Asia, leading explorers like John Cabot of England and Jacques Cartier of France to discover and establish trade outposts along Canada's Atlantic Coast in the late 15th century.[4] This marked the beginning of European interaction with the native peoples and the exploitation of Canada's natural resources, particularly the vast fish stocks in Newfoundland's Grand Banks. The lure of these resources catalyzed the establishment of seasonal outposts and trade relations focused on bartering fur pelts for European goods, supplanting initial ambitions for discovering a Northeast passage to Asia.

Encounters between Europeans and the diverse indigenous communities of Canada showcased stark differences in worldviews, cultural practices, and societal structures.[5] The Aboriginal peoples varied in their occupations—hunters, fishermen, or farmers—and adopted distinct lifestyles, ranging from nomadic to settled. In the eastern regions, the Algonquian and Iroquoian peoples coexisted, sharing and dividing resources across the sub-Arctic boreal forests and northeastern deciduous woodlands. The Algonquian groups, characterized as more nomadic, relied on hunting, gathering, and fishing for sustenance. During summers, various tribes congregated at major fishing sites for socializing, trade, and alliances, dispersing into kin-based hunting bands during winter. In contrast, the nations speaking Iroquoian languages led more sedentary lives. The Five Nations (Iroquois or Hodeñošauñee), along with other groups like the Huron, Neutral, Petun, and Erie, inhabited villages around the Great Lakes, constructed longhouses, practiced agriculture, and cultivated crops such as corn, squash, beans, sunflowers, and tobacco. The distinct agricultural practices and settlement patterns of these groups reflected their adaptation to and utilization of the land's resources.

This period of colonialism brought about profound clashes of worldviews and ways of life. Europeans arrived with ambitions of resource exploitation and trade, often disregarding the holistic connection between indigenous communities and the land. For the Aboriginal peoples, the land was not merely a commodity but a fundamental part of their spiritual, cultural, and material existence. Their perspectives emphasized sustainability, communal ties, and respect for nature, contrasting sharply with the European notions of land ownership, commerce, and exploitation. The clash of these divergent worldviews would define the complex interactions, conflicts, and struggles for control and autonomy that characterized the colonial history of Canada.[6]

9 Social and Environmental Justice for the Indigenous people in Canada

The Indigenous communities in Canada have long grappled with social alienation and deprivation from mainstream society, particularly as they championed against social and environmental injustices that threatened their livelihoods. Environmental justice, an extension of the concept of social justice, revolves around the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens across society, regardless of social background or status. This fairness pertains to the distribution of environmental risks, such as pollution and exposure to hazardous toxins, highlighting the sensitive power dynamics between those causing environmental harm and those disproportionately affected by it. These disparities are rooted in cultural values, shaping societal responses to natural environments, which intertwine with traditions, belief systems, economic survival strategies, and scientific knowledge.

The Aboriginal worldview is deeply intertwined with their land, infused with a knowledge base derived from rituals connected to specific sites. This understanding dynamically varies across cultures, ages, education levels, and genders, influencing choices shaped by their environment.[7] Consequently, cultures reshape their environment in response to these choices, creating new possibilities for both cultural reproduction and ecological relationships within specific locations. Yet, these changes are not random; rather, they're influenced by societal systems, beliefs, norms, and values. Inappropriate changes, as seen in the destruction of the Iisaak Forest resource in British Columbia, can lead to disastrous consequences for both social and ecological orders, highlighting the intricate interplay between culture and environment. The Clayoquot Sound in British Columbia, situated within the traditional territory of the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations, represents a significant case study in environmental activism. This area, comprising lush rainforests and vast natural resources, including old-growth forests, became a focal point of contention due to the encroachment of logging companies. The wealth of natural resources discovered in the 18th century attracted an influx of settlers, leading to limited access to land for the First Nations and fostering a sense of deprivation. Moreover, governmental support for logging companies spurred the logging industry's rapid expansion in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in the degradation of old-growth forests, which became a contentious issue.

The conflict between environmental conservationists and logging companies intensified, with global implications regarding the harvesting of old-growth forests for timber production. The unique temperate rainforest ecosystem, notably closer to home than other threatened rainforests worldwide, led to widespread concerns about ecological health, especially regarding the northern spotted owl, an indicator species vital to forest ecosystems. The root of the conflict can be traced back to the 1950s when forestry companies were granted tree farm licenses, paving the way for aggressive logging activities that encroached upon animal habitats, medicinal plant gathering areas, and culturally significant zones. This encroachment prompted the First Nations to demand the right to veto logging activities in these vital areas, precipitating tensions that culminated in protests and blockades.

10 Introduction Environmental Justice Movement at the Clayoquot Sound, British Columbia in 1993

The Clayoquot Sound, situated on the west coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, is a territory rich in natural resources and cultural significance for the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations.[8] Encompassing an area of 262,592 hectares, nearly ninety-three percent of this region consists of lush rainforests characterized by old-growth or late successional forests. These forests form part of the North American temperate rainforest, stretching from Alaska through British Columbia and extending southward into Washington, Oregon, and California in the United States. While most of British Columbia's temperate rainforests outside protected areas have undergone modifications due to resource extraction activities, Clayoquot Sound remains one of the tracts of forests in their natural late successional state. In the province, approximately forty-two percent of the forests along the coast are considered old-growth, with defined age parameters for various tree species.

