NATIVE AMERICANS AND CULTURAL IMPACT ANALYSIS: THE PROPOSED NUCLEAR WASTE REPOSITORY AT HANFORD

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ABSTRACT

Beneath a surface patterning of legal, political, economic and other formal structures, Native American reservations and their tribes possess many culturally distinctive values and patterns of life. Generally it is this ancient underlying culture that Native American leaders wish to preserve and nourish. Their primary objective is tribal survival, and socioeconomic and cultural impact assessment theories and methods must reflect this objective. Conventional impact analysis rarely meets the needs of tribal leadership. Current, fragmented approaches must be replaced by integrative, holistic alternatives.

INTRODUCTION

Before 1970 tribes were of little interest to academics other than anthropologists and a handful of historians. For the past thirty years I have spent most of my research time alone on reservations with few other scholars in sight. With development of the cultural resource management movement among archaeologists things began to change. Even more change has followed the targeting of Native American lands for energy development such as we have seen in the Four Corners area.

A growing tide of economists, sociologists, and others interested in the study of socioeconomic impacts has become common on reservations. Often such individuals have become conversant with such matters as Indian self-determination, tribal sovereignty, and treaty rights. Despite this, I have seen little modification in their approaches to the study of cultural impacts of energy related development. The same theoretical and methodological constructs are being proposed for the study of Native Americans that we have seen employed on other so-called rural populations of the United States. In fact, I have been assured that Indians are merely another rural people, much like other United States subcultures who live close to the land. Needless to say, this intellectual assimilation of Native Americans tends to obliterate their many distinctive features including tribalism, languages, religions, and kinship systems, and especially their unique legal and political status in the United States. Nevertheless members of this new wave of social scientists have explained to me that Native Americans are like a rural proletariat and well suited to conventional socioeconomic impact analysis. Coupled with this is additional intellectual baggage such that Native Americans are characterized by social disintegration and anomie, that they are undergoing assimilation, and that they occupy the lower strata of United States society. By contrast certain economists are busily converting familiar tribal values and practices into economic variables. In this process distinctive cultural patterns quickly become opportunities for economic compensation of impacts. Meanwhile an imposing community of archaeologists is converting reservations and tribes into cultural resources needing their protection and expert attention. Obviously, there is widespread confusion and fragmentation among these approaches. Perhaps the principal question is whether the impacts of energy projects among Native Americans are to be assessed in terms of culturally familiar values and holistic approaches, or in highly fragmented terms derived from the exotic approaches being introduced by this wave of new experts.

The question of how best to study the impacts of energy developments on Native Americans is quickly becoming a confrontation of disciplines as well as bureaucracies. D.O.E., E.P.A., B.I.A., U.S.F.S., N.P.S., and their associated sociologists, economists, archaeologists, cultural anthropologists, and others are competing for intellectual and administrative dominance in this expanding sector for application of the social sciences. We are witness to conflicting claims of expertise and authority as each group advances its conventional paradigms for analysis of impacts. It appears that the interests and views of Native Americans are of secondary importance in this confrontation. If my remarks are critical, it is because I see the fragmentation and confrontation as unproductive, even if it is inevitable.

I am sure that few social scientists believe that conventional socioeconomic impact theories and methodologies designed for the modern United States can be successfully used in tribal or reservation settings. Historically, anthropologists have conducted impact studies as merely another form of the study of cultural contact among Native Americans. They have studied this process under various rubrics including acculturation, diffusion, and directed cultural change. Typically they have also studied this process in settings where Euroamericans have been the dominant party. In such settings Euroamericans have initiated changes with resultant impacts on Native Americans that have most often been advocated as examples of social and economic progress. From the point of view of most Native Americans of the Northwest, the development of a high level nuclear waste disposal site (BWIP) at Hanford, Washington is not a unique event. It is part of a long historical chain of major projects in the Columbia Basin involving agriculture, mining, logging, railroads, highways, hydroelectric dams, urbanization, and industrialization. Resultant impacts on Native Americans have been environmental degradation, desecration of sacred geography, and exclusion from customary uses of environmental resources and geographical areas they believed were protected by solemn treaties negotiated between them

and the United States beginning in 1855. Of fundamental importance is the well known fact that they have not normally participated in the economic growth resulting from such projects. Given this history, many Native American leaders of the Northwest have come to regard the Hanford BWIP as a supreme insult to the natural environment and a possibly lethal threat to their ultimate survival as tribes and as human beings. It must be remembered that tribal leaders of the Northwest view the proposed Hanford BWIP from a tribal perspective that may be more than 10,000 years old.

For most tribal leaders, mitigation of impacts is not the only suitable goal for tribally-sponsored impact analyses of the proposed Hanford BWIP. A more suitable objective may be prevention of the project. In this context social scientists will be called on to advocate tribal objectives. From the perspective of thirty years experience as an ethnographer and applied anthropologist, I believe cultural impact analysis for the tribes will necessarily entail advocacy of tribal goals and participation as expert witnesses in negotiation and litigation. It is also difficult to imagine that social scientists working for the Department of Energy can employ the same methods or produce the same results as those who work for the tribes. I must disagree with those social scientists who would argue that cultural impact analysis in this context must be a politically neutral and objective exercise with primary goals of identifying impacts and proposing appropriate mitigation. Instead, I would argue that this is an adversarial setting in which the tribes' historical experience is driving them to question the golden project spinoffs promised by the federal government and its negotiators. For many tribal leaders the possible poisoning of the earth itself by further radioactive leakage from Hanford far outweighs the promised economic advantages of this project. Such leaders are intimately familiar with the unanticipated outcomes of project scenarios presented by previous federal technocrats with great authority and heavy credentials. They have witnessed many such unanticipated outcomes in the hydroelectric development of the Columbia River and its tributaries. I must emphasize here that for most tribal leaders, the primary goal of tribal government is tribal survival. However obvious this may be, the primary goal is not the mitigation of impacts from federal energy projects. The prospect of permanent, wholesale withdrawal of lands and resources from tribal access and use at Hanford, and the weakening of reserved treaty rights that will come from this project, pose a serious challenge to tribal survival in the Columbia Basin. Until such time as cultural impact analysts are ready to deal with such issues from the perspective of tribal leaders, the affected tribes will not be well served by our research. It can be argued that cultural, socioeconomic, and other impact analysis will assist the tribes little in their struggle to resist the proposed permanent alterations of their ancestral homelands. This is true because impact mitigation, rather than project prevention, has been the conventional goal of most impact studies. Unless we as social scientists develop approaches compatible with tribal goals, we cannot legitimately expect to be welcomed by tribal leaders. Tribal leaders are well aware that such impact studies by social scientists have customarily been used by powerful groups in government and commerce to justify implementation of unpopular and often destructive projects widely opposed by tribes.

Conclusions

1. Tribal leaders are searching for approaches to impact analysis that are compatible with their goals.

2. Tribal impact analysis methodologies are currently fragmented and confused by competing social science disciplines. More integrated, holistic methodologies are needed, ones suited to the unique features of reservations and tribes.

3. Prior experience has shown tribal leaders that they have much to fear, not only from the unintended and unanticipated consequences of such projects, but even from socioeconomic and cultural impact analysis by social scientists. Project implementation through impact mitigation has been an all too familiar outcome of impact analysis by social scientists of energy projects affecting Native Americans.

4. Unless we develop suitable approaches to tribal socioeconomic and cultural impact analysis, ones that recognize the adversarial nature of the situation, we shall most probably fail in our ethical obligation to protect reservations, tribes, and their members.