Teaching Unit Number 6 - Environmental Justice

Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE) - Environmental History
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This university-level teaching unit is designed to be easily scaled up or down regarding class time consumed, or difficulty, as appropriate for the individual course context. The material in this unit has a strict focus on Canada (British Columbia), though instructors in other locations are encouraged to improvise, using this module as a foundation, to insert a comparative element and make connections to other places or themes.

Learning goals.

- Introduce the concepts of hazard, risk, risk society, and environmental justice
- Contextualize the concept of environmental injustice in Canada
- Familiarize the student with archival sources that inform historical narratives of environmental injustice
- Encourage students to connect these concepts with their own experience of the world

This teaching unit is composed of six resources:

- An open source journal article, to be assigned as a reading
- Discussion questions focused on the reading and the video
- A contextual essay, around which instructors can build their own lectures, or share with Teaching Assistants working outside of their area of expertise
- An online streaming video from the National Film Board of Canada, which can be shown either in class or assigned to students as homework
- Primary sources, in this case photographs from the British Columbia Archives, and an archival video to be deployed as best suits the purposes of the instructor
- A glossary of "Canadian" terms and concepts, to support a non-Canadian, international audience

Resources:


2) Article Discussion Questions
Q. When former Premier W.A.C. Bennett looked at the Peace River, he saw a means to power a modern industrial society. Nature held utility as a resource, which he would
harness through the construction of a dam. His project, however, would interrupt pre-existing relationships between local residents and the river, and neglect the role of the river within a broader ecosystem. What were some of the negative and positive consequences of constructing the WAC Bennett Dam on the Peace River? How were they geographically distributed? Were the rewards worth the damages?

Q. The Peace-Athabasca Delta project group would, in future years, attempt to remedy some of the environmental effects of the dam. They intervened in an environmental management capacity by building more dams to try to counteract water level problems. Area residents were not satisfied by this intervention, as it did not extend to their human experience of the environmental impact. Environmental justice was partially served at one spatial extent, but not another. Tina Loo calls this "scales of environmental justice." What does she mean by the phrase "scales of environmental justice" and why is this multi-level approach important in understanding the broader environmental and social impacts?

Q. Loo underlines the importance of not only examining environmental justice within spatial terms, but also within historic ones. Her sense of history encompasses both human history and the deep history of the environment. Why is it important to have an historical understanding of present issues, as well as a sensitivity to geographical distributions? How does Loo understand these issues as related to the WAC Bennett Dam?

Q. Do some research of your own to see if there are any controversial, currently proposed megaprojects in British Columbia. Based on Loo's analysis of the WAC Bennett Dam's environmental consequences and her concept of scales of environmental justice, what would you advise the reviewing bodies of these projects to consider? Should the project proceed and, if so, on what terms?

Q. What role does history play in your understanding of the word "justice"?

3) Contextual Essay
What one understands as just is in part defined by the historical narratives that one chooses to tell. Told one way, from one point of view, and at a particular scale, a sequence of events might seem benign or innocuous. Told another way, from a different vantage point, those same events can acquire an entirely different meaning. Tina Loo's article, and in a more subtle way Magnus Isacsson's much earlier NFB documentary, both highlight the unequal or unjust distribution of risks across society.

Loo and Isacsson's shared point is that those who benefit the most from modernity inevitably bear the lightest risk burden. Others, who bear the greatest risks, benefit the least. In the article this uneven distribution is exemplified by the construction of a hydro dam, and in the NFB film, by uranium mining. To fully appreciate these cases, students need a good understanding of risk and society and of how these categories have changed in relation to each other through time.
As defined by the role of hazards and risk in daily life, influential German sociologist Ulrich Beck understands humanity to have passed through three distinct historical epochs.

First, in the *pre-modern era*, non-human hazards predominated. A hazard is a situation, such as an environmental extreme (flood, drought, tornado, earthquake, etc.) or an epidemic that can cause harm. Such dangerous situations are omnipresent, and do not necessarily strike particular individuals or groups within society. Further, the hazard's causes are external to society, finding genesis in fortune, fate, Nature, God's will or in an even earlier time, the gods. As such, no person can be held responsible for the calamity. Narratives about these events only include the concept of justice when deities are concerned.

Second, in the *modern, or classical urbanized industrial society*, human attempts to solve basic material needs by intervening in nature give rise to unintended human-made-risks. An example would be the risk of a traffic accident, arising from the modern convenience of automobiles. Risk is the exposure of something of value to loss via a hazard. The concept is a combination of a numerical probability that a harmful event will take place, and the magnitude of the resulting loss. Since these risks were particular problems that affected specific demographic groups in specific places and times (say, in this case drivers or pedestrians), people could act to alleviate these risks. In theory, knowledge of the probability of risky events and the likely consequences allowed people to insulate themselves from identified risks via private insurance initiatives, or via the state through public insurance and regulations.

The emergence of a third epoch (the *Risk Society, or the second modernity*) is in Ulrich Beck's view associated with exposure to invisible risks produced by modernization itself. Despite living longer, safer lives than any previous time in human history, we are increasingly concerned about risks that are larger, more complex and more uncertain than those experienced in the past. The obvious example is climate change. Contemporary risks are less and less able to be mitigated by nineteenth-century institutions like insurance or state regulation.

