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RECLAIMING RURAL CHARACTER: CONSERVATION, CONFLICT, AND THE  
NOSTALGIC LANDSCAPES OF ORCAS ISLAND, WASHINGTON

By

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David McDermott Hughes

and approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Reclaiming Rural Character: Conservation, Conflict, and the

Nostalgic Landscapes of Orcas Island, Washington

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This dissertation takes an ethnographic approach to examining the meanings of rural character on Orcas Island, in San Juan County, Washington. In spite of the challenges facing productive agriculture in the county, achieving rural character remains the stated goal of county planning efforts, environmental groups, affordable housing advocates, and private landowners. Drawing from the anthropology of landscape, political ecology, and critical readings of memory and history, this project examines the definitions of rurality in a place where farming and other types of labor have been overshadowed by real estate speculation and tourism. More broadly, this work argues that land management is a highly subjective process that engages aesthetic preferences, popular ecological models, cultural conceptions of property, and concerns with labor and affordability. In particular, looking at conservation easements can highlight the ways in which nostalgic longings for particular landscapes can be elevated to the level of political economic conflict, in which only certain individuals are able to shape the land according to personally or culturally shared visions.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction: “These Rural Islands”

*WE THE PEOPLE of San Juan County recognize that these rural islands are an extraordinary treasure of natural beauty and abundance, and that independence, privacy and personal freedom are values prized by islanders. Being a diverse people bound together by these shared values, we declare our commitment to work towards this vision of the San Juan Islands in 2020 A.D. (San Juan County 2002).*

In 1993, San Juan County’s Board of County Commissioners approved the above Vision Statement created by the county’s citizens to be placed at the beginning of the Comprehensive Plan, the document that provides a long range framework for the future of growth, land use, and expenditures in the island county. Because the islands are a special place—an “extraordinary treasure”—their futures cannot be left to chance or become the products of inaction. Implicit in the need for a “commitment to work towards this vision” is the notion that such an endpoint is not inevitable—that there are, in fact, other ways for the islands to be and to become. The quote, then, suggests the malleability of place itself, raising questions regarding the processes through which such places are imagined, contested, and ultimately built.

While themes including rural character, natural beauty, and independence might be commonly held by islanders, a more nuanced look at these “shared values” shows that they are not uniformly produced or experienced, and that they in fact have engendered ongoing debates about the social, economic, and environmental trajectory the landscape will take in the future. Islanders seek to reclaim the rural of their imaginations, and conflicting notions of what constitutes an ideal landscape have only led to increasing interest in the islands’ fate. Landscapes gain meaning not just through their physicality, but as the locus of people’s values, memories, and culture. Thus, conflicts over

landscape are not just about resource use or outright ownership, but they also invoke deep seated emotional ties to a place and its associated histories. The narratives that emerge as dominant, such as the vision statement above, are the products of a political economic process much like the one that determines resource access itself. In other words, political economic considerations do not just influence land ownership and use, but also shape the processes through which some subjective experiences with the physical landscape will persist while others will be lost. Tools like conservation easements, for example, do not just preserve physical landscape features like open fields or stands of trees, but are ways of asserting and solidifying the symbols of emotional attachments and visions of a place.<sup>1</sup>

On Orcas Island, I maintain that the “values prized by islanders” are largely based upon a shared nostalgia for particular rural historical imaginaries, employing lessons from the past to inform directions for the present and future. Anthropologists (Stewart and Strathern 2003, Milton 1996, Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995, Crumley 1994, Bender 1993) have considered the cultural meanings associated with landscape and nature, while geographers too (Sauer 1996, Daniels 1996, Neumann 1998, Katz 1998, Watts 1998, Cosgrove and Daniels 1988) have examined the ways in which landscapes and nature are physical forms that take on ideological and cultural meanings. I argue for the need to incorporate a “structure of feeling” into these political economic discussions of land use, proposing that ethnographic examinations of emotive responses to landscapes are particularly useful for understanding land management and conservation efforts.

Combining the above disciplinary perspectives with those of writer and literary critic

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<sup>1</sup> Conservation easements are legally binding conditions that the landowner and a land trust organization add to the property’s deed, assuring that future owners must conserve certain ecological features or prohibit specified developments in perpetuity.

Raymond Williams (1973, 1), who examines the ways in which the “country” as both word and land “stand[s] in for the experience of human communities,” is useful in terms of contributing the notion of shared values and experiences to the construction of landscape meaning. However, while Williams (1977) has primarily described art and literature as the material repositories of these structures of feeling, I use ethnography to examine the ways in which these connections between land and experience converge in contemporary everyday practice, as well as on the land itself. Drawing from the anthropology of landscape, political ecology, and critical examinations of memory and history, I use the term emotional political ecology as shorthand to encompass an examination of the ways in which landscapes themselves are contested terrains, not just in terms of property that is owned and used, but as vistas that are seen and imagined.

The San Juan Islands are an archipelago of hundreds of islands located midway between the coast of Washington State and Vancouver Island<sup>2</sup> (see **Map 1** and **Map 2**). The four largest and most populated islands (in decreasing order of population: San Juan, Orcas, Lopez, and Shaw Islands) have docks to accommodate ferries leaving from Anacortes, WA, which is itself about 90 miles north of Seattle and located on the bridge-connected Fidalgo Island. Orcas Island has the largest area in the county at 56.9 square miles, with the second largest population of 15,298 people in 2006.<sup>3</sup> Historically, Orcas has been an agricultural community that raised livestock and produced fruit since whites began settling and intermarrying with Coast Salish American Indian women in the mid to late 1800s, though it also has had commercial limestone mining and logging. The total

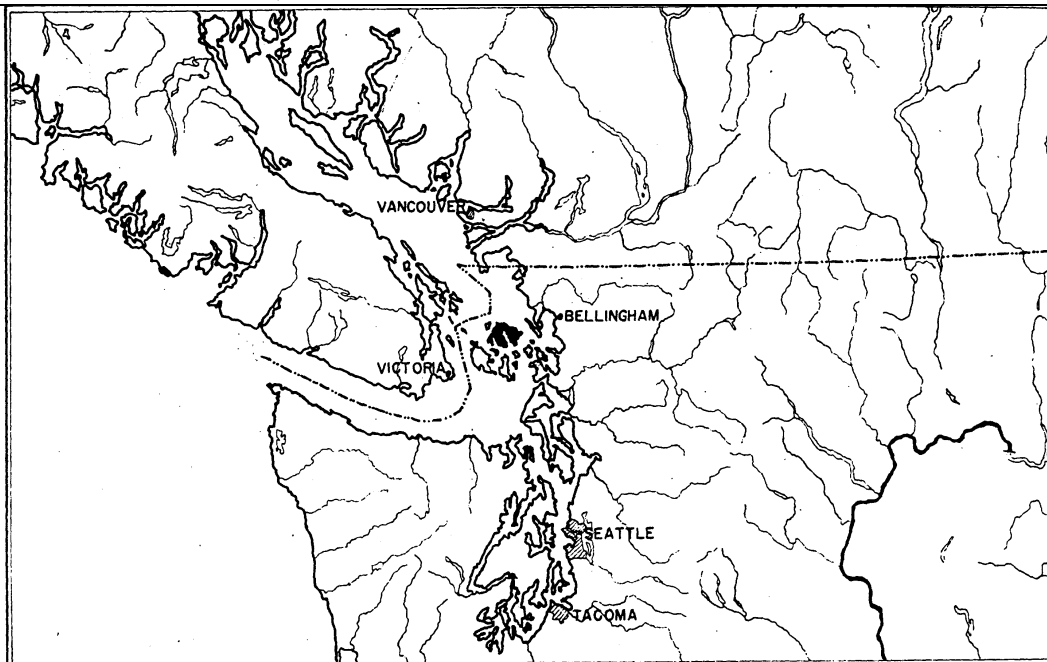
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<sup>2</sup> Estimates of the number of islands vary from 175 to 768 islands, depending on the minimum area employed to distinguish a rock from an island, and the height of the tide at the time of determination (Richardson 1995).

<sup>3</sup> US Census Bureau. San Juan County, WA 2000. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/53055.html>.

**Map 1:** Greater Puget Sound (Orcas Island is highlighted)

Source: Bushman 1949, 2



**Map 2:** San Juan County, WA

Source: [www.sanjuanproperty.com/images/map.gif](http://www.sanjuanproperty.com/images/map.gif)



population remained consistent during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then decreased in the 1960s before consistently rising since the 1970s. Now, Orcas Island's residents are predominantly white and well educated, with increasing numbers of wealthy retirees and telecommuters.

As the population grows at among the highest rates in the state,<sup>4</sup> addressing density issues and preserving rural character are the oft cited goals of both county planners and private landholders. The preservation of rural character receives special attention in the planning and landscape architecture literature (cf. Heyer 1990, Arendt 1994). Planner Fred Heyer (1990) describes techniques to minimize the visual impacts of housing and industry. For example, siting homes below rather than atop the ridge line is more in keeping with rural character (*ibid*, 10), for such structures appear nestled in place—one with their environment—rather than as ‘unnatural’ eyesores inserted into a space where they don't belong. Many other planning recommendations are aesthetic in nature, specifically addressing ways of enhancing particular visual qualities while hiding others.

I argue that addressing the visual elements of landscape is only part of the story; more attention is needed to the ways in which those landscapes are constituted as the locus of nostalgia for an idealized pre-capitalist era. These landscapes are personal as well as political, for beautiful landscapes represent an:

Aesthetic retreat from the perceived impersonality of modern mass society and from the psychologically unsettling process of globalization by which social relations are increasingly disembedded and reconnected into complex and heterogenous networks of abstract social and economic relations (Duncan and Duncan 2001).

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<sup>4</sup> Out of Washington State's 39 counties, San Juan County was ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> in population growth rate from 1990 to 2000 and 7<sup>th</sup> in estimates from 2000 to 2007. [http://www.ofm.wa.gov/pop/poptrends/poptrends\\_07.pdf](http://www.ofm.wa.gov/pop/poptrends/poptrends_07.pdf). (accessed 1 August 2008).

Aesthetically pleasing landscapes, in other words, are ways of escaping the alienating economic conditions that have produced the excessive wealth that ironically makes such landscapes increasingly expensive and exclusionary. Further, I argue that this desire for retreat involves both physical isolation (in locales such as islands) as well as the employment of historical imaginaries that form the basis for contemporary values.

Specifically, on Orcas Island, serene agricultural landscapes convey more than knowledge of food being grown; they suggest a history of American hard work and values, family, and a unique brand of communal interdependence tempered by a strong faith in private property. The extent to which the idealized yeoman laborer ever truly existed is debatable, yet the potency of his (the Jeffersonian farmer was, with exception, a male head of the household) message persists to this day. The farmer is a virtuous worker who labored on his land, forging a healthy yet dominant relationship with nature while earning moral and legal ownership of the earth. Writer and philosopher Umberto Eco (1986, 8, 65) describes Americans' fascination with eras of the past as a "quest for roots" motivated by a search for reality but often hijacked by disingenuous "memories;" he writes, "the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake." Anthropologist Paul Shackel (2001, 10-11) similarly writes, "Heritage creates a usable past, and it generates a precedent that serves our present needs...Heritage can create a national mythology based on even the smallest kernel of truth." Fabricated memories of times one never personally experienced—or that never truly existed—become social realities in that they can become the basis of contemporary values. In other words, (re)producing the rural character of the imagined yeoman past

has become a goal, though my research shows that understandings of how to achieve that vision can vary.

As Chapter 3 elaborates, drawing out the distinction between pastoralism, as the more romantic or literary dimension of the rural, and agrarianism, which is based upon an agricultural economy, is useful in distinguishing between the different ways people imagine the rural and the actions they are able to take to preserve it. While private citizens have limited control when it comes to dictating the economic structures and industries that surround them, as landowners they are able to shape the physical markers that have come to embody a particular relationship with the landscape. Specifically, while promoting the family farms that characterize the Jeffersonian yeoman ideal would involve multiple, complex social and economic reforms, recreating the symbols (like an old barn, an open field) that represent those ideals is in contrast a simpler task. Yet, mowing a field so it looks like a farm is not the same—ecologically, economically, or experientially—as growing crops on it.

While inspired by images of an idealized rural past, these landscapes may not be historically accurate, but are nonetheless emotionally powerful. Preserving rural character, therefore, is not just about saving the past—because the past is never as simple as we can imagine it to be. Nostalgia is not historical, but is an idea—an ideal—“somewhat based in experience, against which contemporary change can be measured” (Williams 1973, 35). Nostalgia itself is a “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (Boym 2001, XIII). Nostalgia, Slavic studies scholar Svetlana Boym (2001, XV) argues, is often nonspecific and elusive, yet nonetheless represents a

powerful drive to “obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology.” An imagined past—or alternative present—become the root of contemporary values.

Yet, how do we translate these values into lived experience? How does one ‘live’ nostalgia? Williams (1977, 132) uses structures of feeling to denote:

A distinction from more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’...we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt...an alternative definition would be structures of *experience*...not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity.

Williams underscores *experiences* of the past and present—processes that may not have been formalized, yet are nonetheless being lived as social experience. While he focuses on structures of feeling primarily as they relate to art and literature, the following chapters expand this notion to include how history itself is “lived and felt.” In other words, how do individuals live particular imagined histories as social experience? Specifically on Orcas, how do residents go beyond conceptualizing the rural not just as a historical ideal and transform it into an experiential reality?

Conversations with residents elicited a range of answers from the romantic to the pragmatic concerning the definition of rural character. Answers generally fall within five broad and overlapping categories. The first rural definition, characterized by the visual landscape, was expressed through descriptions like “vistas uninterrupted by human habitats.” Second, the role of nature in rural character was described as “a religion—being one with nature” and “natural sounds like birds and the lack of intrusion of manmade sounds like traffic and chainsaws.” Third, residents described rural character in terms of property rights and the built environment, defining the rural as “more open space between homes, but higher [social] cohesion.” Fourth, the role of commerce in the

rural was explained as “no chain stores” and “the opposite of industrial use.” Finally, residents referred to the “people piece” of rural character, describing “an independence of spirit” and “having friends teach you farm skills and lend you a tractor.” Aside from the tendency of more recent, frequently retired residents to rely more strongly and solely on visual cues rather than the “people piece” as the defining feature of rural character, there was no discernable pattern correlating with respondents’ class or age and the types of answers they gave. Working class individuals may be more attentive to the economic dimensions of rural character, but they too have been drawn in by the beauty piece; indeed, in many cases it is the beauty that keeps them in a place that is so unaffordable and would seem to go against their economic best interest. Inversely, several wealthier retirees are also vocal advocates of affordable housing, for they see the value of maintaining wage labor in a place that has largely become an expensive rural retreat. Class and demographic distinctions between types of residents will be described further in the next chapter.

It is clear from these quotes that rural character is about more than hiding houses and making bridges out of rocks instead of metal—though those elements are important as well. I agree with Arendt (1994), who takes a broader approach in defining rural character. While he advocates the use of clustered developments and the use of natural materials to mask development, he also incorporates into his definition less tangible qualities, including an increased sense of mutual responsibility among neighbors and opportunities for socializing (Arendt 1994, 4-5). I too found that residents ‘live’ rural character beyond aesthetic considerations, defining the rural in terms of three dimensional experiences as well as two dimensional images.

Rural character is about what is there and what is not there. A number of informants described rural character as “the opposite of Disney World.” I met with one such resident at his relatively isolated home on an Orcas mountaintop. He is a former landscaper from Seattle who bought his Orcas property in 1988, though he recalls he first came to Orcas in 1973 and remembers thinking to himself, “God, beautiful.” I told him that his definition of rural character was a common one and he replied, “that’s because Disney is the epitome of capitalist control, as opposed to a free walk through the woods.” The San Juans, to many, are a place where frequently romanticized images of the non-capitalist and open access or communal (in terms of property relations) rural have become a model of what to achieve. The presence of big businesses or showy tourist resorts would mar not only the physical landscape, but would insert a largely unwelcome commercial atmosphere as well.

Another resident, a retired Iowa native who had purchased his 30 acre conservation easement protected property on a historic but now dormant farm in 1996, explained: “Part of rural character is that it isn’t commodified. It’s not a packaged good for sale. It’s saleable but it *isn’t*. Because then it would lose its rural character and become commercial character.” It is “saleable” in that Orcas tourism and real estate are largely dependent upon rural character, yet those are not the only reasons that a rural ambiance persists. Disney creates its own character, “illusionneering” to recreate early-century small town USA and drawing strength from the “pastoral energy of the suburb” (Wilson 1992, 160-2, 179). Disney World “organizes public space according to the market”—all diversity and cultural practices are reduced to acts of consumption (*ibid*, 180). On Orcas, in contrast, elements of the rural would persist even without the

consumer audience—that is to say, rural character may cater to the tourist and real estate markets, but it does not exist because of them. Though certainly efforts are made to maintain the ‘rural’ look with an audience (tourists, speculators, or other residents) in mind, the motivation is not solely commercial. This rural character, as faithful residents would have you believe, is inevitable and authentic.

How do islanders justify arguments for authenticity? One Harvard and University of Pennsylvania alumnus and artist who moved to Orcas in 1970 told me that, though he prefers “Jeffersonian agriculture,” when it comes down to it “there has to be a reason for it [the land] to look that way. Otherwise it’s just the window dressing of a tourist community.” To many, agriculture is the reason the rural looks the way it does, and the agricultural past (something Disney as a company never had) acts as the basis for claims to authenticity. In spite of the diverse histories of Orcas Island, the agricultural past—as opposed to, say, the limestone industry or Coast Salish cultivation of certain plant species—retains the interest of the local and national population. While, in many places, the agricultural look may remain superficial, the emotions and memories it evokes are rooted in a deep longing for an idyllic agricultural community.<sup>5</sup>

The resident born in Iowa introduced above explained to me the role of agriculture in defining rural character:

In Iowa, agriculture *is* the culture. Every part of the culture is contingent on the farming. Elements of rural character can exist independently, but the whole cloth of rural character entails all the elements woven together. Rural character would just be different without agriculture—it wouldn’t be as rich of a fabric. It might

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<sup>5</sup> I use ‘community’ in this dissertation to reflect the ways many residents identify those who share similar values and goals regarding land use and their understandings of rural character. I avoid that particular word except in quoting others in deference to critiques that posit the term as a way of glossing over internal hierarchies and differences within ‘community’ groups. Much scholarship exists critiquing romanticized portrayals of homogenous communities, for example see McCay and Acheson 1987, Agrawal and Gibson 2001, Joseph 2002 and Li 2000.

seem contrived or artificial without agriculture. Gertrude Stein said, “there is no *there* there.” Without agriculture, Orcas wouldn’t have a *there*.

In highlighting agriculture as the “there” of Orcas, this resident is asserting agriculture as the original justification for the island’s rural character. Agricultural associations have shaped images of rural character, including not just the physical landscape but also the social, property and economic relations that embody a broader definition of rural. Even in the absence of productive farming in some areas, those qualities remain potent influences, prompting one to question the reasons they persist. While tourism depends upon rural appeal, as discussed above, private landholders maintain certain elements of the rural look for personal reasons and often in spite of, rather than because of, their appeal to ‘outsiders.’ In other words, nostalgia for an agricultural society has formed the basis for contemporary management and planning goals. It is clear that emotional attachments to rural landscapes persist even in the absence of agriculture. But how does one preserve ‘rural character’ after agriculture?

Conservation easements, as voluntary agreements in which owners transfer usage rights to a land trust, have emerged over the last few decades as a popular private tool for preserving rural lands throughout the United States. On Orcas, the 79 conservation easements and purchases of development rights in fall 2005 prevent a degree of development on open spaces and farmlands—many of which have not been agriculturally productive for years. Heyer (1990, 2-3) makes a distinction between the “preservation of agriculture and of agricultural character,” claiming that the former is much more difficult to achieve than the “appearance or feeling of agriculture” implied by the latter. To go a step further, preserving the “appearance” of agriculture often acts as a substitute for the more difficult task of maintaining agricultural production. Preserving farmland is not the

same as preserving a farm, though to some, maintaining the look of the land and the potential for future agriculture is enough.<sup>6</sup> While some proponents of conservation easements regard them as a way of instantly ‘saving’ a given property, others regard them as just one step in a process that involves a longer term commitment to social and economic stability.

Further, many private landowners regard landscape protection not just as a way of preserving a particular historical narrative, but as a way of asserting one’s rights to the land via private ownership. As one conservation easement landowner declared, “This is how our property looked when we bought it, and we have a right to keep it that way.” Having a “right” to keep one’s land a particular way evokes the possibility that fulfilling one’s personally preferred landscape is an act that could impinge upon another’s “right” to maintain another landscape vision. Managing land based upon personal motivations therefore also introduces the possibility that preservation is a political process wherein only certain people can decide the fate of a landscape. In the case of private property, it is the landowner who makes these decisions, though a land trust (in the case of conservation easements), neighbors, and a broader ‘community’ can offer input that may or may not be respected. While conservation easements are intended to preserve “ecological value,” it is clear they are not just about maintaining soil quality, but they are also about saving an agricultural heritage—a scenery and a source of personal, familial and county-wide memory.

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<sup>6</sup> Several residents and land trust employees describe conservation easements as a way of protecting the “potential for agriculture,” referring to the maintenance of soil quality as a goal that allows for farming to be done on a given property in the unspecified future when agriculture might become more economically feasible.

In broader terms, conservation easements are preserving the physical representations of an idealized, imagined past. Anthropologist William Cunningham Bissel's (2005) discussion of "colonial nostalgia" parallels many of the processes that have made a particular past so appealing to landowners. Looking at nostalgia as a cultural force requires attention to multiple strands of memory, suggesting that nostalgia is not a monolithic entity, but a personal and political one that links individual responses to broader social processes. As Bissel writes, "Nostalgia is also uniquely capable of bridging gaps and crossing boundaries between public and private spheres. In the nostalgic domain, the personal is inherently political—and vice versa" (240). Memories of landscapes are then both personal and often become political when those visions of the past become naturalized.

#### *An Emotional Political Ecology of Landscape*

Using political ecology is useful at this point for providing a framework for considering land use politics. Geographers Richard Peet and Michael Watts (1996, 4) root political ecology in the "theoretical need to integrate land-use practice with local-global political economy and as a reaction to the growing politicization of the environment." Geographer Roderick Neumann (1998, 2001), for example, uses a political ecology framework to examine issues of access and conservation among Westerners and Meru peasants in Tanzania's Arusha National Park. In his study, colonial visions of what "Africa should look like" have led to the creation of parks that envision a wilderness that leaves no room for human livelihood, ultimately resulting in the Meru's loss of land rights. While Neumann examines the ways in which Meru visions of their

land differ from European conceptions of untouched wilderness, my study of Orcas looks at how even among those who share a cultural memory for Jeffersonian agriculture, conflicts still arise regarding the ways in which that vision will be realized. To understand these conflicts, we must realize that aesthetics is not just about the way the landscape looks, but is also about the experience of being in the landscape, such that a single landscape can be lived in myriad ways. I take Neumann's concern with landscape symbolism and further draw out the ways in which landscape preservation is not just about maintaining particular views, but is about how those views constitute and are constituted by social, economic, and cultural practices. Using ethnographic and geographic readings of landscapes—as well as experiential theories of aesthetics as emotions, memory, and nostalgic conceptualizations—can better model the ways in which not just resources, but also the meanings assigned to landscapes are contested terrain. These strands taken together suggest an emotional political ecology—one that considers environmental change and land use not just as political, legal and economic acts, but as expressions of personal and cultural ideals that come to fruition as a result of these power dynamics, thus bringing political ecology more firmly within the realm of anthropology.

This study draws from anthropology, geography, and environmental studies to provide a framework for understanding the meaning and significance of aesthetics in informing the personal and collective nostalgia that can motivate land use decisions. First, it is important to consider 'aesthetics' not as synonymous with beauty, but as an experiential process that varies based on relationships with objects, places and spaces (see Dewey 1958, Wollheim 1971, Berleant 1995 and Bourassa 1991). Anthropologists

Nicholas Green (1995) and Eric Hirsch (1995) suggest aesthetics are not an appropriate explanation of landscape meaning. Landscapes, they say, cannot be read as text but can only be understood as the relationship between the viewer and object based upon historical and cultural context. I would like to modify this definition, acknowledging the importance of the political and social processes that create landscape, without dismissing aesthetic motivations as irrelevant. *Which* process the viewer sees depends upon his or her experiences—a preconceived aesthetic guides the viewer to experience landscapes in particular ways. In other words, aesthetic preferences themselves are dependent upon memory, history, culture and political interests. The meanings of landscapes change as a product of these social relationships, thus expanding the definition of aesthetics beyond the picturesque.

Landscape originated as a painting term in the 16<sup>th</sup> century—a history that is important to its current artistic associations. Landscape became a picturesque background to life and travel, particularly linked with art, leisure and modernity as the separation between the country and the city (Jackson 1984, Wilson 1992, Bourassa 1991, Williams 1973). Writer and landscape theorist John Brinckerhoff Jackson (1984, 8) quotes the “old-fashioned but surprisingly persistent definition of *landscape*: ‘A portion of the earth’s surface that can be comprehended at a glance.’”

What is problematic about this simple definition is, for one, its failure to highlight the human production of these landscapes, both physically in terms of labor and management, and in daily practice with regard to the subjective experiences that make landscapes a locus of history, memory and identity (see Stewart and Strathern 2003). Aesthetically pleasing landscapes, as Williams (1973) and geographers Yi Fu Tuan

(1979) and Don Mitchell (1996) have argued, often hide the social inequalities that exist behind such beauty. For instance, Mitchell shows how frequently exploited human labor has produced the beautiful California landscape, masking the agency of those who have created it. Similarly, on Orcas, the historical economic conditions that gave rise to the coveted ‘rural’ look have been estranged from the external beauty of the landscape. Recognizing the processual quality of landscape is crucial to any analysis of Native and Euroamerican resource struggles in the San Juans, in opposition to the assertion that landscapes can be read as text as geographers Daniels and Cosgrove (1988) have asserted. The text metaphor, argues anthropologist Pei-yi Guo (2003, 200), represents a ‘Western’ view, drawn from the tradition of landscape art, in which landscape is an inscribed surface, as opposed to alternative perspectives that regard landscape “as a lived space, as a cultural process.” Geographers Dianne Rocheleau and Laurie Ross (1995), however, have examined the multiple ways of reading “trees as text,” showing how material as well as spiritual meanings are embodied within different readings of the same landscape. While the text metaphor can be helpful, particularly in mapping the different cultural meanings and access regimes within locales, I consider landscape more as a process through which landscapes are continually reconstituted, both in terms of physical management and the subjective relationships that give them meaning.

Landscapes gain meaning through experience; they are time collapsed into space—a material indicator of ecological, historical and political processes that can reveal notions of memory, community and identity (Hirsch 1995, Green 1995, Crumley 1994, Stewart and Strathern 2003, Hardesty and Fowler 2001). Anthropologist Timothy Ingold (2000, 193) suggests landscape to be nature’s body, embodied through

“*incorporation* rather than inscription” in a “movement wherein forms themselves are generated.” In this sense, landscape is more than a visual representation that implies a separation between object and image, but is a product of the interactions between objectivity (in this case, material resources) and subjectivity (as personal experiences) (Bourassa 1991). In other words, looking at landscape as a constantly changing process—as object and constantly contested experience—can encompass the range of levels at which landscapes are meaningful. Philosopher Arnold Berleant (1995, 18) also explains that *seeing* is not the same as *experiencing*, and these total feelings are influenced by “social experience and cultural factors;” culture “fuses” with experience, meaning aesthetics are not static objects, but that they travel with the observer, not the environment itself. Novelist V.S. Naipaul (1987, 335) adeptly explains this sentiment: “Land is not land alone, something that simply is itself. Land partakes of what we breathe into it, is touched by our moods and memories.”

History, too, “partakes what we breathe into it.” Anthropologist Jennifer Cole (2001) explores the ways in which the Betsimisaraka of Madagascar have developed social practices that enable them to both remember and forget parts of their colonial past. She attends to memory as a process that evokes both individual and social reconstructions, complicating simple dichotomies that consider only one or the other. She writes, “selective representations of the past explain how a particular constellation of relationships in the present came to be” (102-103). In my case study, selective representations of Orcas Island as a remaining vestige of the Jeffersonian yeoman ideal have shaped relationships not only among actors, but between people and the landscape that acts as the physical reminder of a chosen past. Raymond Williams (1976, 119)

describes history as not exclusively associated with the past, but “connected not only to the present but also to the future.” Literature scholar David Simpson (1992, 9) elaborates on Williams’s definition, writing, “The urgency of history is not, then, in its wholeness or totality but in its immediate applicability to a range of options for reading the past and projecting the future. It instructs and points out; it is part of the present.” What is significant in this approach is not necessarily historical events as they ‘actually’ happened, but how those events are remembered and employed to shape directions for the future.

