

Comment on Eugene S. Hunn, Darryll Johnson, Priscilla Russell and Thomas Thornton; *Huna Tlingit Traditional Environmental Knowledge, Conservation, and the Management of a "Wilderness Park"*

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Postmodernists excused, most ethnographers would agree that indigenous people often have good knowledge of their environments. From my reading, those of us identified in the target paper as contributing to the 'New Orthodoxy' do not question TEK per se. We are more interested, however, in the question of what indigenous people *do* with their knowledge. While Hunn et al. provide some evidence that the Huna have a folk understanding of Glaucous-winged Gull nesting biology, it does not follow that Huna will necessarily use their knowledge to conserve the gull populations. I have seen both Piro bow hunters in Peru and Wana blowgun hunters in Indonesia use an intimate understanding of animal alarm calls to lure entire social groups of prey toward a wounded conspecific, where the group members were subsequently killed one by one (tamarins in Peru, birds in Indonesia). Whether or not foragers work to conserve their prey remains an

empirical question regardless of how much they know about their resources.

Hunn et al. also criticize the "New Orthodoxy" for the view that people in small-scale subsistence economies are unlikely to practice conservation. This characterization is correct as far as it goes, but it ignores the subtleties of a complex argument. It is not accurate to say that the 'New Orthodoxy' discounts the *capacity* of indigenous people to conserve, as the authors state in their abstract. Smith and Wishnie (2000) and Alvard (1998) clearly argue that while conservation is not predicted to be widespread in small-scale subsistence economies, there are also conditions that favor it. Research is moving from simple myth debunking to sophisticated analyses aimed at understanding the contexts that do and do not favor conservation. For example, my colleague, Lawrence Kuznar, and I argue that animal husbandry is a good example of nascent resource conservation and that it arose historically in contexts that favor conservation in general

(Alvard and Kuznar 2001). Interestingly, Hunn et al. refer to the Huna egg harvesting strategy as a form of animal husbandry.

A regularly misunderstood point is that not all sustainable harvesting is evidence of conservation. Thus, although the authors argue that the Huna have functioned effectively for millennia, this is *not* evidence that the Huna have done so by conserving their resources. The authors have a hard time grasping this idea when they rhetorically ask, "Is one therefore not a conservationist for not conserving a resource that is abundant relative to the demands placed on it?" The answer is yes; one is not necessarily a conservationist. In terms of the applied issues, one may shrug and argue that if people are unlikely to over exploit because of limited technology or low consumer demand then access to the resource should be granted. This might be reasonable, but the theoretical question of conservation is left begging.

Elsewhere I have described conservation as resource use reduced to a level below what would be fitness-maximizing in the short-term and designed to encourage long-term, sustainable benefits in the future (Alvard 1998). Given this definition, I view Huna selective egg harvesting as a potential case of conservation. Unfortunately, the contexts of the foraging trips are not presented in enough detail to conclude with any satisfaction one way or the other. Readers are led to believe that Huna foragers understood that removing 'fresh' eggs would induce the birds to lay more. The authors state that it is a self-conscious application of TEK to produce a sustainable yield. This interpretation is not apparent given the quotes presented in the text. Not

one quote indicates awareness that the harvesting strategy causes the gulls to continue laying. I should be clear though, even such a strategy would only indicate that the foragers were *managing* the population, perhaps with the goal to conserve it, perhaps with the goal of maximizing short-term returns.

A designation of conservation depends not on why the 'fresh' eggs were taken but rather on why the embryonic eggs were left behind. It is clear that 'fresh eggs' were preferred to ones with embryos. Most of the narratives indicate that people left behind eggs that were more likely to contain embryos. Why the foragers ignored embryonic eggs is the interesting question, especially for anyone who has been to the Philippines and partaken in the ubiquitous and nutritious snack called *balut* (embryonic duck). If Huna regularly refrained from harvesting embryonic eggs that they might have otherwise consumed in order to maintain the gull population over the long-term, then I am willing to consider the label conservation. Only one quote [from Sam Hanlon] suggests this strategy. Conversely, if embryonic eggs were avoided because they were less edible, contained difficult to digest feathers or bones, or were more costly to process, for example, conservation is less a possibility. The paper offers no clear discussion concerning why these eggs were ignored.

Finally, the paper is empirically weak. The bulk of the data is limited to narratives from a number of Huna 'consultants'. Besides the obvious problems associated with this approach, the issue may be particularly problematic in this case. While I understand and am

sympathetic to the desire to involve Huna in the research, I am sure the authors appreciate the conflict of interests involved in relying on the accounts of people who have vested interests in the outcome of the research. The authors write that egg harvesting “defines who the Huna are

as a people” and is “the touchstone of Huna identity”. It is surely in the best interests of the consultants to report a benign harvest strategy and to downplay more destructive methods in order to gain access to Glacier Bay National Park.

## References

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