Terraforming and monumentality as long-term social practice in the Salish Sea region of the Northwest Coast of North America

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Abstract

The archaeological record of hunter-gatherer-fishers in the southern Gulf Islands of the Northwest Coast provides evidence of large-scale construction of shell mounds and ridges, houses and villages, production features, defensive earthworks and burial mounds and cairns. Landscapes were terraformed — meaning anthropogenically constructed, modified and maintained — in service of multiple ends. These practices had significant implications for the construction of place, community, social inequalities and political dynamics over the long term. We document the scope of landscape construction and terraforming in the archaeological record of the Salish Sea, focusing on its spatial, temporal and social elements in the southern Gulf Islands. Monumental constructions were widespread in the area, in most cases emerging in an iterative manner over the past 5000 years. However, over the last 1500 years, more short-term and larger-scale episodes of construction are evident, potentially connected with increased sociopolitical inequalities and their contestation. Our overarching objective is to consider how monumentality and terraforming have shaped Coast Salish histories, and better establish how monumentality articulated with the reproduction of society.

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The Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast are composed of many nations and tribal affiliations, each with distinctive cultural and political identities, but they share certain beliefs, traditions and practices, such as the centrality of salmon as a resource and spiritual symbol, and many cultivation and subsistence practices. The term Northwest Coast or North West Coast is used in anthropology to refer to the groups of Indigenous people residing along the coast of what is now called Northwest Coast Indian, member of any of the Native American peoples of the Pacific coast from the southern Alaska border to northwestern California. The Coast Salish–Chinook province extended south to the central coast of Oregon and includes the Makah, Chinook, Tillamook, Siuslaw, and others. The northwestern California province includes the Athabaskan-speaking Tututni-Tolowa as well as the Karok, Yurok, Wiyot, and Hupa. Historically, the Northwest Coast people inhabited a narrow belt of North American Pacific coastland and offshore islands from the southern border of Alaska to northwestern California. Read about the Pacific Northwest, the region of the northwestern United States including the states of Oregon and Washington and part of Idaho. Ancient systems of mariculture were foundations of social-ecological systems of many coastal Indigenous Peoples. Clam gardens, traditional mariculture features located within the intertidal zone along the Northwest Coast of North America, are composed of a rock wall positioned at the low tide mark and a flattened terrace on the landward side of the wall. Because these features are largely composed of rock and sediment, and have complex formation histories, they can be difficult to age. Such dating programs are the foundation for understanding the long-term development of traditional marine management practices and how they are situated in broader social-ecological systems. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Resistance to centralization in the Coast Salish region of the Pacific Northwest Coast, Current anthropology 53(5), 547–87. Arkush, E., 2012: Comment on: Anarchism and the archaeology of anarchic societies. Resistance to centralization in the Coast Salish Region of the Pacific Northwest Coast, by Angelbeck, B. and Grier, C., Current anthropology 53(5), 569–70. Grier, C., Angelbeck, B. and McLay, E., 2017: Terraforming and monumentality as long-term social practice in the Salish Sea region of the Northwest Coast of North America, Hunter gatherer research 3(1), 107–32. Grier, C., and Schwadron, M., 2017: Terraforming and monumentality in hunter-gatherer-fisher societies, Hunter gatherer research 3(1), 3–8. The United States of America, due to its immense size and diverse heritage, has one of the most complex cultural identities in the world. Millions of immigrants from all over the globe have journeyed to America since the Europeans discovered and colonised the land back in the 17th and 18th centuries. The blending of cultural backgrounds and ethnicities in America led to the country becoming known as a “melting pot.” As the third largest country in both area and population, America's size has enabled the formation of subcultures within the country. These subcultures are often geographical as a