This attention to the subjectivity of memory is further complicated by non-equilibrium ecological models (*cf.* Botkin 1990, Holling et al 2002), which introduce the possibility that even nature is subject to historical and cultural revisionism. Described further in Chapter 5, non-equilibrium ecologists assert that ‘balanced nature’ is not the most accurate model for ecosystems. Instead, many ecologists and social scientists have adopted ecological thinking that considers given ecosystems not as fixed in time, but as dynamic systems that can be healthy in more ways than one (Scoones 1999, Zimmerer 1996a, 1996b). This approach considers human actions as yet another factor in ecological systems, rather than regarding all human input as foreign and necessarily detrimental to an existing balance. In other words, the landscapes we choose to call natural and worthy of our preservation efforts are just one of many possible incarnations; what makes preservation efforts potent is not just their appeal to ecological truths, but the ways they use emotional cues to present one landscape as more ‘natural’ than another. The idea that landscapes change over time—with or without humans (though of course human impacts can greatly accelerate or even reverse these changes)—brings another

challenge to landscape conservation efforts. In this sense, historical preservation has more in common with ecological preservation than we might think. Rather than trying to save some pre-human or wholly ‘natural’ landscape, the question often becomes *which* cultural landscape to preserve.

These understandings of landscape and history as relative and shifting concepts pose an additional challenge to conservation efforts; how do you preserve landscape as a locus of history and memory that is always changing in relation to the viewer? Efforts to preserve rural character are frequently, though by no means exclusively, posited as synonymous with landscape preservation. Yet, a broader interpretation of rural character suggests that before answering *how* to protect rural character, one must raise the equally difficult question of *what* exactly to protect. Shackel (2001, 2) notes that many scholars regard the “production of historical consciousness as an outcome of the struggle between groups.” Determining what features to preserve is therefore a political act—a conflict inspired in part by attachments to nostalgic renderings of place. In this case study, conservation easements are notable in that they provide a legal means of preserving certain physical landscape qualities that hold particular economic, ecological, social, personal, and/or historical values. Thus, far from the “apolitical” conservation tools that some scholars have described (Brewer 2003), conservation easements are ways in which private land owners can perpetuate a particular landscape vision and associated history in perpetuity.

Land ownership thus becomes central in this discussion because it is the mechanism through which conservation easements become a conservation option. Whereas much of American history highlights the ways in which early pioneers worked

the land in order to gain ownership of it, more recent citizens have earned their property not through direct labor on a given plot of land, but through labor done earlier in life that has entitled them to the reward of land dedicated to leisure. Property, then, is not just a legal or economic concept, but one that shapes aesthetic representations; property is not just about the right to use land, but the right to see and experience it in particular ways.

### *U.S. Anthropology and Political Economy*

New trends in land ownership can be placed within the broader context of recent US economic history, in which economic growth has fostered new consumer tastes. Economic expansion in the United States beginning after World War II has extended into the 1980s and 1990s, leading to unprecedented wealth as well as income inequality (Mooney 2008, Varian 2006, Offer 2006, Newman 1993). While real GDP and GNP have been rising from 1950 to 2000, such growth figures do not express the distribution of that wealth; while the US had the highest average GDP per head from 1980-2001 of seven industrialized countries examined, they rank only fourth in measures of equitable distribution (Offer 2006, 300-1). By the end of the 1980s, for example, the top 1 percent of American families accounted for 37 percent of the private net worth in the country, while the bottom 40 percent of the population saw its incomes decline from 1977 to 1989 (Newman 1993: 41). Drawing comparisons with neoliberal expansion in the rest of the world as well, anthropologists and others have recently examined the role of trade liberalization in producing pockets of wealth (*cf.* Collins, di Leonardo and Williams 2008). While income disparity within the US is striking, a global perspective reveals that the income gap between Americans and the rest of the world is even more substantial:

“the 400 highest income earners in the United States make as much money in a year as the entire population of 20 African nations—more than 300 million people” (Weissman quoted in di Leonardo 2008, 9). What this means for places like the San Juans is that rising domestic and global demand for beautiful, remote landscapes has led to speculation and increasing land costs up until the recent 2008 economic recession, pricing out all but that narrow top percentage of earners. The unprecedented concentration of wealth has contributed to a new mobility that has changed demographics at key spots across the country.

Economist Hal Varian (2006) in particular describes research on inequality that indicates that even during the economic boom of the 1990s, income increases were not only inequitably distributed among individuals, but were concentrated in a few geographic areas associated with technological advances—specifically in Silicon Valley in California and King’s County in Washington. The San Juan Islands in particular are uniquely positioned as a vacation area that could cater to this new wealth (Shapley 1990). On the east coast, Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket serve a similar role—and are frequently evoked by residents as a warning against what the San Juans could become if population and property values continue to rise. The headline of a 1990 *Seattle P-I* article sums up the trend and the fear: “San Juans: Fated to be Martha’s Vineyard West? Global Pressure for Scenic Getaways Will Deed Islands to the Rich” (Shapley 1990). The article references a 1965 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* piece that dealt with growth and development as well, citing the ongoing economic boom as contributing to the demand for vacation homes. According to the 1990 piece, a realtor in the 1965 article explained that, “50 percent of his sales involve Californians who take one look at the uncluttered,

uncongested islands and reach for their checkbooks." Particularly in the 1990s with the advance of telecommuting as a viable option, professionals do not necessarily need to consider proximity to the office when deciding where to live. This freedom, combined with increasing incomes, provides unprecedented mobility for some to choose their homes (or vacation homes) in relatively unpopulated areas. In opting for landscapes of leisure like the San Juans or Martha's Vineyard, many financially successful individuals are choosing retreat from the economic landscapes that have ironically provided the circumstances for them to afford their new island homes.

Rising incomes, combined with shifts in consumer tastes and enhanced professional mobility, have led to increasing demand for relatively secluded homes. Sociologist Katherine Newman cites economists Frank Levy and Richard Michel, who summed up the economic trends since World War II into two major periods: "27 years of rapid real wage growth followed by at least 13 years of real wage stagnation" (Newman 1993, 42). The consumer tastes acquired by average Americans during that first 27 year period helped to define the middle class standard of living, though subsequent years made it difficult to sustain that level of success measured in terms of the increasing accumulation of goods. Those who earn above middle class salaries often spend above those already high standards to distinguish themselves in a sort of "status symbol arms race" (Conniff 172). Writer Richard Conniff (2002, 158) evokes turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sociologist Thorstein Veblen's look at conspicuous consumption to explain some of the excessive spending in which many Americans engage, noting that purchasing such goods is a key to social status. The form that these symbols of wealth take, however, changes over time (*ibid*, 170). For example, he discusses body fat as something that used to be a

symbol of wealth but has more recently become an indicator of poverty in the US, just as hair styles, skin tones, and fashion choices have all taken on different meanings throughout history. Large homes have likely always been symbols of wealth, but the desire of many wealthy individuals to utilize such homes in remote areas as “stops on a journey away from the real world” has been particularly potent in the last several decades (*ibid*, 213).

Several anthropological studies have ethnographically examined populations within this American political economic context (*ie.* di Leonardo 1998, 2006; Ortner 2003). Anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo (1998, 16) espouses the need to conduct US based ethnographies as a way of avoiding unexamined uses of America as “home,” claiming that in addition to looking at the “Otherness” of the rest of the world (and within the US), we also need to understand “selfhood.” Race, gender and, (particularly in this study) class divisions reflect the diversity within this nation as ‘self,’ and necessitate nuanced studies of the ways they implicate themselves in particular political economic circumstances. Placing such studies within an economic and temporal context is particularly important in avoiding an “ethnographic present” that offers a static snapshot of a place. The historical contexts of this dissertation study—including the national mythologies we nostalgically employ, as well as the economic circumstances of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries—are critical to understanding the ways in which ethnographies are applicable to the US, the ‘West,’ and/or other parts of the world. In nations that must temper modern capitalist ideals with the disillusionment that can beset the groups those ideals leave behind, nostalgic renderings of pre or non-capitalist histories are a theme common to the US as well as many other countries and regions.

This study of Orcas Island is attentive to the historical and political economic conditions that have produced its particular circumstances, while recognizing nostalgia as a force that shapes social values for the future across a much broader geographical and cultural context.

### *The “New Northwest”*

Theorizing this study within a more specifically regional context helps to articulate the broader trends that necessitate a reexamination of rural character, moving beyond purely visual definitions. Placing this Orcas study within the American West and, more specifically the Northwest, suggests the need for increased attention to the economic and social changes that have expressed themselves at multiple scales of analysis. Regional approaches can be fruitful in recognizing the interactions between scales, connecting local processes to broader regional trends, such as the shifting economies of the American West (Walker 2003). Scholars have argued for a distinctive northwestern US “sense of place” (Ewert 1999, 7; see Goble and Hirt 1999), defined in part by the diverse natural environment that has drawn so many new residents in recent years. Settlement in the Northwest is particularly influenced by the region’s physical geographic qualities; throughout the middle of the US, where features like climate and topography are more uniform, human settlement is correspondingly evenly spaced. In contrast, settlement in the Northwest followed the natural distribution of resources, including water, mineral wealth, animal game, transportation, and building supplies (Ewert 1999). Cities like Seattle, Tacoma, and Portland would ultimately provide the population centers that, as transportation to hinterlands isolated by mountains or water

improved, would seek nearby rural, outdoor experiences. As historian David Louter (2006, 35) suggests with reference to urban populations' proximity to Mount Rainier, wild areas become known not in spite of—but precisely *because* of—progress in technology and transportation.

The San Juan Islands are unique in terms of their geographic location—driving approximately ninety miles north from Seattle on I-5 to Anacortes, and then taking an hour to hour-and-a-half ferry ride can transform an urban weekend into an ‘authentic’ rural experience.<sup>7</sup> Of course, advances in transportation have been a critical step in making this getaway possible, such that the ferry system has become an extension of the roads. Island residents had constructed docks on most of the islands by 1900, and steamboat operators competed for customers for the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, the 1920s demanded a way of bringing not just people but automobiles to the islands (Richardson 1990). The Puget Sound Navigation Company-Black Ball Line ran the ferry service for 30 years until Washington State took over in 1951. To this day, the Washington State ferries that run from Anacortes through the San Juan Islands to Victoria, BC are part of the state highway department (The Orcas Island Historical Society and Museum 2006). It is telling that these ferry routes are managed as an extension of the state highway system, providing relatively convenient and scenic transportation for those who wish to traverse the islands with the same accessibility they find on the roads.

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<sup>7</sup> A report by the San Juan Islands Visitors Bureau states that recent travel trends include more frequent trips to closer destinations, rather than extended stay getaways. This trend suggests that many tourists are in fact traveling to the San Juans from Seattle, Tacoma, and Vancouver and, further, that marketing efforts are specifically targeting these populations. San Juan Island Visitors Bureau. “2007 Destination Marketing & Visitor Services Plan & Budget for San Juan County.” 27 September 2006.

As urban studies scholar Carl Abbot (2000, 79-80) argues, urbanites “assume the right to use resources and control land at a distance,” frequently transforming rural areas into “weekendlands for city folks” (79-80). Henri Lefebvre (1991, 189) similarly describes landscapes’ “seductive power” to cause a viewer, “during a moment of marvelous self-deception, to claim as his own.” This aesthetic appropriation of landscapes from afar is central to ‘new West’ arguments that assert that the American West has shifted from an economy of resource extraction to one of aesthetic consumption in the form of tourism and recreational uses (Power 1996, McCarthy and Guthman 1998, Walker and Fortmann 2003). Thus, political contestation in the ‘new West’ is not just about access to resources, but must also consider access to views and leisure as equally volatile sites of contestation.

The San Juan Islands fit this ‘new West’ model in that the service economy (which includes tourism) is the number one industry in the county and other indicators, such as seasonal employment opportunities, reflect a place that is highly dependent upon the tourism of the summer months in particular. Orcas Island has a history of lime mining, fishing, logging and agriculture, all of which have either declined or disappeared over the last century. While the influence of the urban on the San Juans is powerful, it is not absolute. Resource use is still important to the rural economy and lifestyle, though it may not be as visible as it was a hundred years ago. On Orcas, agriculture and some local logging still exist, though recreational opportunities like bed and breakfasts, kayaking trips, and whale watching excursions abound. As historian Joseph E. Taylor III (2004) writes:

Logging, mining, and farming still thrive, even if loggers, miners, and farmers do not... Essentializing rural history as extractive has immense rhetorical power, but

this simplified relationship of past to present obscures crucial biases. Where the rural West was purely extractive...it now seems purely for play—which is equally problematic.

Resource users on Orcas still shape the ecological and economic landscape, and help lend authenticity to the notion that Orcas is still a rural place.

These rural resource users share many of the same practical concerns with those who work in the service sector. Essentializing Orcas Island as a service economy that exists to serve its wealthier residents and visitors can tend to overlook the housing needs and affordability concerns of those who are employed to serve that more affluent demographic of both property owners and tourists. Tourism necessitates a level of public services (including roads, police, etc.) that can contribute to rising property values, higher taxes, and an overall increase in the cost of living (Power 1996, 218). However, property speculation has been, according to many residents attentive to the issue, an even greater contributor to higher land and commodity prices.

Ironically, the appeal of Orcas as a rural retreat draws from many urban comforts; as geographer James McCarthy writes, “rural retreats have precisely the same interiors they [consumers] would expect in the top hotels in global cities” (McCarthy 2008, 129)—with the difference on Orcas sometimes being a matter of a window that looks over a mountain/water/field/forest landscape. Also ironically, Orcas depends upon working class employees to provide the rural-yet-comfortable amenities that make it appealing as a rural retreat, while simultaneously needing to mask their presence in order to maintain a rural authenticity that depends upon a seemingly non-urban/non-commercial economic landscape. Many visitors hope for Orcas to be, in a sense, a ‘rural’ museum that they can

visit—the pure reflection of a time that never truly existed. This provides little space for non-traditional and unromantic professions and social problems.

The anti-urban myths that dominate the American imagination (Tuan 1974, 193) leave little room for sanitation workers, supermarket cashiers, and others who do not work directly with natural resources—for these professions are modern and urban by association. Economist Thomas Michael Power (1996, 57) describes the change from local extractive economies to heavy-manufacturing industries—a shift he writes has been in process since the start of US history. On Orcas, where heavy industry is prohibited in the County Comprehensive Plan and detestable to the overwhelming majority of islanders, there is a void of unfulfilled employment opportunities that has largely been answered by service sector jobs. While there exists a clearer mental picture of the visual landscape that makes Orcas attractive as a ‘new West’ rural retreat, what do employment and housing look like in such a place? To what does rural character refer in the ‘new Northwest’?

### *Orcas as an Island*

As an island, Orcas is easily identified as a distinct unit of study. Further, its residents are aware of these defined boundaries, frequently reveling in their disconnectedness from the American ‘mainland.’ “I’m going to America” is only a half-joking way of announcing a ferry ride to Anacortes, the gateway from mainland Washington into the San Juans and back. While some regard the ocean water that bounds the islands as a deterrent, others see the potential in isolation. At an informal island meeting to discuss global climate change, the conversation turned to agriculture and

energy use, prompting one woman to declare, “We could be a working example for the mainland as a model of sustainability...if it can happen anywhere, it’s here.”

The feeling that “if it can happen anywhere, it’s here” is tied to the increased awareness of space and the impacts of one’s participation in a seemingly closed system. One Lopez resident told me on a ferry ride back from an Agricultural Resources Committee meeting that he moved to the relatively sparsely populated island of 2,179<sup>8</sup> in part because he felt like he could “make a difference” that would not be as strongly felt or supported elsewhere. While of course, legally, San Juan County is bounded by federal and state limitations and standards, the frontier spirit combined with the physical disconnect from the mainland enhance feelings of independence. Though technological advances (computers, phones, etc.) have in many respects closed that gap, the uncertainty of the ferry system (where delays and long lines, particularly in the summer months, are the norm) creates an inconvenience that functions to maintain a deliberately slow lifestyle and locally engaged populace.

The appeal of the ‘island lifestyle’ to residents produces a unique brand of rural appeal. A conservation easement holder who has been coming to Orcas for decades but just became a full time resident in 2002 told me “Living on an island makes me feel like I’ve left the real world behind. Orcas is a special place...being on an island makes it harder to come and go.” He went on to describe a new neighbor from California who just purchased a multimillion dollar home, yet repeatedly complained to him about the ferry system. He told me, “I just kept thinking: ‘that’s [the ferry] what makes this Orcas.’ If she doesn’t like it, why did she move here?” A resident who made his living working on

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<sup>8</sup> US Census, 2000.

[http://www.nwfsc.noaa.gov/research/divisions/sd/communityprofiles/Washington/LopezIsland\\_WA.pdf](http://www.nwfsc.noaa.gov/research/divisions/sd/communityprofiles/Washington/LopezIsland_WA.pdf)

yachts and moved from California two years earlier described life on Orcas as “simpler than mainland life...though it is harder and easier being on an island—there are only so many tow trucks [that bring goods on the ferry.] You have to wait your turn for things to happen.”

Being on an island is significant in several overlapping respects with regard to this study, many of which are suggested above. First, the isolation of having “left the real world behind” represents a real or imagined divorce from the stresses of one’s former ‘mainland’ life, though many of those stresses (particularly financial) may continue or in fact worsen on the island. Many retirees have told me they came to Orcas planning in part to escape their mainland commitments—to the PTA, or local service groups, for example—and instead focus on themselves.

Second, in contrast, others relish living on Orcas where, as with the Lopez islander above, they feel their impact can be more broadly felt than it would in a larger, less bounded population. The fact that transportation between the islands and mainland presents a sort of barrier intensifies many residents’ investment in the local and willingness to participate in local events. One elderly couple who has been farming their land since 1972 explained to me during an interview that “helping each other is somewhat unique to an island,” referring to the eastern Orcas town Olga’s tradition of volunteers digging graves, which he and his wife regard as an honor to the past and symbol of communal independence. Sustainability also takes on a new meaning in a place with such tangible borders; instead of debating the confines of a ‘system’ as a town, county or state, being on an island presents a distinct physical boundary. And while in many senses that boundary is permeable because of the ferry system, private boats and

planes, and telecommunications, the definition of a term like ‘local agriculture’ is more easily agreed upon on an island, where unmistakable geographic features, rather than political definitions, define the edges.

Third, being on an island makes affordability issues even more potent. On the mainland, not being able to afford a home in the town in which one works might mean adding 10 minutes to a commute. On Orcas Island, living on the outskirts of an expensive housing market is not an option. While a few do commute from the mainland (see Chapter 6), offering and accepting employment opportunities are particularly burdened by the lack of affordable housing within realistic commuting distance.

Fourth, not having a bridge, while making transportation more time consuming for residents and workers, has the same effect on tourists. While the population of the islands can double during the summer months from seasonal tourists, that number would only increase without the additional ferry barrier. While the economic impact of tourism is welcomed, there is also the sense that the tourist season represents an interruption in the rural lifestyle. One longtime resident I met gave me a ride to town in his beat up Volkswagon van as he explained the economic necessity of tourists, yet his frustration with them when they stay past their welcome. As I crouched in the back seat among an array of tools and groceries, he told me, mock sticking his head out the window, “About October is when I start yelling out my [car] window to the tourists: ‘Go home!’” There is a time for tourism, and increasing accessibility would only expand that window of time to an undesirable level for many residents.

Finally, with regard to planning on the islands, finite boundaries and limited space have intensified public interest in land use issues. Being on an island means, as one

resident told me, “you know you can’t expand further.” Yet, as a county commissioner observed while I asked her about island development and sustainability, “Is there a carrying capacity of an island? Look at Manhattan.” Still, the San Juans are distinct from Manhattan in that they do not have any bridge access and all goods must come across on the increasingly expensive ferry system. One couple who retired to Orcas from Seattle told me, in choosing their new home, “it had to be an island without a bridge...otherwise you can’t control development.” Residents are specifically aware of the potential benefits of being on an island in terms of development control; yet they are also more vigilant because of the limited space that is the consequence of those water boundaries, resulting in increased attention to the development process than there would be on mainland. One resident of almost 20 years told me there was more public interest in the development of the San Juan County Comprehensive Plan than there would have been in a mainland setting. Abbott (2000, 78) explains such local awareness, arguing that “only on the margins do communities explicitly weigh the relative virtues of a few more subdivisions against a few more berry fields or orange groves.” Being on the “margins” means that the end of open space is in sight, bringing increased interest in what will occupy that coveted area.

Portalis, a housing development that popped up in recent years adjacent to the ferry station in Anacortes boasts in its slogan, “Luxurious Island Living without the Ferry!” Appealing directly to those whose main reason for not moving to the islands is the ferry, this ad also suggests a divide between those who find the ferry to be a deterrent rather than an enticement. In this sense, the ferry creates a sort of self-selecting group in which those who seek the island lifestyle tolerate or even embrace the islands’ relative

remoteness. Many find “luxurious island living” to be a product of the ferry itself in that the island lifestyle is a product of its seclusion, such that Portalis’s slogan would appear to be a contradiction in terms. This is not to suggest a uniform population inhabits the islands; to the contrary, many of the unique qualities of island living are contradictory—such as the contrast between those who embrace civic involvement and those who avoid it as described above.

Further, the aesthetic appeal of the islands draws in many homebuyers who soon realize that island isolation is not for them, contributing to escalating real estate speculation and environmental change. One Lopez Islander summed up for me what he regards as a typical scenario:

People move here thinking they’re going to write the great American novel and to fix their marriage, and there’s a great school for Junior, but when they can’t adjust to the lack of movie theaters and bowling alleys, and realize all there is *is* the wife and Junior, they move away.

The island lifestyle has been romanticized by realtors and tourism promoters such that there exists a turnover that does not exist with other similarly priced homes on the mainland. The population rate of San Juan County has been increasing at a greater rate than that of Washington State since 1990, and San Juan County has consistently had a higher percentage of residents relocating to other counties and countries than Washington State’s average since 1996.<sup>9</sup> The unique qualities of an island home contribute to these trends.

Islands evoke images of independence and exoticism, and these associations influence the types of people that move to Orcas and the investment—both financial and emotional—that they make in it. A 1952 article on the San Juan Islands in *Sunset: The*

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<sup>9</sup> City-data.com. [http://www.city-data.com/county/San\\_Juan\\_County-WA.html](http://www.city-data.com/county/San_Juan_County-WA.html). (accessed 31 July 2008).

*Magazine of Western Living* begins with a photograph of a lone man standing in his skiff on the water, fishing pole in hand, with a small island in the distance. The caption reads, “Island exploring, only a few hours from the populated mainland, yet every man can be a Magellan.”<sup>10</sup> This appeal to a sense of adventure and imagination—as well as continuity with themes of European conquest—typifies the strong allure of the San Juans in particular as a vestige of rural character, as well as the physical qualities that present both limitations and inspirations.

### *Methodology and Chapter Organization*

This study is based on research conducted during the summers of 2003 and 2004, and from August 2005 to August 2006. During the first summer, I lived in Anacortes, WA and worked with the Samish Indian Nation, which is headquartered there, conducting interviews and travelling with their Center for the Study of Coast Salish Environments throughout the San Juan Islands. For the summer of 2004 and twelve months during 2005-2006, I lived on Orcas Island. Throughout these research visits, I conducted historical research at the Orcas Island, Lopez Island and San Juan Island Historical Museums and microfiche archived newspapers at the Orcas Island Public Library, in addition to recording oral histories of a number of ‘oldtimer’ islanders—a group defined by their age as well as their time of residence, as described further in Chapter 2. I attended meetings of groups including the San Juan County Land Bank, the San Juan Preservation Trust, the Eastsound Planning Review Committee, the San Juan Conservation District, and Of People and Land Community Land Trust, in addition to

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<sup>10</sup> “San Juans...Treasure Islands of the Northwest.” reprinted from *Sunset: The Magazine of Western Living* for Wilkins Sailing Cruises, Deer Harbor Washington. July 1952.

various permit hearings and countywide and islandwide informational meetings on issues including guesthouses, global climate change, and scenic byway designations.

I interviewed a snowball sample of individuals met at these meetings and through conservation easement interviews. I was able to get in touch with 35 property holders with conservation easements or purchase of development rights on their lands for extensive interviews. I also interviewed key representatives from the Board of County Commissioners, the San Juan Preservation Trust, the San Juan County Land Bank, the Agricultural Resources Committee, the San Juan Conservation District, and Of People and Land Community Land Trust.

In spring of 2006, I conducted multiple extensive interviews with farmers and interns as part of an exhibit entitled “Orcas Farms.” Peter Fisher, a local photographer and activist who became a key informant after I first interviewed him about his conservation easement, invited me to write the text for his upcoming exhibit. We focused on six local farms, and the final exhibit opened at an Orcas gallery in August of 2006, featuring photographs of the farms and farmers, with accompanying text based upon my interviews. This experience not only gave me an additional opportunity to interact with these farmers, but provided insight into both the farmers’ and the photographer’s aesthetic preferences.

The following chapters draw from these data to explain the historical and contemporary dimensions of rural character on Orcas Island. Chapter 2 provides background on the history of Coast Salish occupation, Euroamerican settlement, and development in San Juan County, along with relevant ecological and demographic information. Chapter 3 explores the aesthetic components of rural character, arguing that

American pastoralism is the root of many Orcas landscape ideals. Views from the road and the water are an explicit concern of many landholders, influencing land management efforts. What one resident deeply involved with island planning and conservation efforts calls the “faux agro”—lands that are mowed to keep them looking like farms—are one way that residents are able to maintain the pastoral look even as productive agriculture is itself suffering. This chapter also considers the disconnect between landscape beauty and environmental health, arguing that the two are not always synonymous as many landowners sometimes presume.

Chapter 4 considers private property as the political economic institution through which land management visions become a reality, contending that rather than earning land by laboring on it, residents now can maintain these properties solely as places of leisure due to the wealth they earned earlier in life. This sense of entitlement contributes a further emotional charge to property rights debates, evoking American historical property rights values while exhibiting a reversal of the relationship between labor and land found in the original yeoman myth. Placing Orcas struggles over land use within the broader history of property in the American West, including American Indian resource struggles, this chapter demonstrates how the moral values of property remain potent, though the means of earning it have become disengaged from its original historical context. Competing understandings of the extent to which private property is either characteristic of rural character or its antithesis are examined as they play out in the County’s Comprehensive Plan, which raises debates regarding the balance between private property rights and a common land use vision.

Chapter 5 demonstrates both the political and personal/emotional dimensions of nature and ecology, arguing that these influences shape the creation and content of conservation easements. Specifically, using political ecology and non-equilibrium ecology models reveals the ways in which nature leaves room for historical and personal interpretations, helping to determine the targets of conservation efforts. This chapter goes on to investigate conservation easements, including the reasons for their creation, the challenges they face, and their limitations in terms of contributing to the maintenance of rural character. Conservation easements are not just legal tools, but are also reflections of a range of personal and cultural values.

Chapter 6 takes a closer look at the state of agricultural production on Orcas, including its successes, challenges and the ways in which the economic losses associated with farming can actually enhance Orcas's appeal as a rural, non-commercial space. Romantic images of farmers who labor out of love rather than for profit can mask the dire financial challenges small scale agriculturalists face in the county and indeed across the country. Affordable housing is considered to be particularly potent challenge to agriculture in the San Juans, as well as to other employment opportunities, contributing to demographic shifts that have raised questions about what type of residents are needed to make a place rural.

In conclusion, I show how these chapters taken together demonstrate the limitations of a narrowly defined landscape approach to rural character, arguing that a more holistic assessment is needed when attempting to preserve a place. While conservation easements have been an important tool in conservation discussions across the United States, they cannot protect all the dimensions of rural character. A more

comprehensive assessment of what defines the rural is needed to do justice to the human production and experiences that also constitutes landscapes, and to expand the targets of conservation strategies beyond the visual. Finally, I conclude by considering the politics of landscape preservation and the role of modernity in shaping preservation efforts and nostalgia for the ‘authentic.’

One goes to the countryside not to see great built structures of human imagination or the expanse of booming industry, but to experience nature and the rural firsthand. Identifying the essence of such rural landscapes, however, is a seemingly apparent yet complicated task. Fred Heyer begins his American Planning Association report (1990, 1) with the observation, “Rural character is a bit like pornography—it’s very difficult to define, but you know it when you see it.” This dissertation investigates that elusive definition, presenting an ethnographic exploration of landscape meaning and nostalgic renderings of a pre-capitalist rural on Orcas Island, Washington.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Introducing Orcas: History, Ecology, and Political Economy

#### *From Prehistory to Euroamerican Settlement*

The earliest archaeological evidence from the San Juan Islands shows the presence of human inhabitants beginning at least 11,500 years ago (Stein 2000). The Coast Salish Indians, whose modern descendents include members of the Samish, Lummi, Songhees, Semiahmoo and Saanich tribes, moved between the islands year round, establishing summer and winter villages at various spots throughout the archipelago. Middens, as areas in which “evidence of people’s subsistence, technology, dwellings, and refuse” are concentrated, are the material remnants of many of these village sites and, in the case of the San Juans, contain great numbers of shells demonstrating the centrality of ocean life including shellfish as well as salmon to the Coast Salish’s survival (*ibid*, 10). Landed resources remained important, however, and there exists evidence of the cultivations of plants like camas, or *Camassia quamash*, which is sometimes referred to as “the Indian potato” (Russel Barsh 2003, personal communication).

“Coast Salish” refers to the groups of Indians occupying territory around Georgia Strait, the Strait of San Juan de Fuca, Puget Sound, and reaching from the Olympic Peninsula to Willapa Bay. There is great diversity within the Coast Salish peoples, including eleven Salishan languages spoken within their geographic range (Suttles 1987, 29; Suttles 1998, 167). The group of Coast Salish that traditionally inhabited the San Juan Islands spoke Lkungeneng, which is usually referred to as “Straits” (Suttles 1987),

with the region itself sometime referred to as the Strait Salish region (*eg.* Stein 2000) and the people themselves referred to as the Straits Salish.