Much like earlier understandings of economic output (wealth), risk is not evenly distributed through society. Inhabitants of the Risk Society’s over-riding concern is not so much with the distribution of “goods,” such as wealth, but “bad” or “ilth” (the opposite of wealth) such as risk. In earlier eras a driving force of society could be summarized by the phrase “I am hungry!” In the Risk Society, the commonality of anxiety takes the place of the commonality of need: “I am afraid!” The wealth-oriented logic of distribution is replaced by a focus on avoiding risk.

Beck was putting the finishing touches on his book *The Risk Society* in 1986, the same year as the Soviet Chernobyl nuclear disaster. The magnitude of the inescapable spreading radioactive cloud prompted Beck to make the observation that “poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic.” By this he meant that a new set of human-made
disasters rendered previously significant social divisions less meaningful. In subsequent writings he has modified his view that new global risks affect us all equally. Beck's more recent, more nuanced position is that the new risks must be seen as both hierarchical and democratic. Hierarchical, since the poor cannot protect themselves against exposure as well as the rich. And democratic, since we are all, regardless of status, influenced by these global risks.

Assuming Beck's characterization of time, Tina Loo's article analyzes a classical industrial society, from the point of view of one writing in a Risk Society. Her narrative traces the consequences stemming from a state-sponsored megaproject. BC Hydro constructed the WAC Bennett dam on the Peace River to bring imagined progress to thousands of BC households. The project was an example of high modernism, a form of modernity characterized by an unflinching confidence in science and technology as means to reorder the social and natural world. Not unique to British Columbia, such projects were particularly prevalent in the mid to latter twentieth-century.¹

Using the global debate over climate change as her starting point, Loo points out that scholars have been exploring the link between politics and the environment for some time. The environmental justice literature “charts the unequal effects of urbanization and industrialization, and in the process argued that the risks associated with these changes were borne unequally.” Loo's goal, however, is to understand what is involved in rectifying environmental and social inequalities. She emphasizes the importance of temporal and spatial framings and the way that different ways of living with the river constructed the scales at which environmental change and inequality were perceived.

Supporting source: <http://archive.org/details/LooSiteC>

Additional Sources


4) Primary Sources
Unfortunately the BC Archives does not have permanent links to the pages that also contain metadata for the images, so we have provided the Call Numbers for each specific image suggested to ease the search.

BC Archives Call Number: I-28751.
<http://www.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca/cgi-bin/www2i/.visual/img_med/dir_28/i_28751.gif>

BC Archives Call Number: I-28758.
<http://www.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca/cgi-bin/www2i/.visual/img_med/dir_28/i_28758.gif>

“Photo, Peace River Dam Aerial View” (1966).
BC Archives Call Number: I-28763.
<http://www.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca/cgi-bin/www2i/.visual/img_med/dir_28/i_28763.gif>

“Peace River Dam aerial shows dam and the Peace River where the reservoir will fill” (1966).
BC Archives Call Number: I-68495
<http://www.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca/cgi-bin/www2i/.visual/img_med/dir_187/i_68495.gif>

“Peace River Dam Tourist Lookout” (1967).
BC Archives Call Number: I-28820
<http://www.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca/cgi-bin/www2i/.visual/img_med/dir_28/i_28820.gif>

5) Video Resources with Discussion Questions
_Uranium_, Magnus Isacsson (1990). Produced by the National Film Board, 47 min 59 s.
<http://www.nfb.ca/film/uranium/>

From the NFB description:
This documentary looks at the hazards of uranium mining in Canada. Toxic and radioactive waste pose environmental threats while the traditional economic and spiritual lives of the Aboriginal people who occupy this land have been violated. Given our limited knowledge of the associated risks, this film questions the validity of continuing the mining operations.

Q. Explore the possible tensions between the terms 'modernity' and 'First Nation'.

Q. Compare the voluntary risks shown in the film (smoking a cigarette while discussing the bioaccumulation of radio-nucleotides, and, a medical doctor cycling while not wearing a bicycle helmet) with the involuntary risks associated with uranium mining or dam construction.
Q. Both hydro and nuclear power are often suggested as an antidote to climate change. Knowing what you do now, from the article and the film, discuss the risks inherent in these solutions.

For classes with less time, there is also the shorter 11-minute film Clearing the Peace, produced by the BC Forest Service in 1970. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNPdgkzWM80>

6) Glossary
Ottawa: Located in eastern Ontario, this city is the capital of Canada.

Confederation: The term as it appears in the text refers to the relationships between the provincial and federal governments. More broadly, it refers to the process by which the federal Dominion of Canada was formed on July 1, 1867. The four provinces of Ontario, Québec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia comprised the initial federation, to be joined by other provinces and territories in later years. The term is also used to divide Canadian history into the pre-1867 (pre-Confederation) and post-Confederation periods.

BC Hydro: A Crown Corporation (in this particular case a provincially-owned electrical utility) responsible for providing "reliable power, at low cost, for generations." The electricity produced in British Columbia is generated overwhelmingly by hydropower.

Columbia River Treaty: A 1964 agreement between Canada and the United States regarding power generation and flood control on the Columbia River.

First Nations: The Aboriginal people of Canada who are neither Inuit nor Métis (of mixed First Nations and European heritage).

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Dr. David Brownstein, Klahanie Research Ltd. (http://www.klahanieresearch.ca/)
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National Film Board of Canada (https://www.nfb.ca/)
American Society for Environmental History (aseh.net)
Forest History Society (foresthistory.org)