

Aaron Nichols

Cultural Landscapes

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### Nisqually Delta

Upon arrival at the Nisqually tidal wetlands I was immediately hit with the smell of low tide. I don't think it actually was low tide, but I definitely could tell that the saltwater of the ocean was present. Yellow grasses and reeds grow from the water, providing fish with habitat and protection from predators. Bald Eagles circled the air above looking for a meal in the marshy ground below. Occasionally a number of small birds would all spontaneously burst from the grasses and zoom around in unison in what appears to be a well-choreographed dance routine before settling back down together. The area is surprisingly full of wildlife considering the estuary's proximity to Interstate 5, which is just about the only thing that can be heard.

The Nisqually delta is an example of a type of conservation that is usually not seen. Most of the time when I think of conservation I think of national parks and nature reserves, chunks of land that are set aside to be maintained as "natural areas". The Nisqually delta was once a productive farm, and to turn it into land that could be the home for many different species of wildlife the dikes were removed and the tide came in, that's about it. One of the most remarkable things is the amount of time that it took for the land to return to its natural state. In the period of just a few years plants had grown back and animals were starting to return to the habitat.

Most of the forces that have altered the Nisqually delta are physical forces, such as the building and removing of dikes to prevent the tidewater from coming in. But these physical forces are pushed by cultural forces. When the Natives lived on the land they were mostly

hunters and gatherers that lived off the land and did not alter it much. Using the land in this manner was part of the native's culture. However, using the land for farming and agriculture is part of a different cultural force. When the settlers and pioneers came to the area they brought their traditions and ideals with them, including their methods of farming. Eventually the Euro-Americans were the most prevalent cultural force that occupied the area, and was very visible in how the land had been transformed for their uses. The building of dikes had turned estuaries into farms. Now the people that live in the area prefer to use the land for personal enjoyment and bird watching, another example of how cultural implications alter the land.

The Nisqually Wildlife Refuge is the product of multiple groups working together in order to achieve a common goal and an example of how ordinary people can empower themselves to take on situations that may seem beyond them. Plans had been made to turn the area into either a port for Tacoma or a landfill for Seattle, but the people who lived nearby worked with one another to make the land a protected area. The Nisqually people that live nearby have also worked with the U.S. government in order to expand the nature reserve and restore the habitats for the salmon and waterfowl. Unfortunately, usually the native tribes and the U.S. government seem to be working against one another, or at least they have conflicting agendas as was seen in the Yakama reservation. But in this case and in the situation in the book Frank's Landing, the Indians and government worked together in order to achieve positive changes.

Although the Nisqually Delta and wetlands will probably never be exactly as they were before they were converted to farmland, they demonstrate an important lesson. Conservation does not have to just be setting land aside, it can be converting land back to its original state, and it can work.