Anthropologist Wayne Suttles established himself as the foremost scholar on the Coast Salish, having conducted ethnographic research on their culture, language and ecology beginning in 1946 until his death in 2005. I was able to meet Suttles at his home in Friday Harbor, San Juan Island and on other occasions in 2003, at which time I was conducting research for the Center for the Study of Coast Salish Environments on reef-net fishing, a method of salmon fishing unique to the Coast Salish and on which Suttles had conducted significant research. In addition to his contributions to tribes such as the Samish Indian Nation's legal struggle for tribal recognition (see below,) Suttles has been a prominent voice in asserting the distinctiveness and sophistication of the Coast Salish peoples, opposing characterizations of them as a "pale reflection" of their northern neighbors who have been more heavily researched and often characterized as the "real Northwest Coast" (Suttles 1987, xii). These stereotypes persist: the Pacific Northwest hall in the American Museum of American History in New York City displays the following text next to its Coast Salish artifacts:

... the Coast Salish were not as prolific or skilled woodworkers as were the more northern tribes, and the designs they carved on the utensils were stylistically less typical of the Northwest Coast. What was true of woodworking was also true of other cultural patterns such as religion and social organization; these were somewhat attenuated forms of the cultural patterns of the Northwest Coast tribes dwelling further north.

The Coast Salish were and are often portrayed as "less typical" of the region and as weak imitations of other Northwest tribes, though in fact they have their own distinct and strong traditions of art, culture and religion. Popular images like totem poles have come to symbolize the Native Pacific Northwest, though they are in fact specific to more

northern groups, while the Coast Salish produced stylistically distinct house posts.

Totem pole makers like the Tlingit, Tsimshian and Haida have historically travelled south to raid Coast Salish inhabitants of the San Juans, often stealing goods, raping women, and capturing slaves. Due to this violent history, one Samish tribal employee (himself not native) likened erecting a totem pole on Coast Salish land to “painting a swastika on a synagogue.” This history is recorded in the names Massacre Bay, Skull Island and Victim Island, located in West Sound on Orcas, where the Haida raided the Lummi during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Strait of San Juan de Fuca was first “discovered” in 1592 by Juan de Fuca, a Greek sailor for the Spanish, though historians still debate whether he actually came upon the Islands at all during his voyage. The Strait was then “rediscovered” in 1787 by the Spanish, who were later beaten out by Captain Vancouver who did the first thorough exploration of the Islands in 1792 on his way to Puget Sound. Orcas (pronounced 'OR-cuss') is most likely named for Revilla Gigedo de Orcasitas, who was viceroy of Mexico and sponsor of a Spanish expedition to the islands near the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The first recorded interactions between the Coast Salish and Europeans occurred in the 1790s, at which time many Coast Salish contracted smallpox, tuberculosis, and measles, cutting their population in half by 1840 (White 1980). Smallpox Bay on San Juan Island was named as a reminder of the impact of disease on the Coast Salish.

By 1827 the Hudson’s Bay Company had established Fort Langley on the Fraser River, and many early interactions were recorded in journals written by Company employees stationed at the Fort (Machlachlan 1998, Suttles 1998). Though ownership of the entire Northwest Territory was disputed by England, Spain, Russia and the United

States well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the countries paid relatively little attention to the Islands. The 1846 boundary agreement thus was ambiguous about the Islands' ownership, though they had become heavily controlled by the British Hudson's Bay Company by that time. The first American settlers arrived on the Islands in 1852, an event that sparked debate over taxation and reignited the border dispute. During that time, the Euroamerican population grew as British and Americans moved to the Islands in order to claim the islands for their respective nations. In 1859, an American shot a British-owned pig eating potatoes on his property, thus commencing the infamous 'Pig War,' leading to years of joint military occupation by British and American troops on San Juan Island, which is now commemorated by National Historical Parks at the former camps. The Americans ultimately came into possession of the Islands in 1872 after a decree by Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany, who was brought in as a neutral party to decide the dispute. The pig was the only casualty (Richardson 1995).

A local historian affiliated with the Lopez Island Historical Museum was one of the creators of an exhibit that grouped the islands' history into 3 different phases, with the first characterized by the "Islanders" or Coast Salish inhabits, followed by the pioneers, who intermarried and fit better with Native life, and finally the 'community builders', who came with schools, churches, women and medicine to civilize and/or get rid of the Indians. From 1850 until the end of the century—falling into phase two—many Coast Salish women intermarried with white settlers while some Coast Salish men began working for the Hudson's Bay Company (Richardson 1990, 104). While these forms of assimilation were occurring, however, officially 1855 brought the signing of the Point Elliot Treaty, where Lummi, Samish and other Coast Salish peoples relinquished their

island lands to the United States. The US created mainland reservations as new homes for the Coast Salish, though they were frequently insensitive to tribal and familial organization. For example, the Lummi (whose territory included village sites on Orcas Island) and Samish (who had village sites on Lopez Island, among other locations) were assigned the same reservation territory (what is now the Lummi Indian reservation outside Bellingham, WA)—an awkward arrangement that ultimately left the Samish without a reservation of their own. Due to the close kinship and social relations between many Coast Salish tribes, the Samish occupy a difficult space in which they feel a distinctly Samish identity, but are reluctant to completely disavow their close familial ties with other groups like the Lummi or Saanich. These complications did not lend themselves easily to the US imposed tribal classification system, and contributed to the Samish's uncertain tribal status from the signing of the Point Elliot Treaty (at which they were present, but did not actually sign the Treaty) until 1926, when they formed their own tribal constitution.

After decades of a diaspora of their own, the Samish later 'lost' their tribal status in 1969 due to a clerical error by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and eventually regained it in 1996 after years of lawsuits and the help of testimony from expert witnesses like Wayne Suttles. The Samish's unwillingness to deny their close kinship relationships with other tribes contributed to the seemingly endless legal battle, as the courts had difficulty understanding how the Samish could be so closely related to other tribes yet still want to be a tribe of their own (Wayne Suttles 2003, personal communication). Ongoing lawsuits are still deciding the Samish's rights with regard to treaties created during the time period they were not officially recognized. Now, though they still lack

reservation territory, the Samish have purchased land in and around Anacortes, WA, which is the departure point for the ferry to the San Juan Islands. The Samish Indian Nation established the Center for the Study of Coast Salish Environments from 2002-2003 with the goals of educating Samish students, providing public education resources, and increasing the knowledge available regarding the ecology and archaeology of traditional Coast Salish territories.

### *Geography, Ecology and Early Industries*

Orcas is 56.92 square miles and the most mountainous of the San Juan Islands, with great geological diversity and extant but limited freshwater resources (Bushman 1949)(see **Map 3**). The island is sometimes described as being shaped like an upside down ‘U’ or like two saddlebags, though in fact it has two large and two small peninsulas on its southern side separated by the largest bay, East Sound, as well as West Sound and Deer Harbor on the western side of the island. The town of Eastsound is located in the middle of the “U,” and if it were 20 feet lower, Orcas would in fact become two separate islands (Bushman 1949). In addition to Eastsound, Deer Harbor, Westsound, Orcas Village (where the ferry departs), Olga and Doe Bay are the island’s towns, which (except in the case of Eastsound) are primarily defined by the existence of a post office and possibly some commercial storefronts. To illustrate the point: a resident with whom I was meeting in Westsound needed only to tell me that her business was “on the corner.” Indeed, there is just one T-intersection in Westsound. Olga and Doe Bay (sometimes referred to by locals as ‘Doeberia’) are physically the most remote villages as they are furthest from the ferry, and their residents often relish in this isolation and consider

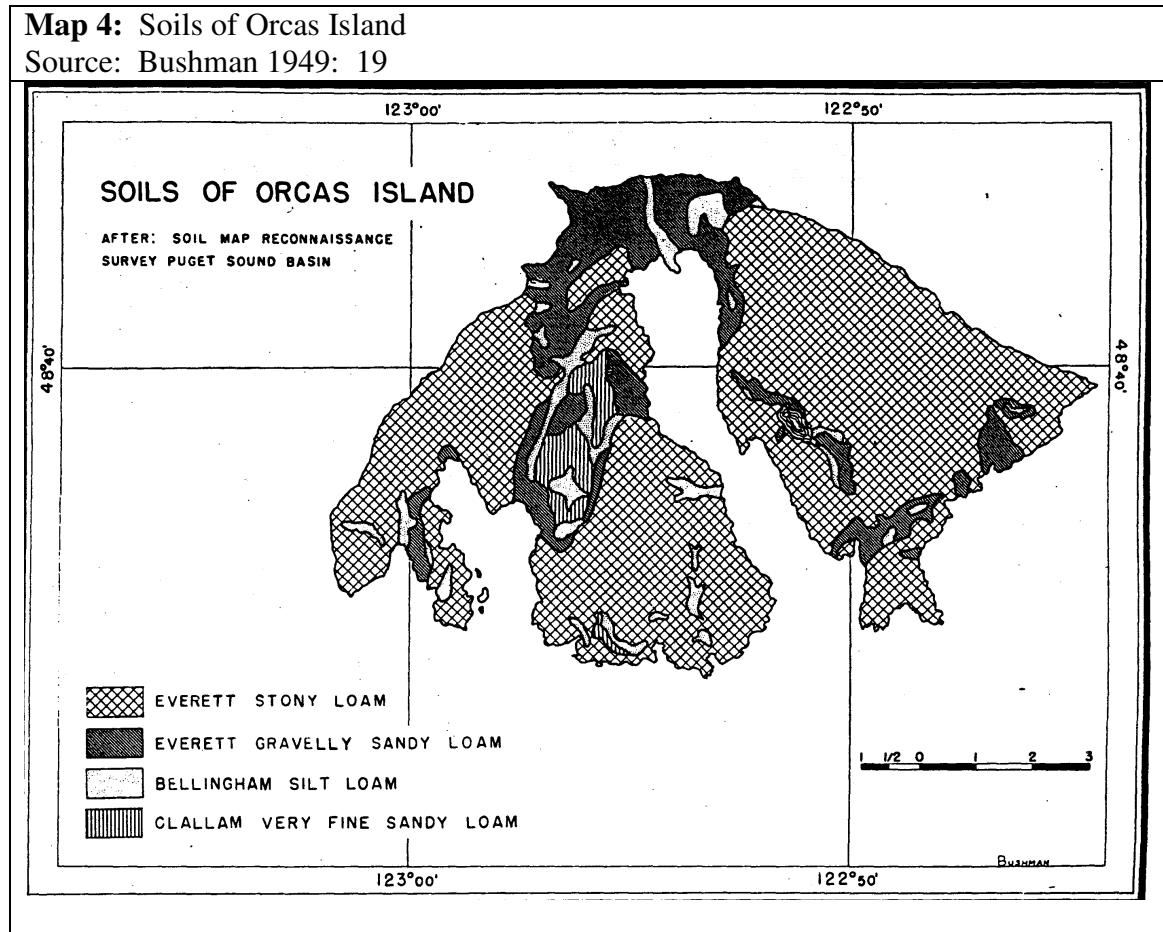
**Map 3:** Orcas Island, WASource: [www.orcasisland.net/images/map.gif](http://www.orcasisland.net/images/map.gif)

themselves more removed from mainland/consumer life than those who live on the western side of the island. The greatest population concentration is around Eastsound, and otherwise homes are somewhat scattered along the main highway and numerous private or public, sometimes dirt, roads throughout the island. Mount Constitution, the highest point in the Island at 2,409 above sea level, is located in Moran State Park on the eastern side of the island. The two largest lakes on the island, Cascade Lake and Mountain Lake, are also on the eastern part of the island and are part of a complex system of still poorly mapped streams. The western part of the island has comparatively less freshwater than the east, though it is home to Crow Valley, which has some of the most fertile soil on the island, as discussed below.

In terms of climate, the San Juan Islands are distinct from the Pacific Northwest mainland because they lie in the rain shadow of the Olympic Mountains and Island Range, receiving about 19-26 inches of rain annually, which is about half of the average annual precipitation found in Seattle, WA. The temperature of the San Juan Islands (fitting within the broader temperate zone of the Gulf Islands Biotic Area, with the Gulf Islands themselves located just to the north of the San Juans and over the Canadian border) is generally mild and “mediterranean” (Suttles 1987, 32). The land itself is home to plant life including Garry oaks, Douglass firs, western red cedars, western hemlocks and the madrona trees with their smooth bright orange peeling bark. In spite of their ubiquity in the Pacific Northwest, the Douglass fir is not a climax type in the Gulf Islands Biotic area and is actually the product of periodic forest fires throughout the region (*ibid*). There exists evidence on Orcas Island of Coast Salish (Lummi) use of fire to encourage the growth of berries and staple root crops like camas and bracken fern, as well as to increase deer and elk habitat (Goss 1995). The anthropogenic use of fire, described further in Chapter 5, has contributed to a diversity of types of vegetative cover on the islands including grasses, brush, deciduous trees and conifers (*ibid*).

According to Donald Otto Bushman (1949), whose Master of Arts thesis on “The Geography of Orcas” I located at the Orcas Island Historical Museum and whose work contains the most detailed description of geological features of Orcas that I could locate, there are four types of soils on Orcas Island. They are: Everett stony loams (found in the more mountainous areas), Everett gravelly sandy loam (found scattered over the surface of the island and often forming a shallow covering over underlying rock, particularly around Eastsound), the Clallum very fine sandy loam (found in Crow Valley on the

western half of the island), and Bellingham silt loam (found in small patches scattered throughout the island)(see **Map 4**). Loam is a soil consisting of a mixture of varying proportions of clay, silt, and sand<sup>11</sup> and, while in general loam is considered ideal for agricultural purposes, the Everett stony loam, which makes up about 60-70 per cent of the



island's surface, is extremely porous and leads to rapid drainage and difficulty farming (Bushman 1949, 20). While the gravelly sandy loam soils are not ideal, they can yield crops with labor intensive agriculture (*ibid*, 20). The Clallum very fine sandy loam soil found in Crow Valley is the best agricultural soil on the island, for it has a high water-

<sup>11</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/loam>. (accessed 17 January 2009).

holding capacity and can be easily drained and cultivated (*ibid*, 21). Finally, the Bellingham silt loam does not drain as easily as the very fine sandy loam, but can be very productive when properly drained (*ibid*, 21-22). All in all, Bushman concludes that “the mountainous character of the island greatly limits agriculture. The climate is favorable to the growth of certain crops, the soils produce average of better yields generally, but because of its mountainous character, the island is not and could not be a top ranking agricultural area” (22). This assessment is generally fitting with the smaller farms found on the island, with the average farm size in the San Juan County at 46 acres with 20 acres as the mode size.<sup>12</sup> There are productive areas and soils within specific, less mountainous areas on Orcas in particular, and of course other factors described later, including rising land prices, island transportation limitations and overall affordability also prevent Orcas from becoming a “top ranking agricultural area.”

Nonetheless, the history of agriculture on Orcas is a significant force that has shaped the island’s economy and culture from Euroamerican settlement to the present. Agricultural data from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is scarce (Bushman 1949), though the first written records of agriculture in the San Juan Islands date to 1853, when the Hudson’s Bay Company introduced 1,300 sheep.<sup>13</sup> James Francis Tulloch, in his published diary from 1875-1910, also describes the island’s fruit production, writing, “Our island has already become quite famous for the quality of our fruits. Not only for our apples, pears, plums and cherries and other Northern fruits, also some more of the tropical fruits” (Keith 1978, 50). From about 1900 until the ‘20s, San Juan County was a critical producer of tree fruits for the state of Washington and had a significant population

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<sup>12</sup> San Juan County Agricultural Resources Committee. 2006.  
<http://www.sjcarc.org/word/SurveySummary.pdf>. (accessed 12 February 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Tom Schultz. “A quick overview of agriculture in SJ County.” *Island Neighbors*. January 1997.

of milk cows. The year 1900 also brought a peak in the sheep population to 12,000, and poultry became a major agricultural resource in the 1930s and '40s. After irrigation reached Eastern Washington in the 1920s, however, the San Juans could no longer remain competitive and the fruit industry collapsed. Agriculture employed 28 percent of the population in 1954, a number that dropped to 2.7 percent in 1994. While the net number of farms has increased in the last 30 years—after having decreased greatly since the early 1900s—the size of those plots has decreased from 50-100 acres to 10-20 acres.<sup>14</sup> Between WWII and 1992, the percentage of farmland in the county has declined from 61 percent to 16 percent of the landscape.<sup>15</sup> A 2002 US Department of Agriculture census reports that the number of farms as well as the amount of land being farmed has decreased 3 percent and 9 percent, respectively, since 1997. However, the market value of production in 2002 increased 10 percent since 1997, up to over \$3.1 million—largely due to an increase in high-value crops—a value that still only placed San Juan County 38<sup>th</sup> in the state out of 39 counties.

In addition to agriculture, limestone mining, logging, and smuggling were also important to the early settler economy. Langdon's Lime Kiln was constructed on the shores of East Sound in 1869, operating until the 1930s. The extracted lime was added to the cement used in construction projects in cities like Seattle and San Francisco (Orcas Island Historical Society and Museum and 2006). Local logging and sawmills produced lumber for construction of docks, boats, and buildings, as well as drying racks, barrels and crates for the fruit industry, while some lumber was also sold to mainland mills

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<sup>14</sup> Tom Schultz. "A quick overview of agriculture in SJ County." *Island Neighbors*. January 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Leeming, "County's farm icons are receiving a lot of support." *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. 1 July 1992; Tom Schultz. "A quick overview of agriculture in SJ County." *Island Neighbors*. January 1997.

(*ibid*). Unofficially, smuggling goods and even people across the Canadian border was also an important part of the early islands economy. One Lopez Island Historical Museum worker and longtime islander told me, “[as an islander] you don’t talk about your Indian grandmother or your ancestors’ smuggling.” Starting at least with the joint British and American occupation of San Juan Island during the Pig War, early Euroamerican islanders smuggled liquor and opium as well as Canadian silks and wools across the border to the US, where they could fetch higher prices (Richardson 1990).

Smugglers also brought Chinese laborers to the islands to work cheaply as unskilled laborers (Richardson 1990, Richardson 1995, Keith 1978), a presence that is now all but invisible except within some written accounts. In 1882, US Congress responded to the influx of Chinese immigrants to the west coast with the creation of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which made the further importation of Chinese illegal, but allowed those already admitted to stay. The San Juan Islands, with their close location to the border of British Columbia, were in an ideal position to profit from the smuggling of Chinese laborers, many of whom would pay \$100 and up to be sneaked from Canada into the US (Richardson 1990). Early settler James Francis Tulloch recalls in his published diary that the Roche Harbor Lime Company on San Juan Island and Orcas’s Cascade Lumber Company in particular had imported Chinese laborers to cut their costs. Tulloch (Keith 1978, 47) also posits himself as an active instigator of the “Orcas Islands Anti-Chinese Association,” writing:

As no white family would live near them [the Chinese] I thought it time to get busy, so I called a meeting at our house and we organized the Orcas Island Anti-Chinese Association for which I drew up a constitution and laws. ... So the Anti-Chinese movement of the Northwest began that had a nation-wide influence. For unlike the sandlot hoodlums of San Francisco, we, while remaining law abiding people, declared that self defense compelled us to protect ourselves from an

incursion of race that was alien to us in every thing [sic].

Tulloch continues to describe the success of his brainchild, much to the dismay of the hiring industries who brought the Chinese to the islands. He portrays the Association as an alternative to the “mob-violence” that could have resulted from “more excitable” islanders’ attempts to expel the Chinese, instead creating an atmosphere in which “the Chinese were so badly frightened that they sprang onto the steamer before she landed, chattering like a band of magpies” (48).

This history of racism is somewhat of an anomaly to the yeoman myth of American hard work on the land, presumably supported by family labor and not illegal non-white migrants (see Mitchell 1996). While evidence is scant, the brief period of Chinese inhabitation was another force in shaping the political economic and environmental trajectory of Orcas. The full impact of the Chinese’s labor contribution to the island economy is unknown, though they likely contributed to the early success of these island industries, providing a foundational source of cheap labor as mining and logging took off until their ultimate collapse in the 1930s. The Chinese impact upon the physical landscape is also unclear, though the owner of an outdoor sculpture gallery on San Juan Island told me that local historians have informed her of a photograph of Chinese women laborers using scissors to cut the grass of a golf course where the gallery now stands—an image I was unfortunately unable to locate myself. Such intersections between human labor, aesthetic considerations, and the presence of leisurely pursuits like golf act as precursors to the tourism and real estate industries such beauty would ultimately engender.

*Island Beauty, Resorts and Summer Homes*

Late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century records of visitors to the San Juan Islands reveal their enchantment with its beautiful terrain and perceived slower pace of life. Steam tourism in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> Century made travel in Puget Sound easier, faster, and more affordable to both Americans and Europeans (Pagh 2001, 15). Records from pioneers of the 1860s-70s report “the shoreline at Crescent Beach [on East Sound] was white with the tents of mainland people who had come over to the island to ‘get away from it all’” (Richardson 1995, 52). Tulloch (Keith 1978, 4) describes his journey to Portland, OR, prior to his 1875 move to Orcas, when he met two travel companions, one of whom was a resident of Lopez Island; “He made the poor fellow believe that the Garden of Eden had nothing on Lopez Island. ... he got me to promise that if I had the opportunity I would go see this marvelous island.” As word of the islands beauty spread, the first hotels opened in the San Juans in the 1880s, and car-carrying ferries began their service to Orcas in the early 1920s. Founder of Moran State Park on Orcas Island and former mayor of Seattle Robert Moran advertised the San Juan Islands to the east coast as early as 1911, encouraging publicity campaigns to attract visitors who would soon be able to access the Pacific through the Panama Canal: “Puget Sound should become the great summer resort and yachting center of the Pacific Coast, for the reason that there is no other place that combines all the advantages of land, water and climate.” The San Juan Islands, wrote Moran, are the “ideal summer resort.”<sup>16</sup>

Resorts in particular became popular from the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and peaking in the 1940s after the end of World War II. In addition to the beautiful scenery (particularly from the road and sea, as described further in Chapter 3), resorts capitalized on

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<sup>16</sup> *Orcas Islander*. 12 December 1911.

opportunities for beachcombing, hiking, hunting and fishing (Orcas Island Historical Society and Museum 2006, Bushman 1949). The earliest resorts provided only canvas tents on wooden platforms to guests, but by 1925 cabins came to replace the tents as a wealthier clientele were able to afford more refined amenities (Orcas Island Historical Society and Museum 2006). The leisure class, then, is not really a new phenomenon, though the post-WWII global and national economic trends described in Chapter 1 have led to increasing numbers who are able to afford this kind of retreat.

Further, the collapse of the fruit industry in the late 1920s due to competition from newly irrigated Eastern Washington coincided with increased attention to resort income, yet did not mean the end of agriculture altogether. Rather, farming slowly shifted from a major source of income to a smaller scale endeavor. Families continued to hold onto their personal gardens as a means of subsistence, but there was no longer the market to support a commercial industry. Further, the possibility of mainland employment opportunities lured many younger individuals away from Orcas, leaving only their elderly parents and a dearth of the labor necessary for agricultural production. Bushman (1949, 50) describes the scene at the time of his research, writing:

Much of Orcas was originally homesteaded. Today many of these homesteaders are the homes of people too old to do active farming. In most instances these individuals are sons or daughters of the pioneers who have remained in the old home place while greener pastures beckoned brothers and sisters to leave the island. Such farms account for a large proportion of the sheep population of the island. Sheep are the least bother of any animal for all they require is pasture and annual shearing.

Today, many of these same socioeconomic factors still apply—with limited island employment opportunities, many individuals born on the islands ultimately move off to find work, leaving an older generation of former farmers who now lack the labor to farm.

Keeping pasture animals like sheep or llamas represent low labor-intensity ways to maintain agricultural heritage when labor is scarce.

In 1924, the County Auditor predicted the future of the islands: “the shores will be lined with beautiful summer homes...to become all year homes as the air-craft, particularly the hydroplane, is perfected and generally adopted as a means of transportation” (quoted in Bushman 1949, 62). The Auditor’s prediction—at least with regard to summer homes—ultimately proved to be accurate. Though the islands’ population dropped steadily during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of scarce employment opportunities, it began to rise again in the 1970s, when transportation as well as national socioeconomic trends and expectations presented a class of people who could afford to choose a home of leisure. Prior to the 1970s, San Juan County’s population grew only 32 percent from 1900 until 1970, from 2,928 to 3,856 people. In contrast, from 1970 to 1980 the population grew to 7,825—an increase of 103% in those ten years alone.<sup>17</sup>

During all this time, agriculture continued on a small scale, as descendents of original homesteaders (many of whom had Coast Salish ancestors of whom they rarely spoke) continued to farm and subsist on whatever additional income they could garner. As the county population rose consistently, though at varying rates from the 1970s to the present day, tourism and particularly real estate speculation became important sources of income. From the 1970s on, longtime residents and their descendents merged with new residents who, in broad terms, would seek a leisurely life of escape, a return to the ideal of Jeffersonian labor, or some combination of the two.

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<sup>17</sup> San Juan County Parks. <http://www.co.san-juan.wa.us/Parks/P&R%20Plan%20Section%20III.pdf>. (accessed 10 October 2008).

*Contemporary Demographics and Political Economy*

With the population growth of the 1970s came a new need for county governance and infrastructure. San Juan Island's Friday Harbor, which still has the highest population in the county, became the county seat and the only incorporated town in the county in 1909. There exist few if any records of a concerted county effort to assert a unified vision of the islands from settlement until the 1960s debates leading up to the approval of the county's first Comprehensive Plan (Comp Plan) in 1979, the document that establishes a framework for the county's governance, land use, housing, transportation, historical preservation, and other relevant planning issues. Though the Comp Plan covers goals and visions regarding these diverse island interests, it fails to specify exact regulations, meaning that developers and residents had to investigate their plans' compliance with county regulations on a largely case by case basis. A Unified Development Code was adopted in 1998 as a document that would set specific regulations in terms of how to achieve the visions and broader principles set forth in the Comp Plan, hoping to end the rather broad space for interpretation that existed in its absence.

Debates beginning in the 1960s questioned the necessity of long range planning, with many rejecting the entire notion of planning as an affront to the independent pioneer spirit, as discussed further in Chapter 4. Nonetheless, as the population grew in such a manner to necessitate some sort of management, the Board of County Commissioners approved the first Comprehensive Plan in 1979, setting forth an agenda regarding the future of development and conservation on the islands. Some residents describe the early meetings leading up to the 1979 Comp Plan as favoring "whoever yelled the loudest."

Many controversies (see Chapter 4) were left unsettled after the Plan's adoption, leading to several rounds of revision. The 1993 Vision Statement at the start of the Comp Plan set forth an image of what residents hoped the county would be in 2020 and, while many residents support the vision itself, the manner in which to achieve that vision is still hotly disputed as longtime residents, summer homers, and realtors continually debate in the hopes of having their interests met. Ultimately, a new Comprehensive Plan was adopted in December of 1998, though the county continues to hold hearings regarding its revision.

When Washington became a state in 1889, all county governments were headed by three elected County commissioners (or five commissioners if the population exceeded 300,000).<sup>18</sup> In 1948, the state constitution was amended to allow counties to establish an alternative form of county government in which elected Freeholders would write the county's new charter. In 2004, San Juan County's Board of County Commissioners authorized a local citizen group called Islanders for a Charter Government to undertake the process in which 21 elected Freeholders would write a charter that would ultimately be submitted to a popular vote. In 2005, San Juan County became the sixth county in Washington state (out of 39 counties) to adopt a home rule charter, meaning the County commissioners would continue in their posts with only legislative power while voters would directly determine the power of initiative, referendum, and the review of the Charter itself.<sup>19</sup> The election of twenty-one local district Freeholders was yet to take place when I complete my research in summer 2006, and the impacts of the new form of government on county planning and preservation are yet to be felt.

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<sup>18</sup> Ted Grossman. "Lots of questions about charter government process." *The Islands Sounder*. 4 August 2004.

<sup>19</sup>Vote 'Yes' for Home Rule. [www.sjcgoodgovernment.com](http://www.sjcgoodgovernment.com). (accessed 5 March 2006).

In terms of political allegiance, observing the Democratic and Republican Party marchers in Orcas's Fourth of July parade quickly reveals a Democratic majority. In 2000, 52.54 percent of San Juan County voters voted for Al Gore, compared to 35.67 percent for George W. Bush and 10.39 percent for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader. In the 2008 election, 70.02 percent voted for Barack Obama, while 28.09 voted for John McCain and only 0.95% voted for Nader.<sup>20</sup> At the state and local levels, Democratic Congressional Representatives, Senators and Governors won by similar margins in San Juan County.

