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9/26/2020

American Environmental History

Ships and Ceremonies: Communicating with the ‘Other’

*“Is it not a maimed and imperfect nature that I am conversant with?” -Henry David Thoreau, *Walden**

Henry David Thoreau’s vision that the English settlers of the 17th century came to a romantic primitive New England landscape of nature untouched by man was far from the mark- the native people there had been interacting with the land for millennia before. The arrival of English Puritans and pilgrims merely changed the momentum of the interactions between land and its inhabitants by introducing fixity in which a community stays on a parcel for decades of time, creating unnatural boundaries, and bringing novel animals and microorganisms with them. In order to answer the question of why these changes were implemented, the question of *who* the lands were modified *for* must also be asked. While the individual English families came for their own reasons, the broader purpose for their settlement is found in the more commonly used name for them: colonists. The mercantilist companies that arranged for their arrival and the expected profits and commodities to be had from founding trans-Atlantic communities were mostly for the enrichment of politicians and capitalists back in England. Without the same social and political structures that led Europe toward mercantilism, the native people had no incentive to trade unless fortune provided them with more than they needed for the season, but they too had an external group which influenced the way in which they interacted with the land. Native peoples in the North Atlantic region thought that life and land were interconnected so that the Creator would keep life on earth “in exchange for the people’s thanks and protection” of the animals and plants around them. (Hill 52) While the English colonists’ use of the land was oriented toward producing valuable commodities for European markets, native people’s covenant to preserve the lives of future humans and animals (as the Creator instructed them to do) instructed them to keep sustainability as the central focus in their interactions with

the land. It's laughable to call England and the Creator 'foreign' since they were so intertwined with the settlers and natives, but they still constitute a form of 'other-ness' since they required the settlers and natives to do their bidding in North America. Because this interconnectedness was an essential factor in the ways both the colonists and natives interacted with the land around them, the primary differences between their interactions stem from the different communication methods they utilized- the colonists traded with England using European mercantile ships and the natives used ceremonies to cultivate their relationship with the Creator.

Imagine that the first colonists who arrived in New England chose to become an autarky by abandoning their ships and banishing any ships attempting to enter. Even with their superior tools, animals, and the microorganisms that accompanied them, the colonists' activities would have resembled the native's much more closely without ships. The fur trade, one of the primary economic activities of the colonies, would not have existed. Without the context of European demand, it would make no sense for a people who had nearly starved to death only a few years prior to traverse far-away lands and hunt furry animals just to make stylish hats to the extent that they exterminate entire species. The colonists would have probably hunted them just as sparingly as the natives, only using them when necessary to make clothing and preserving the rest for later use. The demise of the beaver had a much broader ecological effect, too. After beaver dams collapsed from disrepair, the ponds they created also broke and exposed rich soil underneath. If beavers hadn't been hunted, the communities that formed around their old dams might not have sprung up, suggesting that interior settlement probably would have taken place at a slower rate. This would be particularly true if ships weren't continuously bringing in more animals and people from abroad. (Cronon 106-107)

An autarkic settler population without ships would have also used its forests much differently than the colonists did. One primary reason for cutting trees was ironically for the British Navy's mast supply. 24 sawmills were operating in Maine by 1682 for this purpose, none of which would have been necessary without the superpower's military demand for shipbuilding. (Cronon 110) The West Indie's demand for

trees for barrel-making and firewood further created a market which would have been greatly diminished without trans-Atlantic trade. Sawmills, like collapsed beaver-dams, often brought towns with them. Without the need to log trees from far away and set up new mill-towns, the settler's advance into the hinterlands would have been even further decelerated.

While the settlers marked much of their land usage based on the abstract demands of the English economy, native people treated their land based on their shared responsibilities to uphold their end of a covenant with the Creator. The Haudenosaunee people who occupied much of the Northeastern United States and Southeastern Canada prior to European arrival celebrated four ceremonies throughout the year in order to remember that covenant in which the Creator keeps life on earth in exchange for thanks and protection of the earth. In their creation story, life began when the Creator won a game against his evil brother by chance. Life will extinguish if the covenant is broken, so the ceremonies are a reminder that life is fragile and susceptible to end unless they follow strict conservation measures. (Hill 21) This transitions directly into the way that native people lived- in small bands of tribes spread out across the land to ensure that they never overburden it. Native people were adept at utilizing a broad range of foodstuff across every season so that they never put all of their eggs in one basket and remaining mobile so that they could let one area recover after a period of living there. It is difficult to say how the Haudenosaunee would have lived differently without their ceremonies acting as reminders of sustainability. After all, there are biological limitations imposed on populations regardless of whether they themselves impose population control measures. (Cronon 41) Biology and religion surely have a dynamic history of shifting and winnowing each other so that the religious stories told by the Haudenosaunee were created or modified to inform them of biological challenges in the ecosystem. Thus, the ceremonies may have just been reflections of general ecological constraints that were observed over time. (Cronon 13)

There is another aspect of the ceremonies besides land conservation, however- the land is also meant to be shared equally. It is plausible that the native population could have been greater while still being

sustainable, but it may not be possible to do that while sharing the land equally since the closer the rotating tribes are to each other, the greater the opportunity for conflict. The English were able to settle on the land in much greater and denser numbers but doing so necessitated a class structure and legal system to prevent a state of constant feuding. Although native people like the Haudenosaunee had a structured legal system (The Great Law of Peace), tribal sachems were still much more akin to the average native than colonial governors were to the average settler. Decades after the Haudenosaunee had access to Western tools and animals, The Good Message of Handsome Lake relayed the Creator's message that they could use them "providing there is no pride," continuing to emphasize equality even with the introduction of private ownership. (Hill 49) The ceremonies and communication with their creator thus reinforced a shared responsibility to care for the land, animals, and other humans both before and after their exposure to the European way of life. If not for the Four Ceremonies, perhaps the Haudenosaunee would have developed a more stratified social structure that allowed them to live in denser concentrations and leave a bigger footprint on the land like the Europeans did.

The colonists and natives each shared a connection with different external forces- the colonists were bound by English economic demands, and the natives by the responsibilities they had to mother earth and to their descendants. The drastic differences between who they changed the land for is the best explanation of why each group used the land the way they did. Of course, it is impossible to say for sure what each group would have done without being constrained by some 'other' power because of how intertwined that 'other' was with the two groups. Had the groups only been working for themselves with no outside influence, the colonists may have been more conservative with land use like the natives and the natives may have used the land more radically like the colonists did. Without ships to facilitate the flow of goods through trade, the settlers would have taken a much longer time to begin settling the interior. And without the ceremonies, the native people may have developed a more Western approach to land use that didn't revolve around shared use and stewardship. The landscape that Thoreau observed was fundamentally marked in a particular way because of the commodity trade enacted through ships; perhaps

he wouldn't have thought of the land prior to European arrival as primitive if the native people hadn't preserved the land in the way that they were instructed to by the Creator as retold through ceremonies.

Works Cited:

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