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Aerial photo of Clayoquot Sound.
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Twenty years after the protest, what we learned from Clayoquot Sound

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Clayoquot Sound, home of the Nuu-chah-nulth people, is a visually stunning area on the west side of Vancouver Island; there one sees misty mountains, fiords, inlets, coastlines forested with giant trees, and islands adjacent to the Pacific Ocean. Not to mention orcas, humpback whales, bears, wolves, sea lions, eagles and so on. The Sound contains some of the last remaining ancient temperate rainforests that have been relatively untouched by industrial logging. Some of the trees were seedlings many centuries before Europeans settled in North America. Clayoquot Sound is an important site for biodiversity, and for traditional resources for the Nuu-chah-nulth, and in 2000 was designated a biosphere reserve by UNESCO.

Almost exactly twenty years ago, The Globe and Mail contained a headline on its front page entitled “Taking a stand for the Sound. B.C. protesters risk jail terms.” The Clayoquot Sound protests of 1993 received national and international media attention from the likes of the New York Times and CNN as well as The Globe and other Canadian media outlets. It was visited by international celebrities such as Robert Kennedy Jr., and rock group Midnight Oil. It was a significant historical time, and on this anniversary it is worth revisiting some of the events and their implications.

In the early 1990s, a conflict erupted over logging in Clayoquot Sound. The dispute was ostensibly about the potential logging of pristine rainforests. Environmental groups engaged in a variety of different tactics in order to raise awareness of the issues, attempted to sway public opinion, and to influence government decision makers.

This campaign culminated in 1993 with more than 850 people being arrested for engaging in civil disobedience – namely, blockading logging roads leading into the Clayoquot Sound region. This episode marked the largest instance of civil disobedience in Canadian history. One of the leaders of the protests, Tzeporah Berman, was jailed and charged with 857 counts of criminal aiding and abetting. In the interim, most of the contested land in Clayoquot Sound has remained unlogged: seemingly a testament to the success of the campaign.

In recent years, academic social movement scholars have become interested in trying to assess the causes and consequences of social movement mobilizations and campaigns. While this poses some challenges, it is useful to reflect back on the Clayoquot case.

Campaigns to protect old growth in other parts of B.C. had been going on before the Clayoquot Summer. Local Aboriginal groups and the Friends of Clayoquot Sound had launched various blockades and other types of protest over logging dating back a number of years. Also, the wider environmental movement was contesting the logging of old growth forests in a number of other areas at the time. (Some key ENGOs included the Sierra Club, Wilderness Committee, and Greenpeace – amongst others.)

A number of specific factors probably played a role in producing the scale of the Clayoquot event. A starting point is the outrage that many felt about potential logging in this particular location coupled with the fact that thousands (and perhaps millions of) Canadians had visited this area as vacationers and tourists – so it was a more familiar region to the average Canadian than say an obscure portion of the boreal forest.

Other factors also likely played roles, such as urbanization, changes in the occupational structure, and associated changes in values. Support for the environmental movement was in part a function of changes in values, at the same time, the movement worked hard at changing societal values.

The fact that a seemingly widespread cross-section of the population was seen (on T.V., and in the print media) to be willing to risk arrest and criminal records for what they perceived was a moral cause resonated with many people. Images showed the ages of the protesters ranging from youth to octogenarians.

Before to the "1990s," forestry was "king" in B.C., and the forest industry primarily viewed forests as repositories of timber, and to a lesser extent, as places for recreation. The environmental movement effectively changed the ways in which many non-Aboriginals saw forests – including increasing the perceived importance of ecology and biodiversity, health, aesthetics, culture, and spirituality.

Whether or not a particular social movement outcome is "good" or "bad" is to some extent in the eyes of the beholder. The tentative protection of substantial areas of oldgrowth forests and the related ecological benefits, was, of course, an obvious and explicit positive outcome. But there were a number of other, perhaps less subtle outcomes.