Census and economic data from San Juan County paint a picture of a place where the population is growing older, the workforce is disappearing, and wages are declining. Retirees make up an increasingly significant part of the population on Orcas, as children and working age individuals are found in diminishing numbers. San Juan County's workforce is also shrinking—largely as a product of escalating land prices, which makes it more difficult for individuals to buy land on which to live and work. Changes in the composition of the population also challenge the future of agriculture. There are an increasing number of retired people and fewer children and younger families—a trend that worries many people concerned with the island community. The number of 25-44 year olds dropped from 30% in 1990 to 20% in 2003, while the overall population grew 47% during that same period.<sup>21</sup> As the population ages, the size of the workforce is declining without a younger generation of workers able to afford to take their place. In

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<sup>20</sup> San Juan County Elections Department.  
<http://wei.secstate.wa.gov/sanjuan/ElectionResults/Pages/ArchivedElections.aspx>. (accessed 16 January 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Navigating Our Future. [www.navigatingourfuture.org](http://www.navigatingourfuture.org) (accessed 10 February 2006).; OPAL 2004 Newsletter

San Juan County, 12.3% of the workforce will retire in the next 5 years—twice the national average.<sup>22</sup>

Nineteen percent of the population is over age 65, compared to 12.4% in the U.S. and 11.2% statewide (see **Table 1**). Those aged 20-34 made up only 10.22% of the population in 2000, as compared with 20.98 in the state, and the median age in the county is 47.4 as compared to 35.3 in both the U.S. and Washington State. The number of 25-44 year olds dropped from 30% in 1990 to 20% in 2003, and the number of 45-64 year olds grew from 24% to 38%, while the overall population grew 47% during that same time.<sup>23</sup>

<b>Table 1: Age in San Juan County, WA and the US</b>			
	San Juan County	Washington State	United States
Population under age 5	3.1%	6.3%	6.8%
Population under age 18	15.9%	23.6%	24.8%
Population age 20-34*	10.22%	20.89%	NA
Population over age 65	21.1%	11.5%	12.4%
Median age*	47.4	35.3	35.3
Source: US Census. 2005. <a href="http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/53055.html">http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/53055.html</a> except where noted. *Census of San Juan County. 2000. <a href="http://factfinder.census.gov">http://factfinder.census.gov</a>			

The increasing number of residents over age 65 and the drop in the number of working age individuals has led to a decline in San Juan County's labor force, defined as all persons over age 16 who are either working or actively seeking work, from 51% to 44% between 2000 and 2004.<sup>24</sup> As the population ages, the size of the workforce is declining without a younger generation of workers able to afford to take their place. This

<sup>22</sup>Navigating Our Future. [www.navigatingourfuture.org](http://www.navigatingourfuture.org) (accessed 10 January 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Navigating Our Future. [www.navigatingourfuture.org](http://www.navigatingourfuture.org) (accessed 10 February 2006).; OPAL 2004 Newsletter

<sup>24</sup> Orcas Research Group. <http://orcasresearch.org>. April 6, 2005; Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch, Employment Security Department. "Profile of San Juan County." September 1999. <http://www.wa.gov/esd/lmea/pubs/profiles/sanjuan.pdf>

trend is evident in all economic sectors, including agriculture; the average age of principal farm operators in the county was 49.9 in 1982, 52.7 in 1992<sup>25</sup>, and 57.8 years in 2002.<sup>26</sup> Many believe rural character—and productive agriculture in particular—cannot be preserved without encouraging young families to settle—an issue closely linked with affordable land and employment opportunities.

In spite of the luxurious images often associated with the islands, a 2003 study by the Opportunity Council of Bellingham claimed the biggest gap between rich and poor in the US exists in San Juan County.<sup>27</sup> Though median household income and per capita income for SJC is greater than the national average, a closer look reveals the disparity between wage laborers and those living off investments and savings. The average wage in San Juan County in 1997 was \$19,548, significantly lower than the state average of \$30,755 (see **Table 2**). Though per capita income was ranked second and median personal income was ranked eighth in the state, wages in San Juan County were ranked 35<sup>th</sup> in the state out of 39 counties. To explain this discrepancy, it's important to note that personal income encompasses all types of income, including wages, investment income, retirement income, interest, and government transfer payments. The gap between earned or wage income and investment income has been steadily increasing since 1970 (see **Table 3**). In San Juan County, investment income alone accounts for 49% of the county's total personal income, the highest percentage in the state.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, 38% of personal income in the county is from wages, compared to the state figure of 69% (see

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<sup>25</sup> Frank Leeming, "County's farm icons are receiving a lot of support." *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. 1 July 1992

<sup>26</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Washington D.C., 2002 Census of Agriculture, County Profile: San Juan, Washington.

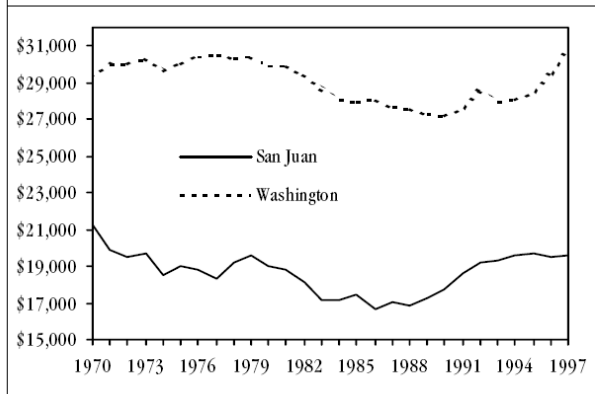
<sup>27</sup> Scott Rasmussen, "Poverty on the rise in county: Disparity leads nation." *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. 8 October 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch, Employment Security Department. "Profile of San Juan County." September 1999. <http://www.wa.gov/esd/lmea/pubs/profiles/sanjuan.pdf>

**Table 4).** The average salary in the county was \$24,640 in 2002, notably below the living wage, defined as \$29,723.<sup>29</sup> In 2002, over half of the workers in the county held jobs with incomes below the standard living wage.<sup>30</sup> In fact, as of 2002 retail and construction were the only employment sectors in which greater than 20% of the workforce were making above the living wage.<sup>31</sup> These trends suggest a class division in the San Juan Islands based upon income. Specifically, those whose main source of income is wages are having a significantly harder time affording to live on Orcas than those whose income relies upon investment dividends and retirement income. This divide also falls largely along age lines, with younger individuals and families with school age children having to rely upon frequently unreliable low wage labor on island, while more elderly retired people or telecommuters can make their way with wealth accumulated off island earlier in life.

**Table 2: Annual Average Wage**

**Annual Average Wage  
San Juan County & Washington, 1970-1997  
Source: Employment Security Department**



Source: Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch, Employment Security Department. "Profile of San Juan County." September 1999.

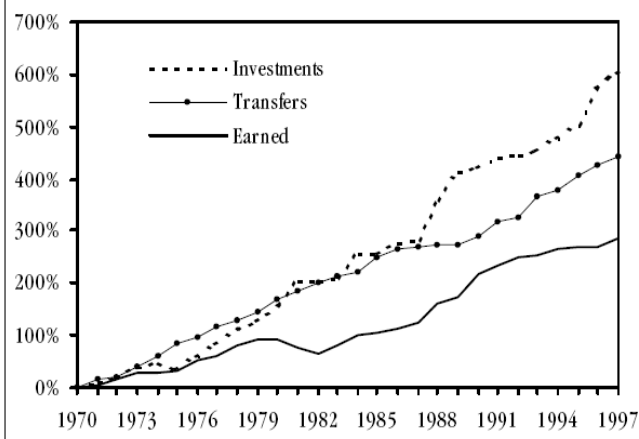
<sup>29</sup> Orcas Research Group. <http://orcasresearch.org>. (accessed 6 April 2005).

<sup>30</sup> San Juan County Park Board. Parks, Recreation, and Preserved Lands Plan. Section 3: San Juan County Profile. <http://www.co.san-juan.wa.us/Parks/P&R%20Plan%20Section%20III.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Orcas Research Group. <http://orcasresearch.org>. (accessed 6 April 2005).

**Table 3: Personal Income Components, Cumulative % Increase**

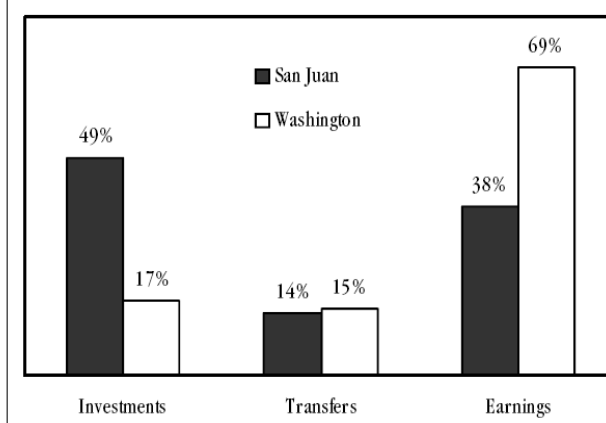
**Pers. Income Components, Cumulative % Incr.**  
**San Juan County, 1970-1997**  
*Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis*



Source: Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch, Employment Security Department. "Profile of San Juan County." September 1999.

**Table 4: Personal Income Components**

**Personal Income Components**  
**San Juan County & Washington, 1997**  
*Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis*

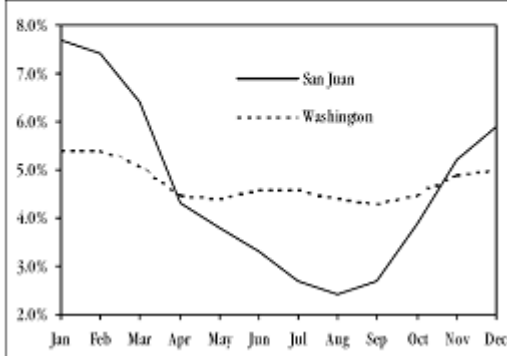


Source: Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch, Employment Security Department. "Profile of San Juan County." September 1999.

In 2001, the mayor of Friday Harbor on San Juan Island declared, “the working people in this island have become the working poor.”<sup>32</sup> The islands are not a place to make money off wage labor, and what attracts newcomers to the islands is generally the beauty and lifestyle, and not the promise of work. The director of Health and Human Services in the county remarked, after the release of the 2000 census, “We see lots of folks who don’t make that much money. People come here thinking the island offers a laid-back way to live, then discover they need to work harder than on the mainland, often holding down two jobs.”<sup>33</sup> Additionally, many jobs are seasonal (see **Table 5**) due to the decrease in tourist dollars in the winter months, making employment wages somewhat irregular and unpredictable. One resident of 20 years whom I met told me she works five different jobs, but combined they still add up to under 30 hours a week. The average low or very low income adult on Orcas works 3 jobs.<sup>34</sup>

**Table 5: Monthly Unemployment**

**Figure 12**  
**Monthly Unemployment**  
**San Juan County & Washington, 1998**  
**Source: Employment Security Department**



Source: Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch, Employment Security Department. “Profile of San Juan County.” September 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Jeff VanDerford. “Census paints a portrait of county.” *Journal of the San Juan Islands*. 11 April 2001.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*

<sup>34</sup> “2003 Countywide housing survey results.” OPAL Annual Report 2003. Spring 2004.

The population of the county is also a highly educated one (see **Table 6**), a characteristic of many one-time urban residents who have decided to move to the country later in life (Jacob 2003, 181). The 2000 Census reveals that 94.4% of the population of those age 25 or older of the county has a high school degree or higher, as compared with 80.4% nationwide and 87.1% statewide. Additionally, 40.2% of those over 25 has a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 24.4% nationwide and 27.7% statewide.<sup>35</sup> Educated people often work below their ability just to be able to stay on the island; as one older retired resident said during a discussion of affordability at a public meeting, “young people can only earn a living here by picking up a hammer—regardless of their education or training. They become carpenters and live in a camper, just so they can afford to stay here.” Data from the 2000 Census reveal the majority of working residents are employed in the ‘service’ industry, which includes working in hotels, restaurants, moped or bike rental shops, recreational instruction, or property sales.<sup>36</sup>

<b>Table 6: Education and Race in San Juan County</b>			
	San Juan County	Washington State	United States
Population over 25 with high school degree	94.4%	87.1%	80.4
Population over 25 with bachelor's degree	40.2%	27.7%	24.4%
White population	95.0%	81.8%	75.1%
Source: US Census, 2000. <a href="http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/53055.html">http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/53055.html</a>			

At 95 percent, the vast majority of the San Juan County population is non-Hispanic whites. While diversity is lacking, overall the population is significantly more welcoming of the possibility of racial diversity than they were during, for example, the

<sup>35</sup> US Census, 2000: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/53055.html>. (accessed 11 November 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Jeff VanDerford. “Census paints a portrait of county.” *Journal of the San Juan Islands*. 11 April 2001.

period of Chinese inhabitation. The second most represented racial or ethnic group in the county is Latinos, at 2.4 percent, followed by residents of two or more races at 2.0 percent. Surprisingly to many, American Indians made up only 0.8 percent of the county population in 2000—though some of the 2.0 percent of mixed ancestry individuals may contain some Coast Salish ancestry—and African Americans were only 0.3 percent.<sup>37</sup> The Latino population is mostly employed by usually more recent residents as private help, or in the service industry, working as hotel housekeepers, cooks, and a few as restaurateurs throughout the county.

While there may not be clear and consistent matches between types of residents and their personal definitions of rural character, it is nonetheless helpful to create typologies as a way of better understanding the diversity of the islands' inhabitants. First, 'islanders' or 'locals' are characterized primarily by their time of residence. A slim book sold in Orcas's bookstores and tourist shops entitled *The Official Illustrated Orcas-American Dictionary and Phrase Book and Gazetteer* half jokingly explains the complexities of "being a local," introducing the section with the observation, "Since there is very little to do on Orcas to distinguish oneself, status is conferred mainly just by hanging around for a long time." It continues to describe the "Orcas pecking order," translating "Is she a local?" into "Has she been living on Orcas for more than 25 years interruptedly?" Along those lines, "old-timer" is interpreted as someone who "hasn't left the island for more than a week in the last 50 years." Old-timers, then, are defined by a combination of their age and time of residence, with many being second or third generation islanders themselves. Being "new" means having arrived in the last five to 25 years, "just off the boat" is someone who arrived in the last three to five years, and

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<sup>37</sup> US Census. 2000. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/53055.html>. (accessed 11 November 2007).

“they’re thinking of staying” is translated as “they’ve been here two to three years” (Hurwicz and Hurwicz 1997). Categorizing islanders by time of residence has historical precedence as well; James Francis Tulloch, in his published diaries from 1875-1910, recalls other islanders calling him a “greenhorn” in 1876, just a year after he moved to Orcas, causing him to defer to “older settlers” on local political matters (Keith 1978, 18).

One resident of more than 30 years who I interviewed at his local real estate office had an alternative basis for his definition; “to be an islander, you have to have been born here or put your children through our schools.” By including schools in his definition, he was asserting the centrality of investment in place—though new residents arrive and depart rapidly, people with children in schools are less likely to move when doing so would disrupt their children’s education. Further, having children in schools implies a greater commitment to place, for parents have greater incentive to be involved with local libraries, parent-teacher associations, safety issues, tax reform, and affordable housing efforts that greatly impact the island’s ability to attract and retain quality teachers. Even among those without school children, it is often these types of involvement that differentiate a ‘local’ from a ‘newcomer’—again, not defined purely by time of residence, but by individual and family investment in the economic, social and environmental health of the island. There are also class implications in this definition as well, for having school aged children implies having to work on the island, rather than being a retiree living off investment or retirement income.

In Tulloch’s time, there came a certain toughness or adventurousness in being the first to settle a new frontier, and some of those sentiments of exploration and discovery persist among contemporaries in justifying their right to be on Orcas. But in addition to

this dimension of length of residence, in more recent years there has been a class dimension to the residence question. With island land prices having increased over 750% from 1994 to 2004, and home building costs having increased 83% over that same period, more recent residents are also more likely to be wealthier and able to afford these escalating costs.<sup>38</sup> County wages, as described above, are nowhere near high enough to support purchasing a home, and rental options are also scarce and expensive. Some residents who move to the island and cannot afford a house live in tents or yurts on private property owned by a few individuals willing to provide these spaces to working newcomers. Thus, the implication is that a more recent homebuyer is living off investment or retirement income and not wage labor. Class on Orcas is perhaps most relevantly defined as the distinction between those who work and those who no longer need to. In other words, the source of one's income is a key distinguishing factor among residents that shapes, though does not predetermine, their views on a variety of island issues.

In other words, time of residence is significant beyond one's familiarity with Orcas as a home. Throughout this dissertation, I refer to my interviewees' time of residence, occupations and/or involvement in island life as ways of suggesting where they might fit within these rough categories of "islander," "oldtimer" or "newcomer." These categories are just ideals, however, and in reality they are porous and cannot be said to determine all of one's views and affiliations. For example, one woman and her husband are recent retirees from Seattle who told me they do not support affordable housing and defined rural character primarily as an aesthetic issue. While it might be tempting to label them as wealthy newcomers and deny any social or emotional

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<sup>38</sup> OPAL Annual Report 2004, Spring 2005.

investment they might have in their island home, they have also become close friends with another couple who are widely regarded as oldtimers. The more elderly couple has been raising sheep and produce on their farm for over 40 years, while their Seattle newcomer neighbors help them with farm chores as the former couple ages.

Relationships like this suggest that even a newcomer can share values and interests with an oldtimer, and that while categories of residence and class are important, they are not static or unconditional.

The current demographic conditions on Orcas Island reveal a place that has changed considerably since Euroamerican settlement, and certainly since the days of Coast Salish inhabitation. Attention to the diversity of economic, cultural and environmental histories suggests that preservation is not just a matter of keeping things the same, but that it involves an inherently political process wherein particular historical narratives become the norm while others are lost. For example, on Orcas Island, the agricultural past—as opposed to, say, past logging or Coast Salish camas cultivation—retains the interest of the local and national population, and has become the objective of contemporary conservation efforts. It is the characteristics of the current population—their cultural, economic and environmental experiences and interests—that determines the encouragement of some of these histories and the loss of others. Events like the removal of the Coast Salish from their island villages to mainland reservations have clearly shaped the population itself and the subsequent ways in which residents imagine what *should* be in the San Juans, replacing a largely marine based subsistence culture with a greater emphasis on landed agriculture. Further, contemporary class conflicts pit larger land owners and real estate speculators against working class residents, with the

victors ultimately shaping the county's Comprehensive Plan and Unified Development Code and, subsequently, the future of planning in the San Juans. Conservation easements themselves, as will be explored later, are ways in which private landholders can preserve particular landscape features in perpetuity and are not, as many of their creators maintain, a means of preserving an ahistorical and static nature. The San Juan Islands have been through a number of ecological, cultural and economic incarnations, yet only some of those narratives have emerged as dominant. The landscape itself is often the medium through which these changes become visible, such that battles over preservation, conservation and development are also struggles over landscape meaning and its associated history.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Rural Aesthetics and Landscapes of Leisure

“I bought this property because it resonated with my heart so much I couldn’t keep a dry eye, and I still can’t.” This resident of just two years looked me in the eye and expressed a motivation he shares with many who live on Orcas Island—the strong aesthetic pull that attracted them to the open fields, distant mountains, and peaceful waters that characterize the Orcas landscape. By aesthetics, I refer to not just visual appeal, but to the strong emotions evoked by the multisensory experience of being in the landscape. Aesthetically charged reactions to places are not universal, however, but are shaped by historical, personal, and social expectations and motivations. If we are to understand landscape as a process that gains meaning through experience, then how do residents and visitors live the Orcas landscape? I argue that while notions of how to achieve beauty differ between individuals, Orcas residents and visitors share a cultural memory for the myth of Jeffersonian pastoralism—which is not just a look, but an ideal that evokes particular social values including the absence of capitalist influence. This chapter examines the historical roots of the American rural and the ways those roots have molded the aesthetic tastes of both residents and tourists, resulting in the production of a standard of beauty that has ultimately become disengaged from the meanings that made it potent. In other words, while agricultural landscapes may have helped define rural aesthetics, the beauty inspired by those ideals can now exist even after the agriculture is fading. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion of beauty and environmental

health, evoking political ecology to reveal how politics and personal emotions can overshadow ecological principles in shaping land management.

While not all individuals share the same depth or manner of attachments to place, some level of aesthetic experience is evident through discussions with all of the residents with whom I spoke. The typical story of immigrants to the San Juans is that of the visitor who encounters the beauty of the islands and decides to stay, sending home for all his or her worldly possessions. This was true for a resident with a Masters degree who first visited Orcas with friends and then decided to stay: “I’d have scrubbed toilets just to live here,” she told me.

Yet, which particular aesthetic qualities are appealing vary between individuals of different backgrounds. Local artist Barbara Meyer describes in her recorded oral history the first time she and a realtor visited the property that would become her home: “[I said] ‘I’ll take it, I’ll take it!... I’m buying that sunset.’” The land itself, to some, is secondary to the view from it. By “buying that sunset,” Meyer is referring to the panorama that includes the sunset, perhaps over the water and through the trees and mountains in the distance. As an artist who specializes largely in landscape and nature paintings and drawings, such a view acts as artistic inspiration. In contrast, a farmer who was the subject of the photography exhibit for which I wrote the accompanying text revealed different values. While the photographer determined the farm’s “beauty shot” to be an image of a growth of bright red flowers and green stalks against the deep blue sky, the farmer insisted one particular photo of a single zucchini blossom growing in her field was her favorite: “This one picture says more to me about the farm than any of the other landscape shots put together.” The product of her labor—a zucchini—was to her the

most perfect expression of the land's beauty, expressed as the reward of working on and being *in* the landscape, rather than observing it from afar.

Whether longtime residents or recent additions to the island, farmers or retirees, inhabitants of either trailers or McMansions, the beauty of the San Juans is key to its appeal. Of course, the way that beauty is defined and expressed varies intensely between people, such that to one, the view of a sunset is the essence of a place, while to another, a zucchini is the epitome of rural beauty. While there will always be individual differences in aesthetic preference, in the San Juan Islands, the predominant aesthetic vision is rooted within images of American pastoralism, described below. Yet, the specific ways in which this vision is realized is largely a product of political economic processes. A political ecological perspective can bring attention to the emotional charge behind the American rural and the political economic conflicts that determine which of those visions will come to dominate, as described further in later chapters. The recurrence of 'rural character,' in both the testimony of residents and in the county's Comprehensive Plan, suggests more attention is needed to both the historical roots of the American rural and the ways in which residents have reclaimed that rural to make it relevant today.

### *Pastoralism, Agrarianism and Rural Character*

"The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination" (Marx 1968, 3). This bold statement rings true on Orcas Island today; few images have been as powerful throughout American history as that of the yeoman farmer laboring on the land to feed the family. Yet, in the absence of the yeoman on contemporary Orcas, a certain

landscape aesthetic has come to signify those American values, keeping the look (or imagined look) of Jeffersonian agriculture without the labor that was once critical to its meaning. Landowners, developers, and the tourist industry have consciously acted to maintain these pastoralist landscapes, using roads, environmental engineering, and landscaping to maintain the façade of pastoralism in a landscape in which leisure has largely replaced agricultural labor. What is this “pastoral ideal,” where did it come from, and how is it expressing itself today?

The Oxford English Dictionary (2008) shows “pastoral’s” first definition to be “A person or thing associated with spiritual care,” while the second definition refers to “a person or thing associated with the tending of livestock.” While the former definition suggests interesting intersections with Christianity in particular and remains intertwined with the moral virtues and ideals associated with the latter, my focus is on the more explicitly agricultural definition. Though the “pastoral” is specifically associated with livestock, definitions beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and through the 20<sup>th</sup> century reveal the concurrent romantic and literary associations of the term. These definitions include, “A literary work portraying rural life or the life of shepherds, esp. in an idealized or romantic form,” “A rural and idyllic scene or picture,” and “Pastoral poetry as a form or style of literary composition.” “Pastoralism” is dated to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is similarly defined as, “Concern with pastoral themes in literature or art.”

These early and ongoing links between the raising of livestock and romantic literature demonstrate the centrality of Euroamerican ideals in contributing to the notion of agriculture both as an “idyllic scene” and as a lifestyle. The notion of living off the land and subsisting primarily on one’s own labor is and was appealing to many,

particularly as urban and commercial environments spread across Europe and North America. Williams (1973, 46) explores many of these same themes in the English countryside. Much 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century British literature describes the country as exemplifying the “rural innocence of the pastoral,” while the city is a place of “worldliness” where industry, rather than agricultural production, is the norm. The fact that pastoralism is so commonly relegated to the fields of literature and art suggests the impossibility of attaining these ideas in reality. In other words, historically, such ideals never truly existed, making artistic representations one of the few ways to capture the emotional fervor associated with the idealized shepherd. Just as the “innocence of the pastoral” came to stand in for the realities of tending to livestock, so have the grazing origins of the pastoral been muddled, such that pastoralism is now commonly used to encompass a broader range of romantic agricultural pursuits.

Particularly in the United States, agriculture has powerful associations. Settlers came to America with the hopes of making a living for themselves by conquering and transforming wilderness. These settlers created a new conceptualization of the traditional divide between humans and nature, instead separating the rural landscape from the industrial machinery of the urban, as well as from the savagery of the wild. Richard Price, friend of Thomas Jefferson, wrote, “The happiest state of man is the middle state between the *savage* and the *refined*, or between the wild and the luxurious state.” This state is best exemplified by the “independent and hardy YEOMANRY,” whom Price extols for their simple means of living, hard work, and “numerous progeny” which would hopefully spread the world over (Price quoted in Marx 1968, 105).

The “yeoman” dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and, interestingly, was originally more closely associated with fighting ability rather than agriculture. The Oxford English Dictionary (2008) defines “yeoman” as “A servant or attendant in a royal or noble household, usually of a superior grade, ranking between a sergeant and a groom or between a squire and a page.” Later definitions described yeoman as “good, efficient, or useful service, such as is rendered by a faithful servant of good standing.” Thus, the link between yeoman and hard, efficient work was forged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, becoming specifically connected to agriculture and working on the land during the Elizabethan era in England. Jefferson himself believed in these ideals, writing, “Those who labor the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He has a chosen people” (quoted in Jackson and Zube 1970, 1). Historian Henry Nash Smith (1982, 133-134) ties the yeoman to agrarian ideals of the northwestern United States, in contrast to Southern pastoralism, which depended upon plantation slavery. Instead, the northern Jeffersonian yeoman exemplified the ideals of hard work on the land and, though Jefferson himself was a slaveholder, his ideal of tilling one’s own soil became the model of all that is virtuous to his followers. American studies scholar Leo Marx (1968, 111) further explores this link between landscape and agricultural labor:

Landscape means regeneration to the farmer. In sociological terms, it means the chance for a simple man, who does actual work, to labor on his property in his own behalf...the farmer of rural scenes [says] ‘these images I must confess, I always behold with pleasure, and extend them as far as my imagination can reach: for this is what may be called the true and the only philosophy of an American farmer.’

Romantic Jeffersonian imagery of the yeoman farmer epitomized the ideal relationship with nature, as laboring on one’s own land not only created wealth, but was morally desirable. Since the time of Jefferson, the “images...beheld with pleasure” have come to

symbolize those ideal virtues. Americans, in this sense, have reclaimed the rural such that “rural scenes” can now stand in for actual labor and production, while still evoking the same sense of morality and satisfaction.

In a place where development poses a threat to current lifestyles in terms of population increase and rising property values, the rural is especially meaningful—a ‘natural’ place in which humans can rightly interact with their environment. Industrialism has been the main threat to the pastoral image since Jefferson’s time (Marx 1968, 26). Many theorists have argued that romanticizing the country, particularly in literature, was a response to the perceived ills of urban life (Williams 1973, Marx 1968, Schmitt 1990). Writer and landscape designer Alexander Wilson (1992) discusses the ‘nature experience’ as one that is linked with ideas of nature as a lost garden—an imaginary realm created by cultures whose technological innovations have alienated them from a simpler, purer nature. With the growth of cities and technologies like the locomotive, industrial power seemed to threaten the innocence of nature; as Marx (1968, 26) argues: “Since Jefferson’s time the forces of industrialism have been the chief threat to the bucolic image of America.” Now, it’s not industrialism itself that jeopardizes the pastoral on Orcas, but the wealth and subsequent development that industrialism has created that is the major threat, discussed further in Chapters 4 and 6.

The rural is compelling not just in contrast to the urban/industrial, but as an alternative to wilderness. Historian Roderick Nash (1975, 9) describes how Western cultures have long regarded wilderness as a barrier to civilization and progress—an unfamiliar, dangerous, and even “evil” space that was best conquered through agriculture. As Nash writes: “It followed from the pioneer’s association of wilderness with hardship

and danger in a variety of forms, that the rural, controlled, state of nature was the object of his affection and goal of his labor.” During the age of romanticism in Europe, wilderness began to take on new associations as “the handiwork of God” and perhaps the purest expression of God’s will (*ibid*, 45). In the United States in particular, early historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s (1893) description of the “frontier” as the boundary between “savagery and civilization” played an important role in transforming the meaning of wilderness from a wasteland into an expression of a new American identity. American identity, he argued, is the product of crossing the frontier line—a process through which settlers adapted to new experiences and “w[on] a wilderness.” The meaning of wilderness shifted from sin to purity, leaving humans with the challenge of how to reconcile their place within a world purported to be more virtuous without them. The solution historian William Cronon (1996, 88-9) offers involves abandoning the human/nature dualism and embracing the cultural elements within wilderness. Writer Michael Pollan’s (1991) *Second Nature* proposes the garden to be the new wilderness—the place where humans experience ‘nature’ in a mutually beneficial relationship. He similarly suggests that the idea of wilderness as completely removed from civilization is not viable as Thoreau would have us believe but, rather, gardens as ‘second nature’ provide a more realistic model of the human environment—and one that also fits more closely with the rural agricultural landscape.