The Indigenous peoples in Coastal British Columbia, including the Nuu-chah-nulth communities, have historically depended on the resources from the cedar, fir, and hemlock forests for approximately 10,000 years.[9] The name "Clayoquot" has its origins in the name of the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation, translating to "different" or "changing." Presently, within the Sound, four Nuu-chah-nulth communities—Ahousaht, Tla-o-qui-aht, Hesquiaht, and Tofino—are situated, alongside the Ucluelet and Toquaht bands in the southern region, including the community of Ucluelet. This region holds cultural significance for these Indigenous communities, not only as a source of subsistence but also as a heritage site deeply rooted in their traditions and history.

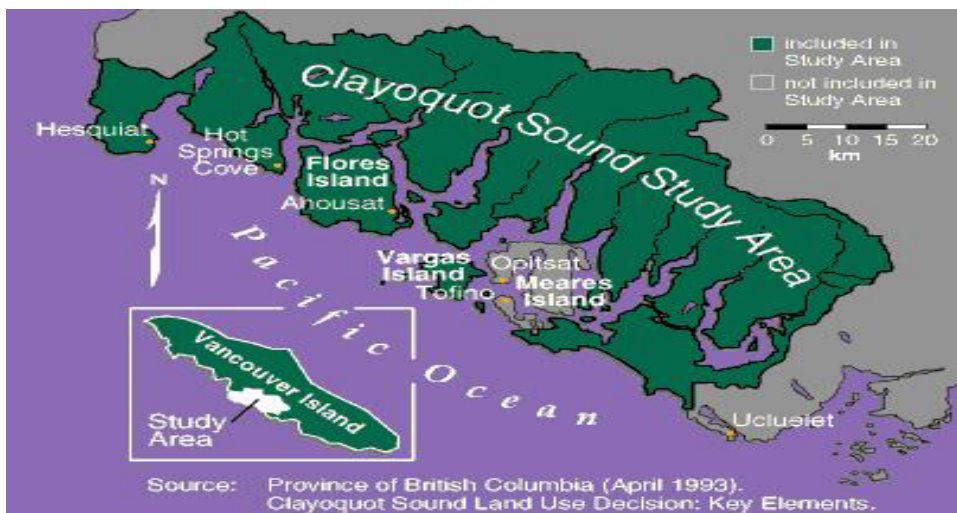


Fig 1. Map of Clayoquot sound in British Columbia

Source: <http://web.uvic.ca/>

The conflict surrounding Clayoquot Sound stemmed from the profound clash between economic interests and environmental conservation, greatly impacting the local Indigenous communities, particularly the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations. Historically reliant on traditional activities such as fishing, whaling, salmon fisheries, and gathering, these practices formed the cornerstone of their subsistence. The Nuu-chah-nulth people held a worldview deeply rooted in Hishuk-ish ts'awalk, emphasizing harmony and interconnectedness with nature, encapsulating respect for all life forms and advocating for responsible resource stewardship. The discovery of Clayoquot Sound's abundant natural resources in the 18th century attracted increasing numbers of outsiders, leading to a reduction in the First Nation's access to their ancestral lands. Government support for private companies and the subsequent expansion of logging industries in the 1980s and 1990s disrupted the old-growth forests, raising concerns among environmental conservationist groups. The conflicts centered around the harvesting of old-growth trees for timber production, especially significant considering that these temperate rainforests were among the last of their kind near the communities' homes, unlike more distant areas like Tasmania or the Amazon.

The escalating conflict saw the formation of groups such as the Friends of Clayoquot Sound (FOCS) in 1992, aimed at protecting significant cultural, spiritual, and ecological areas from logging activities. Blockades and protests were organized by local residents, Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations, and environmentalist groups, including Greenpeace, to prevent further clear-cutting.[10] These protests gained international attention, shining a spotlight on the struggle between conservation and industrial interests, leading to widespread public support for non-violent actions and fostering environmental advocacy in British Columbia. Despite some injunctions and temporary halts to logging activities, continued clear-cutting persisted in parts of Clayoquot Sound, perpetuating the challenges faced by the Nuu-chah-nulth communities and their efforts to protect their ancestral lands and resources.

11 Conclusion

The events in Clayoquot Sound highlighted the intersectionality of environmental and social justice concerns, marking it as a pivotal moment in Canada's history. The protests, resulting in the arrest of hundreds of individuals, underscored not only the environmental implications of resource extraction but also the profound social injustices faced by Indigenous communities. The lack of consultation with native residents during the developmental processes amplified these inequalities. In response to the controversy and growing demands for sustainable development, initiatives such as the establishment of Iisaak Forest Resources Ltd., the Scientific Panel for Sustainable Forest Management, and the designation of a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO formed crucial steps toward fostering comprehensive partnerships and sustainable practices in Clayoquot Sound. These initiatives laid the groundwork for a more balanced and equitable approach to land management, emphasizing the importance of involving Indigenous voices, conservation efforts, and sustainable development practices for the future well-being of the region and its communities.

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