As documented by film maker Shelley Wine, Clayoquot marked the rise of a strong core of women environmental leaders. While there were a number of strong female environmental leaders working in B.C. as well elsewhere in Canada before Clayoquot, this event led to the rise in prominence of Valerie Langer and Tzeporah Berman (initially both with Friends of Clayoquot Sound), the two main organizers of the campaign. Both have since gone on to do work with a number of other environmental organizations (such as Greenpeace and Forest Ethics, amongst others). A number of other women also played important roles in the Clayoquot campaign.

Environmentalists learned and developed a number of tactics and strategies that would be implemented in subsequent campaigns. One was that local/domestic protest based campaigns can have somewhat limited and diminishing returns – thus they turned to a hugely successful markets campaign in Europe and the United States. Environmentalists also learned that launching campaigns in a valley by valley fashion was not likely to be enough to ensure sustainability, and thus they subsequently launched campaigns with broader geographical and ecological scopes: such as the Great Bear Rainforest, the Boreal Forest campaigns.

Forests companies were outflanked by environmentalists, and in the long run became more willing to co-operate with the environmental movement. These dynamics played a role in the Great Bear Rainforest Agreement, and in other initiatives such as forest certification movement.

A full examination of the role of First Nations in these dynamics is complicated and beyond the scope of this essay. At times First Nations allied themselves with the environmental movement, and at others with the forest industry. One of the end results of the Clayoquot conflict was the creation of a First Nations owned

forestry company working in the area, Iisaak, who received support from most of the environmental groups involved in the conflict. (The company started out as a joint-venture between MacMillan Bloedel and the Nuu-chah-nulth.)

From the perspective of some in the forest industry, there were some negative consequences of the Clayoquot protests. Certainly there was some loss of local jobs in the forest industry; though, overall, subsequent job losses in the industry in B.C. were arguably mostly due to mechanization, trade agreements, and global economic processes rather than environmental protection.

The Clayoquot conflict also contributed to the stigmatization of forestry. While it was also likely part of a broader trend, enrollments in traditional forestry undergraduate programs (including at UBC) started plummeting a few years after the protests. (During this period a number of forestry schools closed down, or re-branded themselves with new monikers.) At the same time new "more conservation oriented" university undergraduate programs grew (such as in the Faculty of Forestry at UBC); and in contrast to the pattern of male domination of traditional forestry programs and the forest industry more generally, female students became the majority of students in these new programs. (Perhaps in part as a function of the inspiration provided by the strong women environmental leaders in B.C.)

While these events are related to larger trends, it seems likely that the Clayoquot protests had some effect on them in the B.C. context.

Many individuals in forestry communities (like Port Alberni) were personally effected by the protests. For example, a survey respondent in one my studies said: "The year of the Clayoquot Protest was one of the most unpleasant in my life. The self righteous rhetoric and preaching from urban and European environmental missionaries was oppressive. The emotional polarization on the "save our trees" issue even impacted on long term friendships. …"

In terms of more general environmental politics, Clayoquot and its aftermath put considerable strain on the relationship between the environmental movement and the provincial NDP. Though the NDP won an election after the Clayoquot protests, and while it was not the deciding factor in Gordon Campbell's election as Liberal premier in 2001, growing discontent amongst environmentalists with the NDP's handling of forestry and other environmental issues probably played a role in the pummeling that the provincial NDP experienced at the ballot box in the 2000s.

As the twentieth anniversary of the Clayoquot Summer approaches, it might be worth observing that a number of the actors who cut their teeth in the Clayoquot protests and related campaigns against clearcut logging of old growth forests have now dedicated themselves to combating climate change. Petroleum industry: look out! Twenty years ago Tzeporah Berman was criminally charged with aiding and abetting. Several years later, then-B.C. premier Glen Clark declared the environmental movement "enemies of B.C." This past spring, Ms. Berman was awarded an honorary doctorate at a ceremony at UBC where President Stephen Toope stated: "It is in the context of this university's commitment to sustainability and global leadership that I am honoured to cite the transformational contributions of Ms. Tzeporah Berman." As Bob Dylan once said, "the times they are a-changin'".

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