Regarding the rural as a middle ground or “second nature” (Pollan 1991, Hughes 2005) evokes an “environment worked by people and shaped by extraction, agriculture, markets, and other anthropogenic factors” (Hughes 2005, 158). Marx (1968) too regards gardens as a model second nature that includes yeoman agriculture. The garden, in his

discussion, need not be a literal backyard garden, but rather functions as a “symbolic middle landscape created by mediation between art and nature,” two realms usually in opposition (*ibid*, 71). There is a ‘natural’ way to be human, and agriculture is it. Many people are nostalgic for a greener way of being, and agriculture and the rural landscape embody a way in which humans can rightly and simply interact with nature. When Orcas residents appeal to the rural as the ideal aesthetic environment, they often evoke the visual cues that correspond with this “second” or “middle nature.”

Yet, the ‘rural’ is not valued for the same reasons by everyone. At this point, clarification of terms is useful. What do we mean by rural, agrarian, and pastoral? Marx (1968, 126) understands the transition from agrarian to pastoral as one that expresses the shift from a political economic perspective to a “highly figurative, mythopoeic language...a literary point of view.” Writer, critic and farmer Wendell Berry (2001, 66) too writes of the tendency of some conservationists—equal in sentiment to Marx’s pastoralists—to advance the “romantic assumption that, if we have become alienated from nature, we can become unalienated by making nature the subject of contemplation or art...ignoring, in other words, all the economic issues that are involved.”

The key distinction, then, rests upon the tension between economic feasibility versus idealistic, poetic visions in judging the success of a society. A true agrarian would see an agricultural economy as the basis of an agrarian society; a healthy economy would equal a healthy society. A pastoralist, on the other hand, would value self sufficiency and the aesthetic values of the landscape rather than economic growth, seeing success in the ethical virtues inherent in one laboring on one’s own land and thus earning ownership of it. Pastoralism began as a literary device—one so commonly used and accepted that

Americans began to regard it as an attainable reality. ‘Rural’ is best understood in concert with pastoralism (Marx 1968, 128). Again, returning to Marx: “what is important about the rural world...is not merely the agricultural economy but its alleged moral, aesthetic, and, in a sense, metaphysical superiority to the urban, commercial forces that threaten it” (*ibid*, 99). Like pastoralism, rural character is not necessarily dependent upon an agricultural economy, though it still implies the values of an idealized Jeffersonian agricultural lifestyle. The distinction between the pastoral/rural and agrarian has implications for efforts to preserve agriculture, discussed further in Chapter 6.

Through, what has been to some, an imperceptible shift from agrarianism to pastoralism, Orcas Island has been able to maintain rural character even in the absence of the yeoman laborer. As Marx explains with regard to pastoralism, “the physical attributes of the land are less important than its metaphorical powers. What finally matters most is its function *as a landscape*—an image in the mind that represents aesthetic, moral, political, and even religious values.” The transformation from working landscapes to landscapes of leisure is largely a product of a new economic order on Orcas. An Orcas resident and employee of Orcas’s affordable housing trust since 1996, herself an inhabitant of one of their homes, claimed, “agriculture isn’t as important to rural character anymore because people can afford to maintain the open spaces without the farming labor.” The rural landscape is critically important as the symbol of these agrarian values, though these landscapes are now maintained in very different ways, discussed below.

If rural character is not necessarily dependent upon an agricultural economy, how does one foster it in places where agriculture is not a major economic contributor? What

does rural character mean, and what does it look and feel like? On Orcas, the new rural character has many associations. The same affordable housing employee described above told me rural character is “easy access to Moran State Park, seeing the ocean and beach,” but she followed with a description of what she calls the “people piece.” Knowing people around town and having lives intersect in multiple ways is characteristic of the rural lifestyle she hopes to help preserve on Orcas—for example, while two residents may disagree politically, they may also be allied in raising funds for the local Fire Department. To others, rural character has more to do with maintaining a small, close knit community; some long for the days when only ‘oldtime islanders’ that everyone knew could get elected for county office. One woman spoke of hitchhiking as “one thing the mainland hasn’t taken away from us,” telling me how she taught her children to hitchhike when they need a ride to town. A different economics of the rural was also mentioned by some oldtimers who reminisced at a local potluck about how their grandfathers would barter for each others’ services: one would cut wood and the other would shear sheep, and “money never changed hands.”

These accounts of communal interdependence and exchanges represent another element of rural character that does not exclude labor from its definition, but rather highlights a pre-capitalist economic order. However, early yeomen, in spite of popular images of their wholly non-commercial subsistence, are historically better described as “*semi*-subsistent,” in that they did need cash (for goods as well as taxes) and earned it through commodity markets (Jacobs 2003, 171). Even on Orcas, as described below, early cash opportunities through tourism were a welcome complement to the island economy. Nonetheless, nostalgia for an imagined subsistence economy persists. Being

able to exchange rather than purchase services, or to get a ride to town for free rather than hiring a taxi, are less tangible elements of the rural than an open field, but are just as potent in terms of their opposition to the modern urban—encapsulated by the dreaded “mainland.” To most islanders, however, rural character is associated with “not seeing any cars on the drive to town,” “privacy,” “roadside views,” “open spaces,” and “the opposite of Disney World,” and is described with adjectives like “pleasant,” “homogenous,” “peaceful,” and “quiet.” Such imagery depicts a place of beauty, tranquility, and perhaps above all, leisure. There is clearly a strong visual element of rural character that various methods, including conservation easements, help to preserve. But how is the “people piece” being addressed? What kind of population and economy fits within “rural character”? I will continue to raise this question in the following chapters.

The large land plots and open spaces that were critical to successful agriculture are now valued for what many residents have called a “buffer zone”—acres of space giving them privacy from neighbors and the road. Author V.S. Naipaul (1987) reflects these sentiments in his description of the English countryside:

What has once been judged a situation suitable only for agricultural cottages—next to a farm, far from roads and services—had become desirable. The farm had gone; the very distance from the public road was a blessing. And so, the quality or attributes of the site changing, the past had been abolished.

Though agriculture may have helped shape the Orcas landscape, that rural feel is now serving another purpose and attracting a new demographic of homeowners. The “buffer zone” not only serves the resident, but has been critical to the rise of the tourism industry in the San Juans. In particular, roadside views depend upon the development and

maintenance of the rural landscape, where scenery, not production, is the defining feature.

### *Experiencing Beauty*

Early efforts to mold the tourist experience around views suggest the importance of beauty in defining landscapes of leisure. By positing the San Juans as a ‘tourist paradise,’ tourism promoters laid the groundwork for the kind of views one came to expect from the Orcas, ultimately influencing the land management techniques that would be necessary to maintain these landscapes. Before describing some techniques landowners use to maintain the rural look characteristic of the San Juans, we must first understand the aesthetic preferences, based upon the real and imagined pastoral ideals described above, that are driving their management efforts.

Can we better understand the persistence of rural landscapes through a discussion of aesthetics? After all, aesthetic judgments are subjective—dependent upon personal experience, culture, economic status, and countless other variables. Yet, these personal preferences influence owners’ land use decisions, from their house placement to their determination of which plant species will go and which will stay. These decisions, however, extend beyond the boundaries of one’s property, lending broader consequences to these private decisions. The question, then, is not “is this place beautiful or not?” but rather, “according to whose idea of beauty is it being managed?”

Researchers who concentrate on the aesthetics of landscape, including Dewey (1958), Wollheim (1971), Berleant (1995) and Bourassa (1991), have challenged the Kantian notion of a detached, disengaged and absolute aesthetic. Instead, these theorists

consider aesthetics to be an interactive practice between objective and subjective forces—an experiential relationship that gives new depth to the adage “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Jackson (1984, 65-70) implies a link between culture and aesthetic preferences as he argues that Americans are agrophiliacs; they love horizontal spaces and their associations with speed, expansion and mobility, though of course many Americans have also been taken in by the majesty of mountainous landscapes. Exceptions withstanding, to expand on Jackson’s line of thinking, Americans also love open spaces and the look of the rural because of their association with independence (both economic and political), simplicity of lifestyle, and tranquility. In this sense, the beauty of a landscape is not an objective fact; it is rooted in the sentiments people attach to places based upon their own sense of history, memory, and belonging (Stewart and Strathern 2003, Schama 1995). Who you are shapes what you see.

A country person or a city-dweller each experiences the land upon which they either labor or leisure in different ways—though this does not mean either interpretation is necessarily more accurate or authentic than another. Landscape anthropologists have drawn on Williams’ notion of inner versus outer landscapes, with insiders (country-dwellers) having an intimate knowledge of the land and its resources, while outsiders (city-dwellers) regard landscapes through the lens of capital and exploitation (Williams 1973, Hirsch 1995, Stewart and Strathern 2003). Anthropologists Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern (2003) reformulate this distinction in terms of first and second landscapes, with a first based on the visual, while the second landscape is produced through local knowledge and practice that can be ethnographically uncovered. A landowner in Crow Valley—a stretch on western Orcas that has some of the best soil on

the island—whose family has been farming their land for two generations, for example, does not have the same memories as a neighbor who still strives to maintain a rural feel, though lacks the family history and depth of attachment to that particular place. It is important to note, however, that beauty plays a part in both levels of experience.

Certain proportions and geometric relationships constitute the rural beauty that so many residents and visitors value. Photographer and landscape architect Anne Whiston Spirn (1998, 109) quotes Frank Lloyd Wright, who described geometry as “‘an aesthetic skeleton,’” wherein “‘Certain geometric forms have come to symbolize for us and potentially to suggest certain human ideas, moods, and sentiments.’” On Orcas, the combination of vertical lines (trees) and empty horizontal spaces (fields) makes for an appealing composition. Open fields with low lying vegetation suggest the potential for (agricultural) productivity fitting with the Jeffersonian ideal; yet the placement of trees throughout the landscape removes the image of a large factory farm where the land is stretched to its environmental capacity and production—not the virtues of the rural—is the sole goal. Too many trees, however, act like a wall blocking the view one might hope to find behind it—one composed of trees further in the distance, mountains, water and open space. Being able to decipher a sense of order from the landscape also contributes to one’s aesthetic enjoyment, for a “harmonious” landscape is like a symphony, while a landscape out of context is full of discord and uncertain meaning (Spirn 1998, 179). The textures and dimensions provided by low lying vegetation and high canopies create ordered diversity within the landscape, as opposed to the monotony of a dense forest, a barren field or a suburb sprawling with chaotic developments.

To the untrained eye, a pastoral landscape can resemble an agrarian one. In other words, a landscape of leisure, if properly managed, can look like a landscape of labor. Yet, there are important distinctions between the two. Anthropologist Hugh Raffles (2002, 3) cites Walter Benjamin, who compares “the difference between passing over and walking through a landscape to the difference between reading a text and copying it.” On Orcas, we might equate “passing over” the landscape with driving along it, while “walking through” suggests a more intimate knowledge of place that does not rely solely upon remote, expansive views, but instead upon texture, light, and the experience of labor. Yet again, this is not to say one perspective is necessarily more genuine or correct than another; an aerial view can provide perspective a ground view cannot, and vice versa.

By combining personal history with imagined symbolic meanings of a place (Stewart and Strathern 2003, 8), a viewer driving down an Orcas road sees not just sheep grazing in an open pasture, but the beauty and intrinsic value Americans have come to associate with agriculture. To the farmer, it is not that production takes priority over beauty per se, but rather that beauty is rooted in the fruits of labor. One Orcas farmer explained that farmers do indeed have a different aesthetic of the ‘rural’ than non-farmers: “A farmers sees the beauty in productivity. It takes a certain eye to see beauty in efficiency and not just an open field that isn’t being worked. A working landscape can look a lot different than an open field that’s being mowed, and people need to learn to recognize that aesthetic.” To say that only an ‘outsider’ responds to the visual stimuli of a rural landscape is to overlook the aesthetic components that the ‘insider’ values as well. An Orcas farmer with whom I met, when asked what motivates his desire to farm in spite

of the financial barriers, eloquently expressed how he not just sees, but experiences the beauty of his farm on a daily basis:

My driving force is the art of it. [The land] is my palette. The grid, the rows, the squares, the patterns—I just love seeing those. Like that tilling I did there just to delineate this little rectangle. You can see by my path it’s linear, but it’s also textural, and I love that. It’s nature, kind of condensed into one spot. Just to come out in the morning in the special light and see how gorgeous it is. That’s what keeps me going.

This farmer’s explicit reference to art demonstrates an awareness of the aesthetic rewards intertwined with his practical handiwork. His ‘linear and textural’ tilling was not done as an end in itself, but as a means of working the land to produce food. The “gorgeous” view is “nature...in one spot” in its greenness, but also is also “art” in that it is the product of his personal vision and labor. By evoking the experiences he associates with the beauty before him, he is expressing an aesthetic appreciation that has moved beyond the visual.

There are, of course, other ways to experience a place besides farming it. Consider how two residents described their sense of intimacy and appreciation of the rural landscape. Orcas artist Barbara Meyer reveals in her recorded oral history what about Orcas inspires her paintings: “Ahh, the beauty of it. Just everything about it. It’s not only the scenery but—ah! I love the old barns. I love the informality of it. But mainly it’s the scenery. Everywhere you go there’s a little vista or a little cove.” Old barns, though in actuality remnants of farm labor, ironically act as symbols of the “informality” or ease of island life, while a range of far and near views inspire Orcas’s relatively sizable artist community to produce a range of paintings, pottery, and sculpture. Barns in particular, writes Nancy Larsen (1992) in *Neighbors: Monthly Magazine of the*

*Journal of the San Juan Islands*, “are not only the most potent reminder of our agricultural heritage, but are the most distinctive of our landmarks.” As landmarks, barns need not fulfill their original function, but can become meaningful as visual reminders of a romanticized past.

Another resident moved—or as he might have put it, escaped—to Orcas in 2003, explaining to me that he got “chased out” of California because of its influx of new people, which gave him “road rage” and made him realize he did not like “the person [he] was becoming.” He spoke with pride and passion about his aesthetic attachment to his new Orcas property, describing it as having a “peek-a-boo view of the water through the trees.” What appeals to him about the spot, he explained, are the “old growth trees, the smell, the spirit of the whole piece of property is so unbelievably wonderful.” Non-farmers can clearly appreciate the aesthetic qualities of their land, and move beyond visual elements in describing their experiences in the landscape, evoking “smells,” “spirits,” and symbols like barns to describe how they ‘walk through’ rather than merely ‘pass over’ the landscape, to paraphrase Benjamin.

While scenery is still central to both descriptions above, either explicitly or in reference to the “peek-a-boo” vision of water through the trees, the types of views people value depend upon the depth of interaction from which they have been able to observe the landscape. Many residents who have lived on and worked closely with their land for longer periods of time do not necessarily favor the parts of their property with the highest altitudes or longest vistas. One elderly resident who is a third generation islander and farmer explained when I asked if he had a favorite view, “I have so many favorite views and I’m always finding new ones as I’m working, hidden behind things. They’re like

secrets.” Another resident of about ten years who manages a historic apple orchard on his property responded to the same question, “There are just so many little spaces to see. I can look at the pond which is more open space, or I can go in to the little wooded area and feel like no one else is around and that I’m far away from everything.” Those with more intimate interactions with a place come to associate new sights, smells and experiences with it—and perhaps a more nuanced definition of what it means to preserve the rural aesthetic—as opposed to those who are only permitted to view a private lot from the road.

“Secret” views, of course, stand in contrast to the blockbuster views from the road that frame an open field in the foreground between two mountain peaks in the distance. Yet, this does not mean that the first landscape is less genuine or the viewer less appreciative. Perhaps the ‘best’ way to experience an intentionally scenic landscape is to view it from its intended viewing spot. Two separate artists have painted one particular farm in Crow Valley—and both chose perspectives visible from the side of the road. Landscapes are produced with an audience in mind, whether that is the owner, the roadside viewer, or both. Owners of this particular farm explained to me their thought process in managing their land; they intentionally set the house back from the road, but made sure they still had a great view of the valley through their windows. Their conservation easement prohibits the building of certain structures, and dictates, “no fence or other barrier that will obstruct views across the property from the...road” is permitted on the property. The agricultural fields must remain open visually from the road and, though agricultural production is not required, the owners must maintain the scenic qualities of agriculture, via mowing if necessary. In other words, it is no coincidence that

the view from the road was so appealing to these two artists. In fact, the conscious manipulation of house placement, trees, and open fields produced a landscape that made for an appealing composition from the road. Landscapes imitate art and artists, in turn, have reproduced those scenic landscapes.<sup>39</sup> There is value in the close as well in the distant view, and the fractal nature of landscape means that it can gain new significance at each level of intimacy; the view from the road can be just as powerful as the near view between two shrubs.

### *The View from the Road*

American culture embodies the paradox in which people can value nature and its ideals, while remaining at peace with the auto-centric culture in which it thrives. The car in nature is the ‘machine in the garden’ that has somehow become naturalized such that the auto is not an anomaly in natural places, but the primary means by which to experience the wild and the rural alike. Just as historian David Louter (2006) describes the creation of roads in national parks as a way of conveying wilderness to the general public, so do Orcas roads communicate the story of a rural place, distinct from the urban settings so many tourists are hoping to escape for a weekend or summer. “To many traveling Americans... ‘wilderness’ is something they encounter while driving” (Louter 2006, 8). The same might be said of the ‘rural’—it acts as a romantic ideal best viewed from the road. Rural character is intertwined with the roadside view. While the tourism industry has relied heavily upon the notion that roads are the best way to experience the San Juan Islands, the scenery from the road has become an element of rural character in

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<sup>39</sup> See (Williams 1973, 124); also (Marx 1968, 93): “We find works of nature still more pleasant, the more they resemble those of art.”

itself. Having “a pleasant drive to town” and looking at the numerous roadside farms and fields are not valued by tourists alone, but are also characteristic of how many residents describe their own notions of rural character.

The idea of roadside views is not unique to the age of autos. Marx (1968, 89) describes 18<sup>th</sup> Century America when natural landscapes were particularly in vogue. Travelers held up Claude glasses (named after landscape painter Claude Lorrain) in order to transform the landscape into a piece of art: “framed and suffused by a golden tone like that of the master’s paintings...the glass helped to create a pastoral illusion.” Literally framing the landscape transformed three-dimensional nature into picturesque two-dimensional art that could be cropped to both exclude undesirable elements and optimally frame desirable ones. Above all, these glasses—perhaps a functional precursor to the modern windshield—helped spectators see landscapes not as something to ‘be in,’ but as something to be viewed from the road, at a distance.

The development of tourism in San Juan County is intertwined with the history of road building, which provided visitors access to views of these ‘two-dimensional’ landscapes from the comfort of their vehicles. The earliest record of road building on Orcas can be found in a set of maps done by the Washington State Department of the Interior in 1874, showing a county road and a few smaller roads from the sea heading inland. James Francis Tulloch, in his published diaries from 1875-1910, writes,

I had long dreamed of making our home beautiful. ...It [his property] became the showplace of Orcas Island. It also became the favorite drive for tourists...and became well known throughout the country. I tried to get others to give their homes a name and beautify them, for aside from the pleasure they would derive from it, I knew that it would be a valuable asset. But only a few did (Keith 1978, 90-91).

Clearly, even from an early date, residents were consciously manipulating their property's look with an automotive audience in mind. While tourism was not yet the economic force it would become, as early as 1894, roadside views started to become an industry. The town of Olga, on the western shore of the island, charged visitors \$1.75 for a horse and buggy ride up Mount Constitution, the highest point in the county (Orcas Island Historical Museum 2006). Olga, as opposed to Eastsound, which is now the most populated and 'urban' town on the island, was able to take advantage of this early cash opportunity because it had a dock near a good road that gave visitors leisurely and scenic views as they traversed the island.

Tourism brochures from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century highlight the role of the auto in experiencing the beauty of the San Juan Islands. One such brochure published by the San Juan Islands Publicity Bureau in 1930 describes Orcas Island as "The Tourist Paradise," advertising its automobile ferry landing and the good roads across the island. The same brochure informs the reader that cars may be rented at three separate spots on the island (Deer Harbor, Eastsound, and Olga) for use in driving to Moran State Park and up Mount Constitution (Jonsen 1930). A cartoon in a 1928 issue of the *Friday Harbor Journal* demonstrates the frequent presence of cars from afar. Entitled "Touring Season is On," the cartoon depicts some young boys looking toward the road at two cars whose drivers are in turn looking out their window. One boy exclaims, "Last Sunday I saw a car from Arizona I did," while his friend responds, "Aw, I saw a car go by yesterday from Canada."<sup>40</sup> From early in the century, cars had become inseparable from the tourism market that was selling the roadside scenery.

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<sup>40</sup> "Touring Season is On." *Friday Harbor Journal*. Thursday, July 19, 1928.

By the 1950s, the tourism industry was increasingly direct about the role of the car in seeing the islands. A feature in a 1950 edition of the *Seattle Sunday Times* is entitled “Island-Hopping by Automobile,” claiming “the San Juans can be covered readily by automobile, for roads are numerous.”<sup>41</sup> A brochure from the same era advertises, “Take your car along when you visit the San Juan Islands.”<sup>42</sup> Yet another article from “*Sunset: The Magazine of Western Living*” which was reprinted in 1952 by a sailing company located on Orcas claims, “Good gravel roads...are standard, and make auto-exploring especially easy on the three larger islands. Each has more than 100 miles of road.”<sup>43</sup> Boasting of the amount of driving possible was a key enticement to potential tourists.

Yet, by focusing so singularly on the availability of roads, those in the tourism industry also raised public expectations of what kind of roads the San Juans should provide. A 1950 feature in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reports on the “Famed San Juan Islands: Mecca of Cartour Party.” The writer, while praising the beautiful marine and terrestrial views from the road and water, is also quite critical of the county’s supposed lack of attention to the importance of driving tourism. “Unfortunately San Juan, as we later found Orcas, is almost inexcusably negligent in care or placement of adequate highway and points of interest identifying signs, a carelessness bordering upon rudeness since income derived from tourist trade is vitally important to the economy of the residents.”

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<sup>41</sup> “San Juan Islands: Island-Hopping By Automobile.” *The Seattle Sunday Times*. July 30, 1950.

<sup>42</sup> “Visit San Juan Islands” brochure, Orcas Island Historical Museum archives.

<sup>43</sup> “San Juans...Treasure Islands of the Northwest.” Reprinted from *Sunset: The Magazine of Western Living*, July 1952 for Wilkins Sailing Cruises, Deer Harbor.

This *Seattle P-I* Automobile Editor continues, “Collectively, they [residents in the tourist industry] have rather selfishly failed to cooperate in the best interest of the tourist, jealously doing everything to make their own guests content but failing to present unified action in securing road and park improvements.”<sup>44</sup> The roads are clearly central to the tourist experience, and for a place to not realize this displays an indifference “bordering upon rudeness.” As Jackson (Jackson and Zube 1970, 59) writes of the highway, “the farmer thinks of it as a way to reach town; the tourist thinks of it as an amenity;” clearly, according to this *P-I* writer, the road should be primarily regarded as a tourist amenity and not merely a route to town. Further, the notion that one would be so deeply offended by poor road signage reveals an implicit acknowledgment of the interplay of natural and human-made forces in creating a scenic landscape. While the water and mountains were beautiful, they could not be appreciated to their full potential without more explicit *artificial* attention to them in the form of signs or rest stops.

Now, fifty-six years after the Cartour lamented the lack of attention to road infrastructure, San Juan County is in the process of becoming Washington State’s 28<sup>th</sup> scenic byway. Such designation would provide places en route through San Juan, Orcas, and Lopez Islands with grant money for signs, interpretive markers, restrooms, and promotional materials. After the route along Anacortes to the three largest ferry-accessible islands become state byways, they may become eligible for national funding at a later date. To be designated as a scenic byway, a site must be of scenic, archaeological, historical, recreational, cultural, or natural interest—and, of course, it must be visible from the road. The county’s stated goals in applying for such a designation are:

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<sup>44</sup> Jim Hill. “Famed San Juan Islands: Mecca of Cartour Party.” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Sunday, July 23, 1950.

economic development in the form of increased tourism and ferry riders, education to enhance stewardship of natural and historical resources, and monetary resources that can be dedicated to the maintenance of protected sites. According to organizers, the San Juan County scenic byways proposition has not met with any opposition, though Shaw Island, the smallest island with ferry access, may decide against getting involved to prevent increased traffic through its small community.

While the county's scenic byway application can mention biking and walking trails along the route, they will not be a highlight of the project, nor is there any guarantee that bikes or walking will take any of the attention away from auto-centric touring. In a place where public access is so scarce and 82% of the land is private property,<sup>45</sup> traveling down the road and looking at the landscapes to the left and right is one of the most common ways to experience Orcas. While bike tours are common too, let us assume with the 319,974 motor vehicles that came to Orcas by ferry in 2002, a good number of individuals are arriving to experience the rural through their windshield. The notion that bringing more cars on the islands will help protect its environmental and cultural resources is, in many senses, counterintuitive. Yet, just as natural parks have become inseparable from the carefully placed roads that organize tourists' views, so have San Juan County roads become the structure that frames the Orcas experience.

The scenic byway process, however, is not the county's first attempt to protect roadside views in particular. Several individuals who worked with the San Juan County Land Bank when it began in the early 1990s recall its first priority was to preserve scenery visible from the road through both conservation easements and fee simple

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<sup>45</sup> San Juan Islands Institute. [http://www.scbrandt.com/sjiinstitute/sji\\_index.html](http://www.scbrandt.com/sjiinstitute/sji_index.html). (accessed 1 March 2007.)

acquisitions. The Land Bank's mission intends to "preserve the islands' unique natural heritage for the benefit of present and future generations,"<sup>46</sup> a rather broad goal that encompasses the protection of lands that are particularly visible to the public. A number of conservation easements function as roadside view easements, ensuring that brush is cut to fence post height, or that any new structures remain invisible from the road. Many of the lands protected under conservation easement are what some residents call "mow farms" or "faux agro"—usually historical farms that are now mowed to maintain the appearance of agriculture, though nothing is currently grown there. These properties gain new meaning when considered in relation to their proximity to the road; all of the "faux-agro" farm conservation easement owners with whom I spoke have some if not all of their property visible from a road. As one retired conservation easement protected property owner explained, "Visually, agriculture is important when driving or biking. I'm grateful for those people preserving the land, including the mow CEs... life here is enriched by the visual quality of wheat fields and sheep grazing." To others as well, the roadside view is the primary benefit of a conservation easement. Another resident and her husband purchased a conservation easement protected property in a gated development on Orcas in 2000, after he retired from "corporate life" in Minnesota. She explained that while at first she was not sure if Orcas would be too isolated for her, she has gotten used to the change of pace, and that an easement helps protect the beauty she enjoys by denoting "whatever you see driving up the road, that's going to stay like that."

Not just the view from the road, but the shape of the road can have particular associations with rural versus urban or suburban environments. The County's Vision

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<sup>46</sup> San Juan County Land Bank. [http://www.co.san-juan.wa.us/land\\_bank/mission.html](http://www.co.san-juan.wa.us/land_bank/mission.html). (accessed 1 March 2007.)

Statement asserts, “In some places, the roads are unpaved, narrow, and winding, and care is taken to maintain a rustic quality in public signs” (San Juan County 2002). To many residents, curvy and unpaved roads are more characteristic of a rural place than straight roads. Straight roads can look like driveways; curvy roads provide more privacy from the nosy tourist who might find a straight road more welcoming. On another level, straight roads can create grids, making a place more easily ‘readable’ (Scott 1998) and lacking the mystery of a rural winding road. As political scientist James Scott (1998) argues, ordering space is a project of modernity and, in rejecting grids, islanders can also be said to be rejecting formal attempts to map and therefore make themselves legible to states and markets. Further, curvy roads are an inefficient use of space, and thus create the illusion of land to spare. Unlike the farmer above who described his delight at seeing the “linear” elements of his work that indicated to him a sense of planned labor and productivity, curvy lines suggest a disregard for the rules of efficiency that may be more befitting of a landscape of leisure. It is harder to see your neighbor on curvy roads because they obstruct direct lines of sight, and that privacy and relative anonymity are characteristic of the rural. One woman who lives on a private road hidden among the Orcas mountains succinctly explained to me why she would not want to live in town, “I didn’t move to Orcas to live on a block.”

Equally if not more importantly, curves force travelers to drive more slowly, which also gives them more time to view the scenery on the side of the road. Wilson (1992, 36) describes how road builders of the mid 1900s “designed curves that restricted speed to thirty-five or forty miles an hour and placed those curves in a way that organized the long looks.” It is easier to speed on a straight road, thus missing the landscapes that

help make a place rural. Louter (2006, 30) describes a similar sentiment with regard to national parks: “passing through the park’s portal, visitors were forced to slow down, to leave behind the ‘exhilaration of speed’ in exchange for the ‘calmer glories of nature.’” Driving slowly not only enables better windshield viewing, but also compels a “calmer” mindset and attitude toward one’s environment. Going more slowly tells the driver that the journey, not the destination is the goal. Of course, a resident driving to the bank or grocery store behind one of these “Sunday drivers” might find the slow speed to be frustrating rather calming.

One Orcas couple with whom I spoke expressed their fear that the roads department would straighten and widen the county’s roads, thus taking away some of the island’s rural character. They described a conflict in which the roads department wanted to straighten a road in order to increase visibility of a school bus stop that was behind a blind curve. Their neighborhood association negotiated with the department to compromise on a less severe curve, balancing a desire for rural character with a child safety issue. The conflict between look and function or effect is one that frequently arises in the search for rural character, as described further in reference to ecological health.

