

Indigenous Displacement in Nature and Society

The way society interacts with nature is heavily reliant on the way we humans experience and discuss this relationship. The first knowledge system that separates nature and society is language. Much like trees and plants, we have a way of communication that can be mutually beneficial for all parties. Through underground fungal networks known scientifically as mycorrhizal networks, trees, and fungus benefit from the knowledge they transfer to each other. Almost economically, in return for information, the trees allow the fungi to consume around thirty percent of the sugar that trees collect while photosynthesizing from sunlight. The sugar fuels the fungi, while they scrounge the soil for nitrogen, and phosphorus, which then goes full circle to the fungus being consumed by the trees. There is evidence that “mother trees” will pump sugar into their saplings that are too small to absorb any sunlight to photosynthesize. Researcher Wohlleben, while studying this network, found something unexpected, a dead stump of 300 years was still green with chlorophyll, the surrounding beeches were keeping it alive, by pumping sugar to it through the network. “When beeches do this, they remind me of elephants,” he says. “They are reluctant to abandon their dead, especially when it’s a big, old, revered matriarch.”¹

If we know that trees are sentient, that they nurture their young much in the way that we humans do, that they talk to other trees as well as other plant species, that they take care of their elderly, why does it seem that humans are hell bent on destroying them and their networks? The way that humans interact with their environment through society developed and changed over the thousands of years we have inhabited Earth, it is made of a million moving parts, much like the mycorrhizal network trees and fungi rely on. Sadly, our system of communication cannot be as harmonic as the one that connects the trees. In *Cheap Nature*, we learn of a Chichimec woman executed in New Spain, 1599 for inspiring her people with a vision of nature that contradicted

¹ Magazine, Smithsonian. “Do Trees Talk to Each Other?” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Mar. 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/>.

Indigenous Displacement in Nature and Society

the colonizers.² Her story is quite sad, and I encourage readers to invest themselves in her story and plight. For now, I will be discussing the contradictory knowledge system of language that, on one side, was far more dangerous than the other. For the Chichimec woman, whose name was not important enough for the conquistadors' paperworks it was said, "Her killers called her a witch. That is the name she may have used for herself, albeit without its colonial venom." Through this quote, we can understand more clearly how the same words can carry totally varied weight and meaning depending on the curator. This was also the beginning of the colonizers separating nature and society into hard-lined categories that oppose one another. Through this erasure of culture-by-colonization, linguistic alterations occurred ensuring that these cultures could never fully recover.

The word Savage is a perfect example of what effects colonization has on linguistics, and the power that these "new" words had to destroy groups of native people, and the way the world would view them. Our Chichimec woman was killed by a civilized society because her natural savagery broke its rules. As recently as 1330 (from the perspective of it being 1599), savage meant "intrepid, indomitable, valiant." That positive use faded by the end of the fifteenth century replaced with its modern one of, "in the state of nature, wild."³ In the middle sixteenth century, society took on a whole new meaning. It was not only now that you were an individual, a part of a whole or a group, but now as having a position in a "civilized" society, you are opposed to nature, to the wild. Around this time the New World was developing to what we are familiar with today, society was created through uncrossable lines drawn between it and nature. There was a boom in New World production by way of coercion of Indigenous and African labor. Where land

² Patel, Raj, and Jason W. Moore. "Cheap Nature." *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*, Verso Books, London, 2020.

³ Patel, Raj, and Jason W. Moore. "Cheap Nature." *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*, Verso Books, London, 2020.

Indigenous Displacement in Nature and Society

and mountains and trees once stood, in the minds of the colonizers they were nothing but dollar signs. In a kind of cyclical sickness, the small remaining populations of indigenous people today are being displaced further because of our attitude of nature as opposition to a civilized society. The kind of displacement that is occurring today on top of the other hardships these groups face, is **climate induced relocation**. In the Pacific Islands, they are seeing rates of sea level rise that is two to three times the global average. Fiji has a macabre but realistic list of the villages that may have to relocate due to inhabitable conditions, as of 2017, there were 47 on that list. One village already had to relocate, with it taking a toll on the elders. The people of Fiji love their ancestral lands and feel extremely attached, their word “vanua,” means “land” and “people” at once. It was extremely hard for everyone to leave behind this land, their loved ones were buried in that earth, even their umbilical cords, they tended to the gardens and believed in communally sharing the land.⁴ Modern English and capitalism will have you believe that these people are wasting the land, as they are not profiting from it. There is no other group of people that could be as easily displaced because of the outrage that would occur, but to this day the barbarous notion of civilization is that this is a natural evolution for these groups. That nature means nothing if it doesn't mean money. This fact is why we need to challenge our preconceived notions of these people and the words we use to describe them as well as nature and society. The most efficient way to save the Earth for everyone is to stop this degradation in its tracks as it is now devastating smaller groups of indigenous people. If we continue to allow the displacement of these people instead of finding the root of the problem, the devastation will become irreversible, and will only matter once those at the very top are affected. The climate change movement needs to attend to those most vulnerable to these ravaging effects.

⁴ Aguon, Julian. “To Hell With Drowning.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 3 Nov. 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/11/oceania-pacific-climate-change-stories/620570/>.

Indigenous Displacement in Nature and Society

I think the best way for Western cultures to reverse our toxic environment and mindsets would be to include more nature reliant skills building classes for our children in school. We never learn to interact or make use of our environment for the sake of the environment or ourselves. There are many natural herbs and plants that are known to be more efficient than Advil and Tylenol, with less strain being put on our kidneys and livers. Public schools have come to resemble a sort of prison with concrete courtyards in the middle and no classes based around nature, the synergos of us with it that makes living possible.

One final nail in the coffin of proving how detrimental language connotations can be to indigenous groups, is the way that native groups are seen as “savage,” and “natural.” They are seen as a fixture in nature, not as living alongside it. This also negates the fact that indigenous people haven't always been wholeheartedly on the side of “nature” but on the side of the longevity of their culture, for they have had to at times play the rules of capitalism to secure their cultures’ survival. This is not to say that indigenous people are not connected to the land, but saying so indefinitely creates more harm for them. To assume that all indigenous people revere the land as spiritual is severely negating other aspects of their culture while allowing them to become displaced from their homes. This stereotype is referred to as the “ecological indian.”⁵ Indigenous ecological movements have a lot of nuances, that once dissected the roots can be traced to their original displacement, and genocide. Native Americans have struggled to seek sovereignty and self determination as a means of decolonization, they have many issues they are seeking solutions for, and the environment is one. There are real human rights issues being debated that do not receive half as much sensationalization as the environmental issues. We have a long way to go when it comes to justice for the environment, and for those displaced in the

⁵ Curley, Andrew. “Beyond Environmentalism: Standing with Standing Rock.” *Standing with Standing Rock*, 2019, pp. 158–168., <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvr695pq.16>.

Indigenous Displacement in Nature and Society

name of the almighty dollar. If we begin to listen soon, hopefully those expected to be displaced by 2030 can remain on their sacred ancestral lands.

Indigenous Displacement in Nature and Society

Bibliography

Aguon, Julian. "To Hell With Drowning." The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 3 Nov. 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/11/oceania-pacific-climate-change-stories/620570/>.

Curley, Andrew. "Beyond Environmentalism: Standing with Standing Rock." Standing with Standing Rock, 2019, pp. 158–168., <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvr695pq.16>.

Magazine, Smithsonian. "Do Trees Talk to Each Other?" Smithsonian.com, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Mar. 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/>.

Patel, Raj, and Jason W. Moore. "Cheap Nature." A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet, Verso Books, London, 2020.