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*“We never know the worth of water till the well is dry.”* Thomas Fuller, 1732

Modern treatments of urban development from an environmentalist perspective tend to emphasize the role of man’s greed in resource extraction and ecosystem exploitation. Such approaches tend to minimize or ignore the other elements that may have contributed to prevailing attitudes of each time period. In this paper, I will argue that the development ethic of the Pacific Northwest in the early 20th century, perhaps in contrast to more recent times, was fueled not only by manifest destiny and laissez-faire capitalism, but also by an underestimation of the fragility of the external environment, and a lack of awareness of man’s ability to meaningfully impact it. The implications of this analysis are that cultural motivations are influenced as much by blind optimism as by avarice, and that environmental research and education have a vital role to play in the operation of consistently profitable businesses.

Many contemporary historical accounts of turn-of-the-nineteenth-century events understandably focus on the environmental impacts. Kathryn Morse’s The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush is an example. Morse discusses the effects of placer mining on the Klondike ecosystem (91). Her account, while detailed and comprehensive, focuses purely on profit as a motivation, and does not explore the wider context in which such environmental devastation might be reasonably justified. The question must be asked: under what conditions could people justify despoiling the environments in which they found themselves? Is profit alone sufficient explanation?

Primary sources of the early 20th century appear to present a more complex picture. In many of these sources, the unspoiled environment is portrayed as chaotic, savage, mysterious and nearly infinite, while man is portrayed as the civilizing influence, the bringer of order. Seattle executive George H. Emerson captured the developmental spirit of the times with ebullient, and occasionally fantastical, descriptions of urban construction. “We say but the word BUILD, a word thrown into space as by the wireless telegraph, to be heard in all directions and repeated by all stations until it passes through architects, contractors, factories, mines, woods and to those who drill, pick, and shovel, axe and saw, gather from Mother Earth the crude material” (1). Nature, the provider of the “crude material”, is not only made to be exploited, but is also apparently immune to the effects of the exploitation. Cities and towns, man’s contribution to the natural world, are perceived as an consequence-free improvement on nature’s designs.

Further examples of this conquest-driven approach to natural resources are not hard to find; indeed, they are hard to avoid. A memorable period image shows 35 men, women, and children unselfconsciously posed on top of a massive cedar stump; another shows an Aloha, WA sawmill, crammed full of logs, constructed in the heart of a still-thriving virgin forest. The body language of the workers, combined with the prevalence of similar images, suggests that concerns about environmental fragility were rare. It seems reasonable to presume that the untapped condition of the region, combined with the scale of the bounty, helped to lull timber, mining, and other extractive industry concerns into slumber. However, even if the industries themselves had some idea of the finite quantities of available raw materials, scientific and regulatory voices of the period appear to have been almost completely silent, probably for the same reasons. Nature, designed by God to provide resources to man, was reaffirming the wisdom of Manifest Destiny, yielding apparently endless bounty for the good of capital expansion.

Nature-as-bottomless-cornucopia is a common theme in primary sources of the period. A 1907 report on salmon canning and available labor contains a table showing wildly-variable annual run tonnage, noting that scientists “have endeavored in vain to discover the reason for the phenomenon” (6). Similarly, a 1918 Seattle Chamber of Commerce pamphlet promoting Alaskan development extensively details the various raw materials recently extracted from “a frontier land of vast resources” (1), encouraging developers to cash in on the unprecedented reserves of the state. Extractive industries such as gold, antimony, and tin are highly emphasized. Although such industries were known, even at the time, to drive cycles of both boom and bust, there appears to have been enough genuine optimism in the resources of the state (laid dramatically, in an accompanying graphic, across 15 states in the contiguous US) to allow imaginations to wander. In contrast, eco-tourism, Alaska’s second-biggest industry today, receives only a few general words (2007 Alaska Economic Trends).

Seemingly limitless optimism regarding the ability of the environment to survive any man-made action seems to have been a recurring theme of the time period. One manifestation on this phenomenon was the act of river straightening. In one instance, multiple miles of the Duwamish River were dredged and redirected, destroying hundreds of acres of wetland habitat. Reclaimed land, previously “uninhabitable by anything but fish and water fowl”, was made useful to man (Duwamish Valley News). Conspicuously absent is any discussion of the effects of the loss of wetlands – conspicuous because of the effects that the loss of salmon hatchling habitat was to have on the fishing industry. Hiram M. Chittenden’s description of lowering the water level of Lake Washington takes a similar approach, discussing land reclamation, industrial development, and recreational boating while omitting any potential effects on fish or wildlife.

The lack of environmental awareness, whether caused by naïveté or willful blindness, did not last forever. By 1925, federal regulations restricting the overall salmon take had been established (Seattle Chamber of Commerce, Alaska Division, p. 2), indicating that the dangers of overfishing were well understood. Restrictions on mining waste and habitat destruction appear less frequently in the records of the twenties. This is perhaps understandable: the field of environmental science did not emerge as a discipline capable of commanding political clout until the 1960s. Even as recently as 2003, large-scale salmon die-off on the Klamath River was found to have been caused by lower water levels, diverted for irrigation purposes (San Francisco Chronicle). This modern example illustrates both the complexity of man’s interaction with his environment and the issues that arise when parties with conflicting interests compete over resources.

With the predictive benefits of modern science and greater overall understanding of the complex interworkings of ecosystems, it is difficult to imagine how any modern corporation could fail to assess the its environmental impact. A hundred years ago, however, it seems far more feasible. ‘Klondike fever’, pan-nationalism fueled by international expositions, a vivid sense of intercontinental inevitability and the overwhelming vastness of the unspoiled Pacific Northwest and Northwest territories, coupled with the ideology of capitalism and a deep trust in man’s right and proper place astride the universe, all make it more than likely that the biggest sin of our forefathers was not greed, but innocence. This conclusion reemphasizes the central point: a genuine understanding of the gestalt, through prolonged, unbiased research and public education, is a vital component to any commercial endeavor. Ultimately, sustainability ensures maximum profitability.

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