### *The View from the Ferry*

On an island, it is not just the view *of* the water that is important, but the view *from* the water that also contributes to rural character. Since steamboats started bringing visitors to the San Juans in the late 1800s, the view from the water has been a key selling point to tourists. English literature scholar Nancy Pagh (2001) explores the history of marine tourism in Puget Sound and north to Alaska, focusing on women’s experiences on

the water. These early female tourists wrote in praise of the magnificent scenery visible from their comfortable sea vessels, and coastal tourism promoters in turn targeted their advertising towards women seeking romantic panoramic views of the mountains and water. Pagh goes on to describe a 1939 promotional brochure for an Alaskan cruise that promises the tourist can “lazily watch scenery from a deck chair” (*ibid*, 106). In addition to cruises, by 1948 recreational boating was increasingly fashionable as the economic dynamics of the region shifted. She writes, “where logging had been king, scenery grew into a commodity” (*ibid*, 26), suggesting the ‘new West’ was not a recent moment but a longer process that arguably began as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as described in Chapter 2, when citizens finally had the money and time to engage in leisurely travel.

Many landowners take pride in the view of their property from the water or, rather, how well concealed their structures are when viewed from the water. One boat owner, partially retired realtor, and Orcas landowner since 1989 (though permanent resident since 2000) told me with pride that he can hardly see his picnic structure or ‘barn’ (which houses a wood working room and TV/guest room) from the water, though he regrets having chosen an aluminum roof for his house, which is visible and clearly “unnatural” looking. He told me how the barn is built of cedar, which was too red and stood out too much from the rest of the property. So, he used an aging/bleaching stain to make the new structure lighter and aged looking. “Now,” he joked, “we’re getting mold and all that good stuff” that make a building appear older and more appropriate to its surroundings—and also less conspicuous from land or sea.

While residents clearly value the scenery from the ferry as critical to their rural experience, even that scenery can become commonplace. A local book entitled *You know you're an islander when...* jokes, “You sleep in your car on the ferry, going over and coming back. (Scenery? Who needs scenery?)” (Jameson and Burns 1999). At the same time, those who try and build a house along the shore encounter significant local resistance. Scenery from the ferry—the main lifeline through the islands for those lacking their own vessels—continues to be an important concern to both tourists and residents. Preservation of scenery is frequently synonymous with the prevention of development. Residents of Crane Island, a small island near Deer Harbor, appealed to the Land Bank for financial support in their campaign to purchase a property on the Northeast shore of the island. The sole reason for the purchase would be to place a conservation easement preventing the development of this 0.67 acre parcel of land that is highly visible from the ferry route through the islands. The public benefit of this purchase would be purely scenic, with residents claiming public access would be “inappropriate” for this particular spot. One advocate of the purchase explained at a Land Bank public monthly meeting, “instead of seeing a three floor home, you see Juniper trees. I think that’s a fair trade.” An LB Board Member questioned the high cost of the small property—“so the Land Bank is willing to pay \$75,000 to avoid having one house there?” The parcel’s high status scenic attributes proved to be worth the cost of conservation; residents and the LB ultimately acquired the parcel for over \$300,000, with the residents having taken care of the majority of fundraising. Key visual points, rather than net acreage or ecological value, often take precedence when views are the priority.

*“Faux-agro:” Landscapes of Labor and Leisure*

How does Orcas retain its agricultural, rural feel while only 15% of its land is being used as farmland? How have residents reasserted a rural identity that can still make sense in the face of a struggling agricultural industry? Going back to the distinction between agrarian and pastoral, it is clear that the rural imaginary can persist even without an agricultural economy. Landowners can cultivate the agricultural look without the production to back it up—a trend one resident told me his wife refers to as “faux-agro.”

These faux-agro landscapes share certain visual elements like open fields and old-looking homes or barns, yet are owned not by young farming families as the Jeffersonian ideal would dictate, but by retired couples who long for the peaceful ambiance of a home in the country. Many people see an open field and find it beautiful in part because it suggests a simpler, bucolic time. This is not to say all residents strive to work their land and live the noble life of the 19<sup>th</sup> century farmer. To the contrary, a number of islanders—particularly those who own large tracts of land with no intention of producing on them—enjoy the look that, while rooted in myths of the past, has since taken on its own meaning. That new meaning is one that values the rural as a place in which to experience the ideals of the agricultural past without the work, ultimately transforming what used to be a landscape of labor into a landscape of leisure.

This transformation may come as a surprise to many tourists who come to Orcas expecting a sleepy rural retreat of oldtimer farmers. Yet a number of residents recognize the reality of the faux-agro trend—often with a sense of humor. One landowner—a former consultant from Seattle—renamed his property “Eastlight Farm” when he

purchased it 10 years ago. He told me his friends still joke, “What kind of farm is Eastlight Farm? A yuppie farm?” While recognizing the irony of his productionless ‘farm,’ he also asserts the land is a “heritage farm”—one that is not operating, but is on the site of a historical farm and still has environmental and archaeological remnants of that era, including old fruit trees and dated farming equipment.

The numerous “yuppie farms” of Orcas Island are proof of the persistence of the pastoral feel without an agrarian economy. While memories of historical agriculture remain important in shaping the contemporary landscape, these new farms’ are rooted in nostalgia for an imagined past mixed with contemporary comforts, and not the labor intensity of agriculture. Raymond Williams (1973, 31) describes the lure of land that can be enjoyed without effort. The country life that the urbanite seeks is “not that of the working farmer but of the fortunate resident...What is idealised is not the rural economy, past or present, but a purchased freehold house in the country, or a ‘charming coastal retreat’, or even a ‘barren offshore island’” (*ibid*, 46-7). Among these “fortunate residents,” there is no clear agreement on the role agriculture should play on the “barren offshore island” whose rural character may be able to persist without it. On “faux agro” lands protected under conservation easement, owners are required to mow their property every two years to protect roadside views and soil quality. One retired woman who has owned land in the San Juans since 1987 and has been actively involved in affordable housing issues, estimated for me that 60% of people like the rural aesthetic, while 40% value the actual farming. These “faux-agro” lands, which usually appear as benign symbols of agriculture to the average tourist, have incited a range of opinions among residents regarding the relative importance of open space, views, and agriculture.

At one end of the spectrum, a minority of residents I interviewed value the persistence of the rural look with negligible concern for preserving agriculture or its history. One retired lawyer from Southern California told me it is important to him to see green grass and not crop growth. Such individuals with no sentimental or commercial interest in agrarianism want green open space as a means of eliminating features that might obstruct picturesque vistas. While the view into the distance is important to such spectators, having a rural foreground is equally important. A paved open space, for example, would insert a modern and commercial feel into the picture, destroying the natural ambiance of the rural. But ‘natural’ open spaces themselves are often assigned inherent value. Agriculture is just one means of achieving that aesthetic; what is important is the green space itself that, as another retiree told me, “people need open space for relief, to see, feel, touch it.” Open rural spaces act as therapeutic responses to the perceived congestion of the mainland. The idea that there is land to spare for open space suggests a lack of the commercial emphasis that many residents are hoping to escape.

While several individuals, particularly those who frequent the supermarket rather than the local Farmers Market, are frank about their sole interest in the visual elements of the rural, others continue to value the pastoral look while remaining hopeful that such efforts are also preserving the potential for future agricultural production. Many residents laud the faux agro as a way of maintaining rural character and preserving agricultural lands for a time in the future when agriculture might again become economically feasible—a prospect described more in Chapter 6. A retired conservation easement holder explained to me—paraphrasing the bumper sticker—“once you pave

something, that's forever." Lands that are mowed yearly to keep out encroaching brush are at least preserving the soil quality and leaving the land clear for agriculture. She went on to tell me that, "mow farms provide the same effect as real farms," in terms of maintaining the rural feel and preventing other types of development (i.e., housing). This notion that mow farms may not be ideal, but are at least better than more houses is popular on Orcas. Another landowner explained he is bothered when the Land Bank buys land to keep it looking like a farm and would rather see them lease it to a gardener. "But," he continued, "mow farms are still better than development."

Others regard faux-agro less as a temporary solution to the problem of changing island character, and more as a distraction from the real issue of poor county planning, discussed further in Chapter 4. A retired landowner of almost twenty years who is active in island environmental and political debates argued, "The Land Bank and SJPT are just trying to keep people off the land, but that's not how to do it. They're just keeping land open, but that's not the same as population or resource management." In this sense, a mow farm may be preferable to a new million dollar house, but is still only dealing with the superficial elements of rural character. The rural look may be maintained, but the rural lifestyle and affordability are not. As a landscaper who has lived on Orcas for over 15 years argued regarding the agricultural look without the production, "there has to be a reason for the land to look that way."

Farmers predictably prioritize agriculture above 'mow farms,' sometimes questioning residents' interest in the scenic values of agriculture. As one farmer asked rhetorically at a San Juan Conservation District meeting after I explained my introduction to "faux-agro," "Farming isn't necessarily neat and tidy—it might look messy. Will

people still want it then? Are we doing agricultural production here or are we just becoming a mowing society for tourists?” To many Orcas farmers, the notion that mow farms are functionally equivalent to productive farms is absurd. The contrast between agrarianism and pastoralism arises again, as the basis of the Orcas economy comes into question. Will Orcas be a place that produces food or scenic landscapes? With land so expensive, is keeping the farm intact visually, if not functionally, the best farmers and sympathetic residents can hope for?

The Preservation Trust’s recent acquisition of historic farmland in Crow Valley has inspired much applause as well as some criticism from residents. The Crow Valley plot is a 322 acre farm, for which an \$865,000 conservation easement was purchased after a \$200,000 discount by the owner. The easement prevented potential subdivision into 16 separate lots and has been widely lauded as a success for the Trust and more broadly, as an environmental victory against intruding development. Director of Outreach and Development for the Trust announced that residents and tourists can “rest assured that this part of Crow Valley will retain its rural character and scenic splendor for generations to come.”<sup>47</sup>

Yet, the future of this historic farmland is still unknown. Some have suggested the leasing of lands to market gardeners, while others have told me that the original owner wanted to maintain the land as a large habitat for grazing animals. The Trust intends to protect the “natural and scenic values of the farm,”<sup>48</sup> and to encourage farmers to work the land in the future. However, with little experience leasing agricultural lands and the property otherwise too expensive for a farmer to afford, the logistics of how

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<sup>47</sup>San Juan Preservation Trust. “San Juan Preservation Trust saves 322 acre farm.” September 7, 2005. <http://www.sjpt.org/news/?tab=2&subtab=8>. (accessed 1 November 2005).

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*

Crow Valley will remain a working farm are still to be worked out. At this point, Crow Valley will likely be mowed or hayed to maintain the agricultural look and soil quality.

Some residents are bothered by the preservation of farmland with no explicit commitment to actually farming it anytime in the foreseeable future. One retired resident who has been active in island ecological restoration efforts for years went so far to say, “the Crow Valley preservation was a mistake—it’s a joke to save farmland without actual farming.” “Crow Valley,” a farmer of about ten years told me after I asked him what he saw as the motivation behind the conservation effort, “is mostly about the aesthetic, not the knowledge of farming happening. ... If there were more tractors and smells there, a lot of people wouldn’t like it. People probably wouldn’t notice if there were a reversion to brush and forest.” What most people would notice, however, is a house. Many farmers in financial trouble without heirs end up selling their valuable properties to a developer. In part, the purchase of a Crow Valley CE was a way of avoiding this fate and maintaining the low density associated with the rural look.

In this sense, the faux-agro is a “symbolic landscape”—a “movement away from an ‘artificial’ world” (Marx 1968, 9) of the urban that embodies civilization and complexity, and towards the rural. Crow Valley was saved from potentially becoming a bastion of the “artificial” in the form of expensive houses. Though agriculture would be ideal as an alternative to the “complexity” of the urban and its associated modernity, in its absence, the faux-agro is preferred to development because it retains the values that come with agriculture. Pastoral landscapes are appealing because they represent wholesomeness and a nature in which humans make sense, even after the agriculture is gone.

### *Beauty and Environmental Health*

Many presume beauty to be synonymous with environmental health. Just as a polluted sky can make for the most striking pink sunset, beauty does not always indicate a healthy ecosystem. When the reasons for a particular look are either unknown or no longer relevant, beauty can become uncoupled from the processes that created it.

Consider Cayou Lagoon in Deer Harbor on western Orcas, an estuary that has been the focus of salmon restoration efforts and a number of scientific studies. After a bridge was built over the estuary in the 1970s, the estuary no longer drains properly, leading to a drastic change in species composition and a build up of mud, according to a study recently conducted by the Samish Indian Nation's Center for the Study of Coast Salish Environments. In response to recent efforts to restore the estuary, some neighbors who own a bed and breakfast that overlooks the estuary have told me they prefer it the way it is—they do not want to look at the estuary at low tide, but instead, prefer if it were filled with water all the time because, in their words, a “pond” is more attractive than a mud flat. Of course, an ecologist looking at the same scene might find the stagnant water even more unattractive than a perpetually filled estuary, for he or she would see the unnaturalness of an undraining estuary.

What makes one person see beauty while another sees destruction? Many islanders argue that newer residents and absentee owners do not have the same familiarity and deep connection with their land as longtime owners, and thus have ideals of beauty that do not correspond with ecological health. One retired couple expressed these sentiments when explaining how their neighbors—who visit their Orcas property once every three years—cut down their old cedar trees because they thought having a better

view of the water would increase their property value. “It was like cutting our limbs off,” described the full time residents, who asserted that had their neighbors known their land better and seen the beauty of those trees, such a mistake would not have been made.

Yet, oldtime residents also make ecological mistakes in the name of aesthetic improvement. One elderly lifelong resident built a lake on his property almost thirty years ago by damming a nearby stream. A few years ago, he deepened the lake (with proper scientific and county approval) to deal with an invasion of watershield, a weed common in shallow freshwater bodies. Since then, a number of ecologists and environmental activists have questioned the ecological health of the lake, which no longer filters to the sea, but sits on an acidic peat bog. The owner has been working to repair the ecological damage, but revealed his idealistic motivations: “I just wanted to make something beautiful,” he told me.

Such is the motivation for a number of human made ponds on Orcas. There are no records of how many built ponds are on Orcas because many were built before there were any sort of county regulations, and others are smaller than a ¼ acre and do not require a permit. Of the 21 people I spoke with who had human-made ponds on their property, built either by themselves or previous owners, 11 were built for aesthetic reasons—to add depth, variety and texture to the landscape, as well as to provide a spot for them to watch wildlife come and go. Just six of those ponds were built for agricultural reasons, including water storage for gardens or livestock. Yet, two of these ponds originally built for agricultural purposes earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century have since been landscaped and now are maintained for aesthetic purposes.

Many of these landowners regard their pond building as an act bordering on environmentalism; as one resident explained during a Land Bank public meeting, “I’m totally in favor of restoration. I put a pond on my land, just for the wildlife.” While providing wildlife habitat, ponds also have a number of adverse effects on the San Juans, where fresh water is already a limited resource. It is counterintuitive to many residents that building a ‘natural’ entity like a pond is ecologically harmful. Most ecologists agree, though, with a Steward from the Preservation Trust who told me, “We don’t need more ponds—we have enough ponds. We need more stream flow.”

Yet, it is difficult to dispel the myth that beauty always corresponds with health. A partially retired computer programmer who moved to Orcas in 2003 explained in defense of scenic easements, “we need to preserve visual character because under that there are real benefits to the land.” Another landscaper and his artist wife who moved to Orcas in 1990 told me, “a thriving ecosystem is picturesque.” Picturesque to whom, may be the real question. The resident who first told me of his use of the term “faux-agro” criticized a neighbor who kept his cows next to a stream, which he viewed as unhealthy, but has an “agricultural ambiance to it.” For one taking a photograph or painting a picture, the combination of livestock, water, and perhaps a mountain backdrop make for an appealing composition. Yet, for those making an ecological assessment, the possibility of manure entering freshwater is by no means charming.

Just as an ecologist might consider an estuary at low tide as the picture of environmental health while others abhor the dry landscape, so beauty itself is not an objective fact, but a subjective judgment based upon past knowledge and experience. Nature is not so much a real place as it is an ideal of an Eden long lost. This ideal nature

is beautiful, and not necessarily ‘natural’ in its adherence to ecological patterns. Wilson (1992, 92) describes how the suburban aesthetic is one that values evergreens in particular because they “constantly say ‘green’ and thus evoke nature over and again. The implication is that nature is absent on the leafless winter months...” The manicured lawns of suburban and, increasingly, rural landscapes may also appear ‘natural’ in their greenness, but are actually the result of numerous toxic fertilizer and pesticide inputs, wherein aesthetic expectations often interfere with ecological rationality (ibid; Robbins, Polderman and Birkenholtz 2001, Robbins 2007). Nature, in this sense, is justified less by scientific renderings, for example, than it is by its beauty and, perhaps more importantly, the comforting emotions and nostalgic images evoked through the process of envisioning such beauty.

In contrast, sustainable forestry efforts also introduce the possibility that what looks unattractive might actually be more energy efficient. The notion that to cut a tree—the very symbol of nature—might be ecologically healthy is shockingly counterintuitive to many residents. One landowner who came to Orcas in the 1950s described her alarm at her first introduction to a forest management plan during her time volunteering with the San Juan Preservation Trust; “The first thing I saw was logs on the ground—that wasn’t what I expected. But now I know you need to cut some things.” Sustainable logging can be heartbreaking to the untrained eye, yet a sustainable energy advocate on Orcas explained that it would be more energy efficient for people to cut and mill trees locally rather than shipping them from off-island, but no one wants to see trees being cut on the islands.

Mowing to preserve the agricultural look can also lead to questions about balancing aesthetics with energy efficiency. One retired landowner and conservation easement holder who mows his open field admitted it is purely an aesthetic issue to him, and that the field is “the heart of the property.” Yet, he also realizes those aesthetic needs might not always take precedent: “To mow, a can of gas costs \$40. I can afford it, but at what point does using that fossil fuel stop making sense?” The same question might be asked of the scenic byways system, which hopes to protect roadside landscapes through the promotion of auto tourism. As another conservation easement holder and landscaper told me when I asked whether the goal of conservation easements should be the agricultural look or actual production, “It would be hypocritical to have roadside views look nice and be dead. Otherwise it’s just the window dressing of a tourist community.” Like the scenic byway system, “How parks looked was often far more important than the health of their natural systems, which was less apparent to the eye” (Louter 2006, 9).

This is not to say that managing a landscape according to aesthetic ideals is always irresponsible, but rather that looking at beauty alone can be deceptive. As one former county commissioner told me, “There’s a real movement to make it pretty here. It’ll be pretty, but it won’t be healthy.” To many, aesthetically pleasing landscapes have become shorthand for ecological health as well as rurality. Yet, perhaps the goal should be to understand beauty not as one would through a painting, but as a reflection of a deeper understanding of the processes within that landscape including social and economic equity. J.B. Jackson (Jackson and Zube 1970, 54) has written optimistically that this may become true: “What we even now call a beautiful landscape may not necessarily be efficient, but certainly in the future an efficient landscape, a landscape

where the health-giving processes are continuous and unimpeded, will be thought of as beautiful.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Property Rights and Planning: Building Rural Character

#### *Private Paradises and Common Concern*

“Everything here [in the San Juans] is emotional because this is where people come to find their dreams, whether that means open spaces or condominiums... And never get between an American and his dream.” This statement by a longtime islander and sustainability advocate suggests the strong emotions behind land use decisions on Orcas Island—a passion that has come to fruition through the protections of private property. Whereas, during the days of homesteading in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, US political rhetoric promoted private property as an institution that was earned through laboring on the land, more recent claims to ownership evoke notions of entitlement due to labor done earlier in life. This chapter questions the role of private property on Orcas, examining the place of private property within rural western US discourse. I argue that nostalgic longings for the days of homesteading inspire strong faith in private property and independence from the state; however, the means by which such land becomes owned have fundamentally changed, as have the meanings of private property itself. In other words, people still feel the same sense of entitlement to their land that early homesteaders did, though without the labor that acted as the original justification.

This shift in the political economic means through which ownership is achieved suggests attention is needed to the political ecology of property ownership. In particular, the strong emotions associated with both historical and contemporary claims to American

lands suggests that ownership does not just affect resource use and degradation, but also impacts the ways in which that land is seen and remembered, by owners and viewers alike. Landowners use history strategically, appealing to moral lessons and values while extricating the narrative elements that are no longer useful for justifying current claims to ownership. Further, this chapter documents the process of creating the County's Comprehensive Plan, considering the political economic process through which it was created and showing how the Plan in turn has helped shape the visual associations of rural character. The chapter continues to use debates over the Comp Plan's content as a lens through which to examine the extent to which rural character is shaped by private ownership versus collective planning efforts. In conclusion, I consider cases in which rural character is something to be built, showing how modern developments have only enhanced a shared desire to recreate the ruins of the past on private lands.

In contrast with the Lockean premise that one earns one's land through laboring on it, or even sociologist Max Weber's (1930) notion that Protestantism encouraged labor as a means of promoting the glory of God, more recent land claims are instead based upon dreams and aspiration. Attaining a space for leisure is rarely earned through working the land. In fact, Veblen (1931, 40) describes the "characteristic feature of leisure class life" to be "a conspicuous exemption from all useful employment." Leisure, as he uses it, connotes "non-productive consumption of time," in the sense that productive work is "unworthy" and that one is wealthy enough to be able not to work—or at least one works very hard to appear to have a life of leisure (*ibid*, 43). Rather than labor serving as a more 'virtuous' basis for ownership, money and a feeling of entitlement is all one needs to own land on Orcas—or indeed, the rest of the country.

Property, as discussed below, is not a thing, but is relative and can change based upon context; the basis for land ownership shifting from labor to aspiration is just one such example. In fact, as described further in Chapter 6, many residents feel that Orcas is not a place for work at all, but a place one goes to escape labor altogether—glossing over the earlier accumulation that made such leisure possible.

The transition from Orcas as a landscape of labor to one of leisure involves maintaining certain visual and communal qualities of the idyllic rural—the helpful neighbor, the old barn, the open field—without the hardship that comes from relying upon them financially. Yet, to say that one who has worked the land is necessarily more attached to it than one who comes for leisure does not tell the whole story. As described in Chapter 3, it is possible to experience strong emotional ties to a landscape even without having farmed it, for example. Achieving “rural character” in a place that so many have invested not only money, but emotional commitment as well, invokes feelings of entitled ownership. Who has the right to regulate landscapes that one has earned through either labor or ambition—is not that freedom to use land as one sees fit part of American rural character? But what happens when competing visions of rural character complicate these property rights arguments? While some landowners appeal to a wider sense of place, regarding their land as a rural homestead on a rural island, others’ visions might be as singular as seeing their land as *their* private land, on which they can do whatever they like regardless of their surroundings.

A 2005 debate at a public hearing over a bed and breakfast on San Juan Island illustrates the type of defenses residents use to oppose particular types of economic developments within their “private paradises.” A couple who have lived on San Juan

Island for seventeen years wanted to transform their three bedroom residential home into a vacation house. They argued that they would screen all renters and make clear they must be respectful of the environment and neighbors, claiming that “people who would rent here and can afford that kind of experience are respectful of the property and treat it well.”

A group of neighbors showed up at the permit hearing to protest against the potential vacation rental, eleven of whom (at a meeting of 37 individuals, including nineteen men and eighteen women) made public comments to argue varying points as to why such a rental would transform their residential neighborhood into one with commercial dimensions, setting a dangerous precedent for future owners. One neighbor explained that the road he shares with the site in question is private and in poor condition, and is not appropriate for increased use by individuals not accustomed to the windy, narrow, and steep route. Others worried about the availability of water to suit the needs of “city type people,” who are presumed to be less familiar with natural resource limitations in an area where wells regularly dry up.

By far, however, the most common concern was the desire to protect the rural feel of their neighborhood. One resident described how his water pipe broke the previous night, so his neighbors gave him 5 gallons of water; “I wouldn’t call a vacationer and ask him to give me water.” A vacation rental, he argued, would destroy the “rural country look” and transform his “informal community of friends” (a phrase he repeated three times) into a community of “speculators and transients.”<sup>49</sup> Another explained, “this has been a pleasant, peaceful, rural, homogenous neighborhood,” and creating a vacation

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<sup>49</sup> “Transients,” as this resident noted, is defined in the Unified Development Code as individuals who live in a particular place for fewer than 30 days.

rental would be the first step in turning it into a “tourist trap.” A third declared, “our homes are our special private paradises—we all have worked and now we need an escape. Take the greed somewhere else—not in my backyard.” Yet another stated: “We’ll end up having to be watchdogs—and we’re too old for that. We want tranquility and that’s why we live on a private road that meanders.”

Describing the creation of a vacation rental as an act of “greed” while one’s own home is an “escape” after a life of work suggests a fine line between appropriate and inappropriate uses within San Juan County’s limited land resources. It is the institution of private property that offers potential protections against unwanted development (via the private road), but also establishes the rights of owners to use their land however they desire within the confines of the Comprehensive Plan and Unified Development Code. In many respects, the standard “private rights versus public interest” debate applies (Pralle and McCann 2000, 64), but it is also important to note that both sides are acting in the name of preserving rural character. To one group, maintaining a rural neighborhood that rejects the encroachment of capitalist pursuits is the essence of rural character; to the other, protecting private property and the right to profit off it is another, though perhaps less romantic, way to continue a rural American tradition.

While the County’s Comprehensive Plan specifically refers to the maintenance of rural character in its Land Use section, in this particular case it would appear that private property rights took precedence over perhaps less tangible fears of changing community character. Ultimately, San Juan County does not consider vacation rentals to be a commercial use and this issue, suggests a local realtor who had been watching the meeting and occasionally rolling his eyes at some of the public’s appeals to maintain their

“peaceful” neighborhood, should be taken up with the County and not at a permit hearing.

Thus the question is raised: how have County regulations regarding land use been produced, and what understandings of property have informed them? How does the County attempt to balance private property rights with a communal desire to maintain certain rural vestiges? While visual and ecological dimensions remain important to defining rural character, particular types of property relationships also shape what makes a place rural or urban. Whereas historically, communal living was necessary for survival (in terms of bartering for goods or collaborating on projects that required the labor of more than one household), now some see those collective concerns as a vestigial remnant of the past that defeats the purpose of their choosing an island retreat, while others see cooperation as inseparable from pastoral ideals. Does the freedom to do what one wishes on private property signify the true pastoral, or is compelling a unified vision the best way to build the rural?

### *Informal Property Law and the Urban/Rural Mindset*

There exists the notion that rural beauty—however much labor is required to maintain it—is a public good that everyone has a right to enjoy. One islander expressed her dismay at a tourist who came on her property and picked a flower right out of her front yard. When the local confronted the tourist and asked, “how would you like it if I came on your property and took a branch off your tree?,” the tourist replied, “Well, this is different. This is the countryside.”

While some would never think of walking onto a suburban lawn and picking a flower, somehow the same action on rural private property seems more reasonable. The argument that rural private property is somehow “less private” than its urban counterpart is baseless in legal terms, but it also illustrates how the meaning of private property can shift in different circumstances. Whereas in the example of the hopeful vacation renters above, the freedom to do what one wishes on private property is the defining characteristic of American rural independence, in this case rural private property is perceived as fitting within a communal moral economy. Perhaps romantic historical images of informal community access and shared country lands convinced the above tourist her actions were acceptable. The seemingly natural countryside implies a place where ownership is irrelevant because the landscape has supposedly not been shaped by labor. Raymond Williams (1973, 46) argues that the contrast between the country and the city—between nature and worldliness—“depends, often, on just the suppression of work in the countryside, and of the property relations through which this work is organized.” Part of the myth of the idyllic countryside depends upon removing labor and property from the picture—the country should not be a place for the harsh reality of private enterprise, but a vestige of a romanticized communal past. These conflicting expectations of private property show it is not a universally recognized ‘thing’ to be owned, but a relationship dependent upon context.

Rural versus urban and private versus public property debates reveal the mutability and relativity of property regimes across space and over time. The meanings of private property have changed since settlement, as Director of the Samish Center for the Study of Coast Salish Environments put it, from “community to enclosure—the worst

sense of private property.” While private property has long been important to Americans, as explored below, informal access onto private lands has also played a significant role in daily life. One fourth generation islander expressed his internal discord over no longer allowing strangers on his waterfront property. He explained, “it feels right to me to share my land, because not everyone has a place like this. But,” he continued, “I also don’t really want to share my beach, though I do feel a little selfish...But I pay all the taxes.” In the 1940s and 1950s, he knew more people and did not fear the liability issue. But now, when he sees people trying to camp on his beach, he asks them to leave, though he does not always feel right doing so.

Another third generation resident and local historian described a time when one could dig clams anywhere on the island, whereas now there are no private lots where he can gain access. After white settlement, there was a shift from the Coast Salish emphasis on water resources to the Euroamerican emphasis on farming—which required more attention to land property resources rather than water access. Waterfront property was generally undesirable to these early settlers; the ‘oldtimer’ above told me his great-grandfather never wanted their waterfront property because it had too many trees and was too rocky for him to farm. Now, that or any waterfront property is among the most desirable and expensive on the island. Whereas early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, informal access on waterfront property was acceptable because it was among the least desirable land, now that those beaches are so valuable, public access is a rare occurrence as liability threats loom.

Though early settlers were more protective of land rights rather than water due to the centrality of agriculture, a neighbor could generally gain access with a simple request.

Farm property lines were well respected from an early date, and residents have told me into the 1960s there was a reasonable amount of informal access permitted on private property. Yet, as more ignorant or simply unconcerned tourists and residents began to explore the island, boundaries have been become more rigorously marked. Some landowners still allow neighbors to cut across their property to get to town, for example, while others with open space land allow hiking groups access onto their property. Other owners on Turtleback Mountain and Eagle Mountain also allow informal access onto their lands so that neighbors can climb to the top—while simultaneously trying to keep “visitors” away. How do you keep the tourists out without excluding your neighbors as well?

The tendency of many visitors to trespass on “country” property has prompted many owners to post “private property” and “keep out” signs at commonly trespassed spots. One resident told me of a guide book to the San Juan Islands that advised tourists to “ignore the private property sign” in a particular area and continue hiking on private property in order to reach a coveted viewpoint. This kind of attitude has inspired signs like one on San Juan Island that reads: “NO TRESPASSING...NOT SOMEONE ELSE!! ‘YOU’! WE MEAN IT!” While the placement of such signs is frequently rooted in concerns over liability, property damage, and other nuisances, some are concerned with the impression such signs convey to visitors. A Seattle resident who owns a home on Orcas wrote a letter to the editor that addresses this issue:

Orcas Island is a very unwelcoming place to visitors. I don't mean people on a one-to-one basis, I mean the overall impression...We own a house on Buck Mountain and every time I drive by the sign at the start of the road, I'm annoyed by it, the one telling me I'm not welcome unless I have specific reasons to be there and the Sheriff, by god, will see to it. It's like that all over the island...But let's face it, the message really is, I've got mine and I won't share—go buy your own

damn property. Nice... We don't have to convey the impression that Orcas is an exclusive enclave (or is it?) to be enjoyed and explored only by the lucky few.<sup>50</sup>

With so much of the island privatized, Orcas is something of an exclusive enclave to the uninformed visitor.

For those who feel signs are not enough of a deterrent, there are gates. One woman who moved to Orcas in the 1950s and has been involved with both the San Juan Preservation Trust and the affordable housing trust suggested the whole of Orcas Island is a “gated community” in terms of how unaffordable it is to most working people. In addition to these financial barriers, there are tangible gates on the islands to suit a variety of intentions. One woman who moved to Orcas with her retired husband in 2000 purchased a home in the gated development Bluebell Springs. She told me she believed the owner of the development put in a gate to help market the plots for sale and to create a “nice community.” The neighbors all chipped in to turn the padlocked gate into an automated gate for “privacy” and to keep out tourists who want to look at the nearby Twin Lakes. This resident went on to tell me that she is startled whenever the doorbell rings; recently a man came to her house to ask where he could find a beach with mussels, but she suspected he was there to size up the house.

While perhaps intended to keep out tourists, gates have the effect of alienating locals as well. One Inn owner who has owned land on Orcas since the mid 1990s included gates as evidence that the “big city mentality” is becoming more prevalent on the islands. A number of islanders, including a third generation farmer, have told me they resent the big “Santa Barbara style” gates, which have been springing up on San Juan Island since the 1970s, and are present in several spots on Orcas—as one longtime

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<sup>50</sup> Letter to the Editor. The Islands Sounder. December 6, 2006.

resident asked me in disbelief while we discussed changes he has noticed in the island's population, "can you believe Orcas has a gated community?" In fact, there are at least 3 gated residential areas on Orcas, including Bluebell Springs. A retired couple who lives in another gated community is clearly appalled and embarrassed by the gate that encloses their community. They explain that one of their neighbors installed the gate in 2001 to keep out the "hordes"—an ironic reference to the relatively few visitors who have come through the property they have owned for 21 years. This neighbor installed the gate on the private road leading to their home, ultimately causing the couple with whom I spoke to sue because they had no rights to the gate—for example, while they themselves could come and go, they were not permitted to leave the gate open for guests. Residents' attitudes towards their gates often became evident even as I made arrangements to visit them at their homes; the couple above gave me the numerical code to their gate so I could enter the development, while others requested I call ahead so they could buzz me in. Those who gave me the code also turned out to take the gate itself less seriously, finding it embarrassing and unnecessary.

One retired resident who, due to health reasons, now only spends part of the year on his Orcas home suggests having a gate that is never closed is enough of a deterrent to curious tourists. He and his partner keep a gate at the front of their driveway in response to tourists driving in and thinking their property is a park; "It is a park," he said with a smile, "but it's a private park." He told me he believes the gate is most effective when left open because people think someone is home—he is not even sure if the gate closes anymore. The open gate, rather than the closed gate, acts more as a symbol of private property than a physical barrier between the public and the private.

To some extent, the rural feel of communal access, while still protecting private investments, is maintained through informal knowledge of public spaces. For example, some spots are open to the public, but surrounded by private roads. To drive from the main highway to Victorian Valley, a beautiful spot with a small country chapel surrounded by a pond, marsh, meditation garden, and open fields, one must traverse a number of intimidating “do not enter” and “private property” signs. Yet, the owners of the chapel told me it is open to the public and they encourage visitors to enjoy the serene spot. The bottom line is that certain spots are public to those ‘in the know.’ At a meeting to discuss the addition of the San Juan Islands as Washington State’s 28<sup>th</sup> Scenic Byway, a representative from the Visitors Bureau asked attendees to list sites they think should be included as highlights, in addition to “secrets” that they would like to remain unadvertised. After one woman suggested adding a trail in a National Historic Park on San Juan Island to the list of secrets, a man responded that they should not try to hide spots if they are in public parks. The woman responded half-jokingly, “we’re not hiding them, we’re just not mentioning them.” While ‘not mentioning’ public spots may intend to keep visitors at bay, the feasibility of informal access on private land is changing as well. The Deer Harbor waterfront property recently purchased by the Land Bank, described in Chapter 5, had previously been owned by individuals who allowed public access onto their waterfront parcel. Yet, residents fear that arrangement will not be able to work anymore, since future owners would be unlikely to allow trespassers onto their million dollar investment.

Historian Richard Judd (2003) explains that although Americans were newcomers who lacked the historical connections to the new land on which they would settle, they

still had their own traditions, culture, and customs that would shape their resource use. “Early on,” Judd claims, “Americans made their pact with private property, but in a variety of interesting ways land use followed communal expectations...the image of society reinventing itself on the frontier blinds us to the role of tradition in shaping American land use” (23). For my purposes, this point is important because the idea that vestiges of traditional, common property arrangements can exist within a society that simultaneously emphasizes the virtues of private property suggests the permeability of property regimes themselves. In other words, to say that property is ‘private’ does not mean it exists in a vacuum free from cultural, traditional, or social influences.

*Property in Context: US History and the American West*

What do we mean by ‘property’? For legal scholar Barbara Rose (1994), a fence illustrates a popular definition: to own property is to claim, “this is *mine*” (1), along with the expectation that others will agree. Yet, many researchers and theorists instead understand property not as a thing, but rather as a relation. Hoebel’s (in Hann 1998, 4) ‘textbook’ definition of property is as follows:

The essential nature of property is to be found in social relations rather than in any inherent attributes of the thing or object that we call *property*. Property, in other words, is not a thing, but a network of social relations that governs the conduct of people with respect to the use and disposition of things.<sup>51</sup>

Political scientist C.B. Macpherson (1978) similarly recognizes the mutability of ‘property’ as relations and how people’s perceptions change over time, suggesting that

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<sup>51</sup> With all this attention to ‘things,’ it is also important to note much contemporary property conflict concerns intangible items including intellectual property rights, ‘culture,’ and language, though this chapter is concerned primarily with landed property.

property is a political relation between people and an extension of individual rights granted by the state.

Property, then, is not a single, unchanging entity. Rather, it changes in response to social transformations. Bruce Yandle (2000, 43) emphasizes the notion that property rights are not purely legal, but are a “social phenomenon.” In other words, property gains meaning not just in a court setting, but through social practice. Law itself is not the only determinant of property regimes; daily social interactions shape the definitions of property, such that a plot of legally “private property” might function as a *de facto* commons, for example. This chapter argues that private property on Orcas is not an immutable fact, but rather a product of changing social relations, reaching from the days of Coast Salish land management to contemporary conflicts over the aesthetic qualities of house placement. The rich implications of private property in the U.S. only strengthen the notion that property on Orcas is the source of much conflict, transformation, and emotion.

American ideals regarding the sanctity of private property and the independent farmer are central to any discussion of property in this country, particularly in assessing the role of private property rights in protecting—or alternately, threatening—rural character. Jefferson’s vision of the yeoman farmer carried with it certain ideals that were later identified by Frederick Jackson Turner in his famous essay on the disappearance of the American frontier. Turner (1892) asserts, “the frontier of settlement advanced and carried with it individualism, democracy, and nationalism.” This national identity was bound up with particular expectations of land, property and the state.

Even before Turner wrote his treatise, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century John Locke was a pioneer in asserting the inalienable right of “man” to own land. Many Western conceptions of property are rooted in John Locke’s *Two Treatises on Government*, which more recent scholars have studied in order to better understand the distinctions that are now made between the private and common. Locke (1978, 17) uses his *Treatise* to explain how although “God gave the world to *Adam* and his Posterity in common,”<sup>52</sup> it is still possible to distribute this “common” land to private owners. Labor, which Locke claims does belong to individuals, can be mixed with land to assert claims to God’s nature. Labor removes land from the commonly held “hands of Nature” and creates private property. These rights extended beyond the fulfillment of basic needs; Locke states, “As much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils; so much he may by his labour fix a Property within. Whatever is beyond this, is more than his share, and belongs to others” (*ibid*, 19). Laborless land was thus presumed to be unowned or communal, as in the example of picking a flower off rural land. A ‘natural’ appearance suggests the absence of labor, which in turn evokes communal or open access property regimes. God gave ‘Men’ land so they could use it for the “Industrious and Rational” (20). In other words, “advantageous” use is a prerequisite for ownership—a statement that has profound implications with regard to American Indian land claims, discussed below (*cf.* Cronon 1983, Braun 2002). Further, valuing “industrious” use also suggests that owners of leisure lands—who engage in the “non-productive consumption of time”—are less deserving owners.

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<sup>52</sup> Notably, of course, Locke’s emphasis on God’s gift to “the Children of *Men*” remains powerful in many places that posit property and ownership as male spaces (*cf.* Goody 1998) .

Labor was a way of asserting rights, and private property as a legal institution protected those rights. Turner argues the frontier promoted democracy, as it was the driving force behind the creation of new federal legislation that was necessary for the governance of the new ‘lawless’ territories. This government intervention, however, was largely unwelcome. The intense drive towards privatization was derived in part from the pride in individualism as expressed through independence from the state. The tension between private property and the public domain remains within contemporary debates regarding the role of the state in regulating and promoting particular kinds of developments. The West, according to Turner, was also “rooted strongly in material prosperity.” Private property again formed the basis of this material prosperity; to threaten property was (and arguably still is) to threaten individualism, freedom and democracy. Moral and economic values thus became intertwined in much American thought and practice. Yet, the original basis of claims on private property—labor—has become disengaged from its current meanings, discussed below.

In spite of this strong emphasis on privatization, public property and federal land reform are central to American history. The Land Ordinances of 1785 and 1787 intended to divide public lands and promote private ownership. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, in fact, the primary function of US federal land policy was to distribute public land to private owners. Land was plentiful, and the 1862 Homestead Act was the federal government’s last great attempt to distribute the Western territories. Proponents of the Act—which enabled citizens to claim 160 acre plots of land for a nominal fee—espoused three basic principles rooted in the sanctity of Locke’s mixture of land and labor: “residency on land would lead to ownership, ownership was affirmed by labor invested in the land, and

residency and labor would be rewarded by a reduced purchase price as well as low-interest loans and reasonable terms of payment” (Geisler 1984, 11). Privatizing land was the most efficient way to generate capital in a new country rich in natural resources but lacking infrastructure.

Yet, according to Sociologist Charles Geisler (1984), private ownership was a myth by 1880. In part due to the lack of water and need for a larger irrigation infrastructure, much of the cheap land of the West was never claimed and is still federally owned. The 160 acre lots turned out to be too small to be workable, given the aridness of the West, and the size was gradually doubled and sometimes tripled. Land monopolies appeared near the limited water resources, while many of those who were not able to irrigate were ultimately forced to relinquish their lands to the government or larger landholders, contributing to landlordism and farmer debt. In spite of the grand goals of the Homestead Act, only an estimated one in six acres of land went directly from the government to settlers, indicating the failure of this early attempt at land reform (Geisler 1984, 13).

These acts and the later confirmations of private property rights under the US Constitution ultimately contributed to capitalists’ acquisition of the many valuable above ground and subsurface resources in the American West. Robbins (2004, 6) states, “Although the desire to acquire land may have involved all social classes, in the long run the larger capitalist enterprises were better equipped to buy out or push aside small holders when such actions were critical to their interests.” The capitalist takeover of Western resources changed the nature of settlement, insinuating a new mode of ownership in which family labor on the land was no longer the standard—though it

remains the central myth. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, another shift occurred in which views came to slowly replace resources as the major source of value in the west. Cultural as well as economic values came to prize aesthetic and environmental qualities above timber or mining, for example (McCarthy and Fortmann 2003), creating a different kind of industry and a new management goals. Labor was no longer the basis for ownership because beauty, not working to make the most of one's resources, became the reason to own.

The Sagebrush Rebellion of the late 1970s and early '80s was prompted in large part as a response to those who saw the West as a locus of aesthetic and recreational value—a national heritage that should be protected. The property rights debate above regarding the vacation home on San Juan Island, however, does not pit environmentalists against resource extractors. Instead, it has placed capitalists against other capitalists, the difference being that some made their money before moving to Orcas, while others are trying to do it on Orcas. It is not a question of preservation versus extraction—both groups benefit from the aesthetic qualities of the landscape. In fact, one could easily argue a resource-based industry (with appropriate aesthetic and environmental considerations) such as sustainable forestry or organic farming would garner *less* opposition on Orcas than a purely recreational one like a vacation home. The crux of the issue lies in the associations of each industry—small scale farming “connects urban America to an arguably more virtuous agrarian past, the *symbolic* loss of which would disturb more than a few citizens” (Bosso in Pralle and McCann 2000, 65-6). Agrarian pursuits lend legitimacy to the rural, while vacation rentals signify a commodification of the aesthetic attributes that so many islanders want to remain untouched by capital. Of

course, developers and realtors have created the very opportunities that have allowed these residents to settle their own homes, as discussed further below.

Historian Richard Opie (1998, 99) declared, “The American dream was defined by private property.” The history of American land settlement and reform does indeed show private property, and the ideals it embodies, to be critical to both American history and the current faith in privatization. Yet, the tendency to regard private property as a detached, rational pursuit ignores the passion property has incited in the Sagebrush Rebellion, early Homesteading efforts, and the dramatic pull of Manifest Destiny.

Historian Patricia Nelson Limerick (1987, 76) explains, “Neither the Western past nor the Western present will make sense until attachment to property and attraction to profit find their proper category as a variety of strong emotion.” Many Orcas residents embody the same emotional fervor of those early Western settlers, combining a sense of frontier adventure with an unshakeable faith in the sanctity of private property, regardless of how they earned it. Yet, residents no longer appeal to their history of labor on a property as a way of justifying ownership—they can instead speak of the work they performed earlier in life to deserve a place where labor is no longer necessary.

### *American Indian Property Issues*

How do the original inhabitants of the islands factor into these property relations? American Indian inhabitants, according to Locke’s premise, were not owners of any land because (to Euroamerican eyes) they had not ‘improved’ it. In fact, finding the seemingly “simple” and “wild” Indians only reinforced settlers’ beliefs that America was a place of “primal nature” (Marx 1968, 36). These notions have been thoroughly

critiqued; for example, Historian William Cronon (1983) demonstrates the differences between European and American Indian conceptions of property. In his look at interactions between colonists and Indians in New England, he shows how colonists failed to recognize Native ‘ownership’ of lands that were not organized similarly to their own system. The fence, for example, “represented perhaps the most visible symbol of an ‘improved’ landscape...fences and livestock were thus pivotal elements in the English rationale for taking Indian lands” (*ibid*, 130). This is not to say that the Indians had no method for organizing access to lands; rather they just did not conceive of ‘ownership’ in terms of fences and exclusion. Cronon argues Indians were more concerned with usufruct rights and did not believe that land itself could be bought and sold; rights to hunting and gathering, for instance, were the relevant features of property relations. Thus, these Indians did labor on their land and cultivate resources, yet did not mark this labor in the same ways as Euroamericans. To the Indians in Cronon’s account, ‘ownership’ did not refer to possession of the land itself, but to *access* to the resources on the land—a concept that has been difficult if not impossible to translate into US legal and policy language.

Historically, American Indians have often been left out of the story of Western settlement, though they were deeply impacted by federal policy. In response to the great value of many Western resources and the inaccessibility of many arid Western lands, the US sought to acquire more territory to satisfy its desire for profit. Until 1871, treaties were the primary means through which the US acquired Indian lands, though Indian groups were frequently coerced into signing under threats by the military and anxious white settlers (Ortiz 1984). The General Allotment (Dawes) Act of 1887 broke up

reservations and put a moratorium on the creation of new reservation treaties, effectively returning Indian lands to the public domain. By 1892, about 75% of the land that had been released under the Dawes Act was owned by whites (Geisler 1984, 12).

Ethnic studies scholar Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz (1984) shows how the federal government continues to deprive American Indians of their lands. In numerous cases, whites have appropriated the most valuable resources, leaving Indians with only marginal lands. Nonetheless, many of the Indian lands that remain are the home of valuable resources, including coal, oil and uranium. By consolidating federal interests with those of major transnational corporations, the US has been able to put significant pressure on reservations as potential “sacrifice zones” for national security (Ortiz 1984, Kuletz 1998). Anthropologist Paula Wagoner (1998) also stresses the shift South Dakota Indians have made from assimilation to self-determination, after years of being subject to changing state and federal property laws. The military occupation of reservation lands poses yet another challenge to Indians’ fight for self-determination, as many tribes continue to lack a voice in their own economic and political development.

Currently, the Samish Indian Nation’s Center for the Study of Coast Salish Environments is engaged in its own struggle to reassert its presence in the San Juans. Since the Coast Salish used different islands for summer and winter villages, asserting use and thus ownership of such territories proved especially difficult to white settlers who were accustomed to permanent settlements, again evoking Lockean notions of ownership. With the tribe’s headquarters located on the mainland in Anacortes, many Samish have lost interest in the San Juan Islands and are understandably more concerned with housing and health care in the Anacortes area. While the Samish now own no land in the islands,

they are conducting archaeological and ecological research in their traditional territories with the goal of achieving co-management as a means of unofficial ownership. Since historical precedent has not provided a basis for ownership, the Samish hope scientific knowledge and conservation efforts might grant them access to ancestral sites. As one student involved in the tribe's research efforts stated, "we're gaining power through knowledge instead of casino revenues"—a statement made to a local reporter writing an article on one of their projects. The reporter replied, "that quote's going in," perhaps a reflection of his anticipation of the public's satisfaction with seeing Native conservation efforts, as opposed to the casino stereotype.

Negative stereotypes of American Indians are evident in a number of recent property battles. For one, the 1973 Boldt decision in the case of *U.S. v. Washington* set a precedent in terms of its progressive support of indigenous fishing rights, much to the dismay of non-Indian fishers and the state government.<sup>53</sup> A few oldtimer residents—who have in the past relied upon sea and land resources for survival, as opposed to more recent residents who are unfamiliar with resource extraction—continue to resent the decision and have suggested and, in one case, outright told me, "I wish Indians could blend in more with the rest of us. They have more rights than the rest of us. I mean, my family's been here a while too."

In the 1980s, debates over the future of Madrona Point, located near the main town of Eastsound, revealed a range of perspectives on the rights of the Lummi Indians to ancestral burial grounds. According to various historical records and an archaeological

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<sup>53</sup> See for example: Institute for Natural Progress (1992) and Cohen (1986).

assessment of the 1986 environmental impact statement for the site,<sup>54</sup> the Point has historically been a burial ground for Natives and, later, Euroamericans (Keith 1978). In the late 1800s, the area was claimed by the US government and later sold to a non-Indian settler, who built a hotel and various recreational facilities at the start of the 1900s. In the mid 1900s, the hotel burned to the ground and the property remained vacant until Northwest Building Corporation developers began plans to build a resort community on the site in the late 1970s. Ultimately, President Bush signed a \$2.2 million Interior Department Appropriations Bill in October of 1989 to help the Lummi buy Madrona Point. The Point has since been left open for public access, with signage acknowledging Lummi ownership and cultural and historical claims.

The Lummi Indians combined with environmentalists and anti-development activists to oppose the Northwest Building Corporation's (NBC) proposed plans. Both Natives and non-Natives cited spiritual connections to the Point, while others extolled the aesthetic properties of the Point and the need for Orcas to restrict development. Those who supported the development made arguments appealing to private property rights and faith in the Comprehensive Plan for San Juan County, which designates some lands for preservation and others for development and recreation. Madrona Point, being near the urban area of Eastsound, was designated for development to concentrate development and avoid sprawl.

While representatives from NBC promised to work with residents in developing building plans and to make sure all homes would be "tucked" behind trees along the

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<sup>54</sup> San Juan County Planning Department. Madrona Point Site 45SJ141, Archaeological Assessment, Final Environmental Impact Statement. Volume II: Appendices. October 1986; Lynn Roberts. "Burial site existed at Madrona Point." *Islands Sounder* August 9, 1989.

shoreline to preserve views of the ‘wild’ spot from afar,<sup>55</sup> many Lummi concerns were overlooked if not outright dismissed. Newspaper editorials and NBC discourse touted good planning and careful development as reasons to look past dissenters’ protests, though other sources have suggested that fear of Lummi ownership also played a part in the drive towards development. One resident who grew up visiting Orcas Island told me that, while the majority of islanders were supportive of Lummi ownership of the Point, a minority of elderly islanders had the attitude, “we don’t owe them [the Lummi] anything” and feared the Lummi would try to build a casino. One longtime resident described stereotypes of Indians as “greaser alcoholics” from the 1950s and ‘60s as remaining just under the surface of some opposition to Lummi ownership. The persistence of such stereotypes reveals a racism that some islanders may not have even recognized in themselves—the resident above admitted that it was not until he moved east and got involved in Civil Rights efforts in the 1960s that he realized his own biases against Washington State’s American Indians.

White attitudes towards American Indians have changed in recent years, largely as a result of generational shifts. Up till just a few years ago, according to a Lopez Historical Museum staff member, many people would not even acknowledge that Indians ever lived in the islands; “don’t tell anyone about your Indian grandmother,” was the credo. Many local historians continue to refer to “white settlement” as if whites replaced the Natives when, in fact, intermarriage between whites and Coast Salish made for a more complex shift in population—an idea that some residents as well as the Samish Environmental Center hope to promote. As the older generation gives way to descendents and newcomers who, as a whole, find Native cultures (or at least popular

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<sup>55</sup> “Madrona Point project aims to enhance Orcas.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. December 3, 1986.

perceptions of Native culture) an attractive alternative to the contemporary urban lifestyle, acceptance of Coast Salish history has grown. Nonetheless, the Coast Salish presence on the islands is scant and, while outright ownership as in the case of Madrona Point remains the exception rather than the rule.

*Debating the Comprehensive Plan and Development: What to Become?*

“Orcas Island and the San Juans are faced with a dilemma, to be, or not to be? What do you want to be? A tourist mecca? A center of hustle and bustle? Rustic, charming, and broke? A nice, quiet retreat? Heavy industry? You can be dynamic and developing.”<sup>56</sup> So opens a 1967 article in the *Orcas Sounder*, quoting Admiral Nix Lidstone, a retiring manager of the Bellingham Chamber of Commerce at a meeting of the Orcas Chamber. While there is less likelihood of heavy industry appearing on Orcas now than in 1967, these same questions could just as easily appear in a 2007 newspaper article. Whereas now such questions might intend to shape the direction of county planning, at the time of this article they argued not for a particular path, but rather advanced the then controversial notion that *planning* itself should be institutionalized.

By 1979, the year the county’s first Comprehensive Plan was approved, many self proclaimed “old time” islanders were still questioning the need for zoning and regulations regarding the subdivision of land. One resident declared at a 1978 public hearing, “I’m opposed to the Comprehensive Plan for the sole reason that it tampers with our basic right of private property ownership. This is a Republic, not a Democracy as I’ve been hearing. Once we give away our basic right to control our own property we’ve lost those

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<sup>56</sup> “Planning Springboard for Controversy.” *The Orcas Sounder*. Vol. 31, No. 6. June 1, 1967.

rights.”<sup>57</sup> A letter published in a July 1979 issue of the *Islands’ Sounder* reads, “We, who have owned parcels of land in the Islands for many years, do not want to have our destinies regulated by others. Regulations cost tax dollars, will negatively affect us financially and generally destroy the community comradeship we have enjoyed for so many years.” This self proclaimed “old-time Orcas islander” goes on to respond to prior letters to the Editor that have condemned those profiting from development and rising land prices: “Let’s not forget that most retired Islanders are living on profits earned earlier in life...Profits are not ugly, but a necessity of living. Capitalism is based upon profits, and socialism is based upon government regulation.”

The notion that any type of planning is a form of socialism harkens to the frontier myth of independence from the state and, while planning is now more commonly accepted as a necessity on Orcas, the idea persists that government regulation is an affront to the sanctity of private property and capitalism. A longtime resident and former Preservation Trust Board Member told me that while new laws may have made private land use more restricted, the minds of those coming to Orcas has not changed much:

Forty years ago, people came here thinking they could do whatever they want to their land, and they were right. People still come here thinking they can do whatever they want to their property, and they’re shocked to find all these regulations that limit them...People 40 years ago would be shocked to see how long the Comprehensive Plan is now—they always resented outside interference and people telling them what they couldn’t do.

On one hand, the Comp Plan is an affront to those who resent any restrictions upon private property. On the other hand, of course, achieving any degree of cohesive planning and shared vision depends upon the creation of an effective Comprehensive Plan that is able to balance the protections of private property with the public interest.

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<sup>57</sup> “P.C. Hears Pros and Cons on Comprehensive Land Use.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. Vol. 14, No. 22. August 30, 1978.

Mistrust of any form of government intervention was present during the three years of debates that preceded the approval of the first Comprehensive Plan 1979.

A 1978 hearing on the pros and cons of the Comp Plan drew about 175 Islanders, 89 of whom commented during the public comment period. Of them, reports a journalist covering the meeting,<sup>58</sup> 56 were in favor of the Comp Plan, 10 opposed the specific plan, and 23 were against planning in general. Several comments suggest the divide between those for and against planning fell along “oldtimer”/“newcomer” lines. A woman from San Juan Island stated, “I’ve lived here since 1941 and I’m naturally opposed to the plan. I think it’s repressive and so dictatorial that it says, ‘breathe in, breathe out.’” A San Juan Island resident denounced the Plan: “I strongly object to this anti-democratic plan that we’re having foisted upon us. This is an absolute socialistic, anti-democratic plan. The rule of the few over the many. We are absolutely being deprived of our constitutional rights.”

Another resident made extended remarks addressing supposed ‘newcomer’ supporters of the Comp Plan:

I’ve lived in Friday Harbor all my life. My parents, grandparents, my husband’s parents and his great grandparents (have too)... We’ve been environmentalists and ecologists before you ever invented the words. You came here because you liked it here. But don’t try to change us and tell us what we can or can’t do. Have you ever plowed a piece of land? Have you even gone out and gotten in the hay as a matter of making a living?... If you haven’t then you haven’t worked the land. You don’t have roots... Please don’t tell us what we can and can’t do. If we’d passed this Comprehensive Plan back in 1936 there would only be about a third of you here in this room today. Because if you had to sell 20 or 40 acre lots at that time, I doubt if any of you could have afforded it. You’re putting dollar signs on our land which weren’t there before.

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“P.C. Hears Pros and Cons on Comprehensive Land Use.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. Vol. 14, No. 22. August 30, 1978.

This comment evokes the Lockean premise of ownership—unless one has “plowed a piece of land” to make a living off it, one has “no roots.” This notion of rural American labor as a means of achieving title stands in contrast to those who have moved to Orcas not to work, but to escape work altogether. “Putting dollar signs” on the land signals not just higher property costs, but a change in the way one comes to own property—not through work, but through wealth. The audience, many of whom surely hated to consider themselves part of the problem, likely resented being told they were less deserving residents.

In addition to arguments concerning the ‘un-Americaness’ of private property restrictions, others argued with an eye to the impact of larger plots of land on prices and population. A realtor blatantly announced the effect that adoption of the Comp Plan would have on his business:

I’m in the real estate business and I want you all to understand something. I will continue to make a living selling real estate in San Juan County if there is never another parcel of land subdivided in this County. The fewer parcels there are the more money I’m going to make and the easier it will be... It’s fine with me.

One of the two hundred attendees at a 1979 discussion entitled “What Is Growth Doing To Us?” reasoned, “If I were a large landholder, I would support a tough Comprehensive Plan, because it would limit supply to increasing demand. My land would increase in value appreciably...Don’t blame the realtors or investors. We have only ourselves to blame if we increase this demand.”<sup>59</sup> The tension between lower density and higher prices is still a challenge today, discussed further in Chapter 5 on affordability.

Many residents—today, as in the late 1970s—blame newcomers and developers for changing island character. Yet, supposing that one only needs to lift the metaphorical

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<sup>59</sup> “What is Growth Doing to San Juan County?” *The Islands’ Sounder*. Vol. 15, No. 5. February 28, 1979.

drawbridge to Orcas after one has moved there has always usually raised some eyebrows.

In a 1979 *Islands' Sounder* letter to the editor, a resident criticizes a previous letter that blamed developers for being “the real ‘growth and progress advocates’” in the County:

Certainly it cannot be that some ‘Developer’ *forced* [the letter writer] to move to Orcas Island, can it? Is there anyone living on any of the San Juan Islands who now wishes that the ‘Developer’ who was responsible for making that opportunity to find a home here had been prevented from making that ‘Development’?...They want to stay where they are, but keep any later arrivals from sharing ‘their’ beautiful islands...they want laws to protect their privileges at the expense of others either in terms of money or of opportunity.

This resident goes on to argue that it is the demand for the islands that is setting high prices, and not the sellers or developers themselves.

The idea that not just ‘newcomers’ have contributed to changing the islands, but everyone who moved to Orcas is responsible for some of its development is troubling because it eliminates the simple solution of lifting up the drawbridge. A County Commissioner told me she does not have any laws that say no one else can come to the San Juans: “Some residents want me to shoot people at the ferry landing—but who do I shoot?...it’s not just that people are coming, but *who*’s coming...Wealthy newcomers have high expectations of what the islands should look like, and they have the money to make their dreams happen.” While fewer people may be able to move to the islands, those who can are not farming families who would most closely fit the rural character imaginary, but wealthy retirees. As one informant told me, “only rich people still think anyone can move here.” The high cost of land, the lack of affordable housing, and limited employment opportunities are among the most evident threats to the social components of rural character, yet have often taken backstage to the protection of visual elements.

### *Controversies within the Comprehensive Plan*

Even ten, twenty, and now almost thirty years later, many residents are still frustrated and unclear on various elements of the Comprehensive Plan. At a 1989 Comp Plan amendments hearing, a County Commissioner spoke of the public comment period, saying, “I don’t know right now how many spoke for or against it, but the general tone was not good. Not very many people gave improvements to the comp-plan amendments, which is what the hearing was supposed to be for.”<sup>60</sup> Over a month later, the amendments were finally approved, though several of the most controversial issues including guesthouses and signs were put off for later evaluation.<sup>61</sup> The tone at the 1989 meeting exemplifies many of the sentiments that have accompanied the planning process, and records from some of the earliest meetings in 1978 to the present shows the recurrence of a number of critical debates.

The Vision Statement was, by most accounts, the product of a lot of public input and reflects the broad majority’s image of the future of Orcas. Yet, translating those visions into law is a controversial process that has required, at its best, a fine balance between specific guidelines and the flexibility sometimes needed to preserve the laws’ intent. Many residents and elected officials alike have suggested that by the time laws are envisioned, written, and enforced, much of the original meaning is lost. As one frustrated resident who has spent years trying to participate in the planning process put it during an interview, “there’s a vision but no plan.” Some of the most contentious issues in Orcas planning are addressed below, as residents struggle with how to make their vision of rural character a reality.

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<sup>60</sup> “Changes to comp plan expected after angry hearing on Orcas.” *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. January 11, 1989.

<sup>61</sup> “Comp plan amendments finally approved.” *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. February 22, 1989.

## Density

Initially in 1978, all of Orcas was designated base, or R-1, meaning one home could be built on each acre parcel. At early planning meetings, San Juan and Lopez islanders declared, “I can understand why these people from Orcas Island, God bless them, we love them all, why they are in favor of the plan. It’s because they got what they wanted. I would like to see San Juan Island designated mostly base, same as Orcas Island.”<sup>62</sup>

That base designation did not last for long, and within a year significant changes had been made. Original map designations were based on soil types and geological maps,<sup>63</sup> though many changes were later made to county maps that caused many to question the logic behind the designations. A redesignation meeting on Orcas in June of 1979 drew over 100 people, over 40 of whom spoke regarding changes to the Comp Plan’s maps. A few people complained about the redesignation of their land from base to R-5, meaning one structure could be built on each 5 acre parcel, arguing that the new R-5 designation placed too many restrictions and prohibited the subdivision of land to pass onto each of one’s children.<sup>64</sup> Many redesignations decreased density, while others increased it—sometimes as a result of public input.

The notion that low density<sup>65</sup> is the solution to the preservation of rural character is a controversial one—a seemingly simple solution to a complex problem. As one Orcas resident who has been active in planning and conservations efforts for decades noted,

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<sup>62</sup> “P.C. Hears Pros and Cons on Comprehensive Land Use.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. Vol. 14, No. 22. August 30, 1978.

<sup>63</sup> “Hearing on Map Changes is June 22.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. Vol. 15, No. 14. June 15, 1979.

<sup>64</sup> “Redesignation Hearing on Orcas Well Attended.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. Vol. 15, No. 15. June 29, 1979.

<sup>65</sup> Density in the Comp Plan is used to indicate the “maximum number of dwelling units that may be constructed per acre of land, or conversely in rural areas, the minimum number of acres per dwelling unit” (San Juan County Comprehensive Plan, Section B, Element 2, p.2, December 2002).

density does not define land use, and having lower densities does not guarantee better environmental practices but instead leads to higher land prices. Nonetheless, maintaining open spaces remains a high priority to most residents for visual and privacy reasons. Combining those desires with the pressing need for affordable housing has transformed high density housing clusters into a Not In My Backyard issue (explored more in Chapter 6). While most support the clustering of development to maintain open spaces, few (with some notable exceptions) are willing to have their own property be adjacent to such a development. One landowner explained, “It’s hard for me to be objective about density. I can say I want everyone to live in Eastsound, but I want to stay here in the forest. It would take more planning than is legal in the United States to use the land optimally.”

Some residents see the potential to use conservation easements to change county density rulings. The Comprehensive Plan’s section on Land Use mentions conservation easements seven times; the first two times refer to them as voluntary means of reducing density that will be included in future buildout analyses. The next five suggest the “implementation” or development of conservation easements and transfer of development rights as a way of preserving natural resources, historic resources, open space and scenic resources, environmentally sensitive areas, and forest resource lands. While the county clearly acknowledges and to some extent relies upon conservation easements in order to advance its own land use goals, the voluntary nature of easements makes incorporating them into broader plans a difficult task. Further, while many residents view conservation easements as a favorable means of lowering density, the fact that they are private tools means that the public has no say in their use, as opposed to the input they theoretically have supplied to the Comprehensive Plan.

For instance, one Preservation Trust staff member told me that after the hamlet of Olga on Orcas was rezoned for more development years ago, a resident opposed the higher density and wanted to create a conservation easement limiting development in the town. Luckily for the Trust, the idea faded away before they were forced to make a decision. Any attempts at cohesive planning in the county must—but generally cannot—account for potential ‘artificial’ changes to density by using a land trust. An affordable housing advocate told me that it would be more efficient for county zoning to lower densities than for the Land Bank or San Juan Preservation Trust to use easements and fee simple acquisitions, but county routes are not always effective. While the Land Bank initially did not want to purchase high density land because that would be working against the county’s vision, some argue that they are now doing just that.

### Guesthouses

Instead of seeing the Comp Plan as being too restrictive, a number of islanders instead want the Plan to be stricter in certain respects, particularly in its limitation of guesthouses,<sup>66</sup> which has been one of the most contentious issues on Orcas for years. Guesthouses are defined by having a kitchen and a bathroom, and have been limited to 1,000 square feet in area and 16 feet in height. In 1998, the Board of County Commissioners approved a version of the Comp Plan and Unified Development Code that included new Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) regulations—standards that the environmental group Friends of the San Juans claimed via lawsuit were not in compliance with the criteria set by the state’s Growth Management Act. The Western

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<sup>66</sup> Throughout the controversy, also referred to as “freestanding accessory dwelling units” or, most recently, “detached accessory dwelling units.”

Washington Growth Hearings Board agreed with the Friends' appeal, leading to a moratorium on the building of guesthouses in 2000. In 2001, Washington's Superior Court upheld the Hearing Board's decision and, in 2003, the Board declared, "unrestricted numbers of detached ADUs in rural and resource lands created sprawl and urban growth in these areas, violating the underlying residential densities."<sup>67</sup>

Yet the last six years have provoked a number of negotiations, lawsuits, moratoriums, and appeals over the issue. As of February 2007, the county was finally close to being in compliance with the Growth Management Act, the only necessary change requiring the prohibition ADUs on properties measuring less than 5 acres within 120 days of the decision. In March, 2007, a resident of San Juan Island filed a lawsuit challenging the February decisions, claiming they are "at odds with state planning guidelines which are intended to preserve rural character and protect the rights of private property owners."<sup>68</sup> The new rules limit the number of new guest houses to approximately 15 per year, in addition to requiring the detached ADU to be within 100 feet of the main house, share utilities and driveways with the main house, and have enough water on the property, rather than getting it from offsite. The complainant asked to end the restrictions, or at least nullify the water requirement.<sup>69</sup>

The debate surrounding ADUs has pitted property rights advocates against those who support environmental protection. Both sides refer to rural character in their arguments, citing either low density or property rights as characteristic of the rural ideal.

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<sup>67</sup> Growth Management Western Washington Hearings Board. Friends of the San Juans, Lynn Bahrych and Joe Symons, Petitioners. v. San Juan County, Respondent.; James Nelson et al, Petitioners v. San Juan County, Respondent. No. 03-2-0003c Compliance Order. Case No. 06-2-0024c. Final Decision and Order. February 12, 2007. [http://www.gmhba.wa.gov/western/decisions/2006/03-2-0003cFriends\\_06-2-0024cNelsonComplianceandFDO20070212.pdf](http://www.gmhba.wa.gov/western/decisions/2006/03-2-0003cFriends_06-2-0024cNelsonComplianceandFDO20070212.pdf)

<sup>68</sup> Scott Rasmussen. "New guest house rules headed to court." *The Islands' Sounder*. March 28, 2007.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid*

While some proponents of guesthouses suggest they could serve as affordable housing—thus helping the county meet compliance with the GMA affordable housing requirements—Friends of the San Juans argues that guest houses double the density and that only one in 12 guest houses are rented at affordable rates.<sup>70</sup> The “double density” rhetoric is a common opposition to ADUs, for low building density is associated with lower population, less strain on water resources, and a reduction of other environmental impacts. Others, however, find it “ridiculous”—as many residents told me and also revealed in public meetings—that the county should be able to prohibit what one does on private property.

A January 2006 informational meeting held by the San Juan County Guest House Alliance turned into a debate over the merits and harms of ADUs. The contentiousness of the issue put both sides on the defensive; a representative from Friends protested that she had not been informed of the meeting until the last minute, and did not have time to prepare any comments. The moderator explained this was a public meeting, and no one received any special invitations. As one citizen began to angrily question the shoreline regulations in the guest house proposal, the moderator cut him off, claiming, “this is an informational meeting, not a public hearing.” After six years of litigation, three decisions favoring Friends, and hundreds of thousands of tax dollars spent, many residents want the issue to be resolved as quickly as possible.

#### On signs and being “too mainland”

The notion that certain features are “too mainland” to be on Orcas is a common complaint, referring to a number of different developments. One islander told me of an

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<sup>70</sup> Editorial: Speak out at hearing. *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. July 14, 2004.

incident a few years ago in which residents became incensed over a ‘clock tower’—about 9 feet in height—built by a bank in Eastsound. Angry letters to the editor complained the clock was “too mainland” and demanded it be removed, though it has remained. While there was not necessarily anything inherently “mainland” about the clock except, perhaps, its newness, the fact that it was constructed without community input by an off-island bank was reason enough for it not to belong. The clock was part of the bank’s commercial landscape, and was not incorporated into a rural town vision that might have made it more palatable.

Another spot in Eastsound, a convenience store and gas station called the ‘Country Corner,’ is a common target of jokes. One local artist and resident who had been visiting Orcas since his childhood jokingly calls it the ‘Country Coroner,’ a reference to the fast-food type fare it offers, and jokes with others that the area used to be a waste dump full of old batteries and car parts—and is it really better now? The main complaint, as a longtime farmer on one of the more productive island farms put it, “if they had to build it, why did they make it look so mainland, like a 7-11?” In spite of its name, most residents find the Country Corner to be anything but the slow paced, local market that would act as a vestige of rural character.

In 1986, the County proposed an amendment that determined that real estate signs were not exempt from the Comp Plan rules, attempting to formalize an unofficial agreement from the 1970s in which real estate offices did not put up signs. The 1986 amendment states real estate signs, “shall be permitted provided they carry only the words: ‘for sale’ and a telephone number,” and may not include a company logo. The amendment also allowed only one sign per property, and limits the size of the signs to 12

by 18 inches.<sup>71</sup> Aesthetic considerations came to the fore in support of the restrictions, as the County Planning Director claimed, the proliferation of real estate as well as Chamber of Commerce of signs could “degrade the scenic quality of the islands.”<sup>72</sup> Realtors united in opposing the amendment, claiming it infringes upon their right to free speech, violates state licensing laws that require the names of real estate offices on signs, and breaks a federal law stating that restricting signs is also a restriction of free trade.<sup>73</sup> An Orcas realtor claimed he was personally not in favor of real estate signs, but was “more opposed to property rights being taken away from the property owners. I think that in this case, it’s selfish and self-serving. Property rights have to take precedence.”<sup>74</sup> Rules regulating shoreline signs are even more restrictive; the Uniform Development Code states, “All signs must be located and designed to minimize interference with vistas, viewpoints, and visual access to the shoreline,” and that “Light sources for externally lighted signs must be hooded, shaded, or aimed so that direct light will not result in glare when viewed from surrounding properties or watercourses.”<sup>75</sup> The appeal to property rights again arises, positing the rights of the landowner against the less defined ‘rights’ of the neighbor or passerby *not* to see certain unattractive blemishes on the landscape.

San Juan County’s prosecutor maintained that using a company logo on signs to advertise a realtor is inappropriate, though he encouraged the use of directional signs pointing to businesses. Yet, by 1989, business owners were still complaining that poorly

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<sup>71</sup> “Revising the Plan: Land-use plan open for change.” *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. October 26, 1986.

<sup>72</sup> “Problem with Orcas Chamber’s signs: Grout says the problem is overall proliferation of signs.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. November 16, 1988.

<sup>73</sup> “Realtors reject sign restrictions: Many who don’t use signs oppose county proposals too.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. Vol. 22, No. 48. December 3, 1986.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid*

<sup>75</sup> San Juan County Uniform Development Code.

[http://www.sanjuanco.com/Planning/Docs/UDC/UDCtoOrd\\_15\\_2005.pdf](http://www.sanjuanco.com/Planning/Docs/UDC/UDCtoOrd_15_2005.pdf)

marked roads were making it difficult for people to find the 86 businesses located outside island center Eastsound. Two proposed signs were introduced at a January 1989 meeting, one measuring 5 ½ inches by 42 inches, and the other measuring 4 by 24 inches. The words “Obstruction Pass,” which is a state park on the southeastern end of the island, was printed on both signs to exemplify the newly proposed commercial signs and, reports a journalist, “the crowded writing almost ran off the smaller sign, and was hard to see even at ten feet.”<sup>76</sup>

Why such hesitation to display even the smallest of commercial signs?

Advertisements do not just physically interfere with scenic vistas, but mentally transform what is supposed to be a rural idyllic landscape—a place somehow outside of capitalism and economic relations—into one potentially as commercial as the suburbs or cities residents and tourists are trying to escape. Yet, as Raymond Williams (1973, 37) notes, contrasting capitalism against the idealized ‘natural’ or ‘moral’ economy of a past agricultural order overlooks the historical fact that, “there was very little that was moral or natural about it.” Nonetheless, emblems of the mainland, whether they are clock towers or real estate signs, alter the appearance of Orcas, in addition to insinuating a more commercial character into the rural landscape.

### Enforcement

In August of 1977, the Planning Commission held a hearing on Orcas Island to discuss an early version of the Comprehensive Plan. At this meeting, an opponent to the particulars of the first Comprehensive Plan argued, “the Plan is ambiguous, vague and, like most modern land-use laws, merely suggests attitudes and goals, rather than

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<sup>76</sup> “Concerns about day care, home occupations.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. January 11, 1989.

delineating substantive actions...the laws' very vagueness puts a tremendous burden upon the courts for interpretation, that such laws place insuperable concomitant burdens upon property owners by way of legal expenses and delays."<sup>77</sup> The 1986 Comp Plan amendment process brought more critiques of the Plan, causing even the County planning director to claim, "San Juan County's comprehensive plan is strong on policy as opposed to being strong on quantified standards. There's always that question of balance between pure policy thought and the desire for hard standards that are easy to administer. The amendments make the policy clearer but still don't change the fact that the plan is still a plan that requires many judgments."<sup>78</sup> More broadly, the tension between judgment and quantifiable standards remains central to much of the debate and interpretation of rural character itself.

Amendments to the Comp Plan in 1986 included "almost a page-and-a-half" of changes to the enforcement section, aiming to impose civil penalties on violators. For example, a 1986 article reads, "anyone who violates the plan could be fined \$1,000 a day for each violation."<sup>79</sup> County Commissioners and residents alike have told me that in many cases, wealthy residents have made land changes first and then obtained the necessary permits afterwards. For example, one Lopez Island landowner cut down a tree containing an eagle's nest, opting to simply pay the \$10,000 fine (a mere .1% of the \$10 million development project) rather than abide by county conservation regulations. A longtime Lopez resident who has been involved with the public planning process since the 1970s speculated, "this county must have the most after-the-fact permits."

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<sup>77</sup> "Orcas Portion of C.P. Hearing Non-Controversial." *The Islands' Sounder*. Vol. 13, No. 19. August 10, 1977.

<sup>78</sup> "Revising the plan: Land-use plan open for change." *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. October 26, 1986.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid*

These ambiguities, according to many contemporary residents, remain in the Plan itself. One resident who has been deeply involved in subarea planning and environmental restoration claimed, “the laws are wonderful, but enforcement is poor and difficult.” Another longtime Orcas resident and former member of the planning commission<sup>80</sup> explained, “the county couldn’t possibly follow through on all of their plans [to regulate properties]—there are too many conditions.”

As with conservation easements, enforcement of the county laws is often complaint driven, with no formal enforcement procedure except in the case of building permits, in which the county checks the lands firsthand. Many residents and commissioners expect—and applaud—neighbors who turn each other in. Yet, even when violators are identified, the county must make the decision whether it is worth the financial burden of fighting lawsuits from wealthy families like the Nordstroms, for example, who can afford to appeal. When owners try to create a dock that is restricted by the UDC, it is still expensive for the County to fight private residents via the legal route.

A former San Juan County Commissioner told me, “Everyone wants to do something with their land, and they can afford to fight for it. San Juan County is the most litigious county in the state, or at least it was a few years ago.” San Juan County was relatively late to develop, and got its first Planning Director in 1975 and was subdivided in 1979. Until just recently, only “old timer” islanders could get elected as County Commissioners, and the first Commissioner to be elected on a pro-planning platform occurred as recently as 1994. The population of San Juan County, however, changes 25% every 4-5 years, with many new residents moving from urban areas like Seattle or San Francisco. This Commissioner explained that the county has increasingly

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<sup>80</sup> Planning committee members were appointed, with three representatives from each island.

“sophisticated citizens” who “know how to work the system” from places like King County, where the government is bigger and has established more land use precedents. These urban minded landowners get frustrated, she explained, with a Comprehensive Plan that is still catching up with the scope of its new residents’ land use plans, and often resort to lawsuits to challenge poor enforcement precedents—a trend that may only increase as land prices increase and the wealth of new residents rises to match.

### Permits gone too far?

In June of 1998, the builder of a small shelter on Crescent Beach received a letter from the County Permit Center advising him to remove it because it violated County Code 16.40.517, which does not allow built structures on the beach. The architect and builder was an 11 year old boy, and the structure was a fort constructed out of driftwood and tarps. Apparently, according to an article covering the controversy, someone on Orcas filed a complaint with the county citing the two story fort to be visually offensive, hazardous, and illegal. Neighbors responded that children building forts on the beach has been a “tradition for nearly 50 years.”<sup>81</sup> A week after the article was published, an Orcas resident wrote a letter to the Editor stating, “Oh, come on! Let the kids have a fort just like any other kid. Do we really expect these kids to ask the permit center for permission to erect a fort?...If it doesn’t affect you directly, then LET IT BE!”<sup>82</sup>

In 2006, while I was living on Orcas, I met a young man on Crescent Beach inside a newly built fort constructed of driftwood. I told him I had just read about a boy who, in 1998, got in trouble with County Code for building a beach fort. He replied, “Yeah, that

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<sup>81</sup> “County says kids’ fort must go.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. July 1, 1998.

<sup>82</sup> Letter to the Editor. “Permit Center: Let kids be kids.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. July 8, 1998.

was me.” He recalled that the community supported his right to build a fort, and told me that he had since built dozens of forts all over the island, and hoped to one day create a book of them with the photos his mother has taken of each structure.

The controversy over the fort raises questions about the wording and enforcement of county codes, as well as regarding the definition of rural character. First, while there are those that complain that the Comp Plan is too vague in its language and enforcement, here is a case in which leaving more room for interpretation might have yielded a more lax verdict on the beach fort. The county’s code enforcement officer claimed, “It is illegal to build things on the shoreline,” though many residents questioned whether the intent of the original law really meant to include temporary childhood forts. Secondly, which is more representative of the rural character touted in the Vision Statement: an unobstructed view of an island beach, or the knowledge that children are playing outside and building driftwood forts on the beach? Particularly at a time when the population of San Juan County is growing older, several islanders miss having younger families on Orcas (see Chapter 5)—as one landowner who was considering moving after his own children turn 18 told me, “I don’t want to live here with a bunch of old people.”

Others regard the Comp Plan as having gone too far with regard to the permits required to construct and renovate one’s home. For one, the Permit Center itself has been inefficient and overburdened. One local artist and longtime resident told me he had applied for a permit and called the Permit Center a month after he was supposed to have heard from them, only to find out his permit had been approved and signed but was just sitting at the bottom of a pile. He offered, “That’s why so many people hire expeditors to run back and forth between Friday Harbor—just to make sure things are moving.”

Second, since its inception, many residents have been confused with the permit process, sometimes inadvertently breaking the law due to paperwork bewilderment and expensive fees. In 1989, residents from Lopez and Orcas Islands—many of whom had built their own homes without the proper permits due to the complexity and cost of the permit process—met to discuss their grievances with a County Commissioner. In 1985, Washington State forced San Juan County to overturn its previous laws which allowed owner-builders to not comply with all aspects of the Universal Building Code (UBC). Regulations limiting how individuals may build their own homes are a clear affront to the pioneer spirit, and currently owner-builders can apply for permits granting exemption from certain UBC regulations.

Inconsistent interpretations of Comp Plan regulations have also led to confusion and frustration. During a conversation about building restrictions, one resident said his shop was initially considered a bedroom because it had a bathroom in it, which made it a duplex. Later, another inspector gave him a different interpretation altogether. Another islander told a story of a friend who was building an apartment above her garage, and was told by a building inspector that she would have to build the kitchen shelves and stove outside. A third resident who has had his own frustrations with the permit process insisted, “What you *can’t* do is well communicated in the Comp Plan, but what you *can* do isn’t so well defined.” While the general intention of these regulations may be the reduction of density and preservation of rural character, many residents question whether such specific building regulations are really the best way to attain the stated goals. As with the beach fort, the question is one of the letter versus the spirit of the law. A former County Commissioner summed up the challenge with Comp Plan regulations:

“[Microsoft co-founder] Paul Allen’s 14,000 sq ft home on Lopez Island uses a lot of energy, and produces a lot of wastes. How do you compare that with a small house that has one more window than it’s allowed?”

### Public Participation and the Planning Department

Determining the role of public participation in creating and amending the Comp Plan depends largely upon whom you ask. While some feel that the public was successfully included in policy discussions, the majority seem to believe that the public process failed to incorporate their voices. Even in 1979, while debating the first Comp Plan, such conflicts were clear. A June 1979 letter to the Editor from two residents of Shaw Island stated, “the interim [Comprehensive Land Use] plan was *not* brought into being by wishful thinking or technically ill-informed people. It is the product of many, many concerned neighborhood meetings...and reflects the thinking of the majority of (but not necessarily the largest) land holders.”<sup>83</sup> A few weeks later, the Islands’ Sounder Editor suggested in an editorial that, “It would seem that at least one secret meeting must have been utilized to decide just what designations were to have finally been put on the Orcas map and perhaps the Lopez and San Juan maps as well...Public input, though taken, was disregarded as completely as in any totalitarian state.”<sup>84</sup> On the same editorial page is a letter from a resident of Orcas Island who wrote, “As a concerned citizen for the future of our island I feel the residents of Orcas are having no say in our land planning...Why can’t we have a public hearing where our questions will be answered by

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<sup>83</sup> “An Open Letter to Islanders for Balanced Planning.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. Vol. 15, No. 13. June 8, 1979.

<sup>84</sup> “From the Editor’s Desk: Secret Meeting Decided Fate of Maps?” *The Islands’ Sounder*. Vol. 15, No. 15. June 29, 1979.

the Planning Commission? Don't I have a right to know what *motivated* the Commission to designate a change in any given area?"<sup>85</sup> This letter writer continues to question why one of three properties similar in topography and water availability had been designated R-5 while the other two were designated R-10, meaning one structure is allowed for every 10 acres. As an owning partner of the R-5 property, she asks, "why are you discriminating against us? We have no plans for the property at this time, but why should we have the cost involved to have the designation changed at a future date?"

Density issues remain contentious, as the county is confronted with the task of lowering density while keeping landowners involved in determining the fate of their property. In 1998, changes in property designations spawned a lawsuit by four Westsound residents, who claimed their properties were changed from urban to rural without their knowledge or any opportunity for their voices to be heard, lowering their property values an approximate \$75,000. County Commissioners reportedly changed the designation after the Western Washington Growth Hearings Board rejected the county's density plans, forcing them to reconsider the Westsound designations.<sup>86</sup> In 2002, almost 5 years after the initial lawsuit, a County Superior Judge dismissed the claimants' suit, saying the county was within its legal rights. Yet, the Westsound residents maintain that the county nonetheless acted immorally and deceptively by acting without their knowledge or input.

In 1997, San Juan County became the first county in Washington State to repeal a Comp Plan under the Growth Management Act. After one of the two commissioners who favored the 1996 Comp Plan left office, the tide shifted against the Plan. Rhea

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<sup>85</sup> "Protests New Orcas C.P. Maps..." *The Islands' Sounder*. Vol. 15, No. 15. June 29, 1979.

<sup>86</sup> "Gudgells, Island Institute sue county over redesignation." *The Islands' Sounder*. July 8, 1998; "Gudgell Lawsuit over redesignations denied." *The Islands' Sounder*. February 5, 2002.

Miller, the one opposing vote to the 1996 Plan, along with Darcie Nelson, the newest Commissioner, favored the repeal of the Plan because, in Miller's words, "'I feel like we lost the people's plan on December 31, 1996...I've got to have public ownership in this document (the Comp Plan) or else it's worthless.'"<sup>87</sup> The third commissioner, John Evans, and now ex-commissioner Tom Starr, according to a local paper, "violated the public process at the end of last year, when they hastily scheduled a final public hearing on the plan for Dec. 18 and passed it under a storm of protest on Dec. 31."<sup>88</sup> At a hearing days before the repeal, over 100 people testified with a 3-1 ratio of those favoring the appeal to those against it.

In a meeting with a former county commissioner, I began to ask about public hearings when the commissioner interrupted, "frankly, the public hearings are failures." While sometimes they do bring important issues to the commissioners' attention, "too often there's no dialogue and just yelling. People come with solutions, but don't tell what the problem is so that you can't get to the root of the problem. When I find out what the problem actually is, I can give alternative solutions." This sense of antagonism between the county and its residents has been present at least since the first Comp Plan came into effect. A 1979 article describes a new room for the county commissioners and hearings to be "pompous indeed—and will further enhance the feeling of officials against the people or vice versa."<sup>89</sup> At a 2005 meeting of the county's Land Bank, the chair was surprised that none of the 8 members of the public had any comments, tentatively continuing the meeting with, "I'm waiting for that one thing where you're all going to stand up."

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<sup>87</sup> "Miller and Nielson repeal Comp Plan." *The Islands's Sounder*. April 30, 1997.

<sup>88</sup> "Community split over repeal of comp plan." *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. April 30, 1997.

<sup>89</sup> "Courthouse Commentary." *The Islands' Sounder*. Vol. 15, No. 16. July 13, 1979.

One Orcas farmer and local sustainability activist told me, “the Comp Plan was actually the product of a lot of public input,” while another retiree who has lived on Orcas full time since 1990 insisted, “there was no public participation in the Comp Plan—they [the county commissioners] begged people to come and review it at the last minute...People read the Vision Statement and think that’s all there is.” Some suggest that frustration with the public process has led to disinterest and apathy on the part of some residents, while others have maintained that some commissioners have been better than others at listening to the public. One landowner I met briefly at the Orcas Island Historical Museum told me, as she searched through old photographs to find evidence of what plants once existed and that she might replant at the site of her newly purchased restaurant, “Land use goes to whoever has the most money, that’s it.” Another Inn owner and holder of a small conservation easement answered upon my asking whether he participated in the public planning hearings, “I don’t like the [public hearing] meetings...they’re [the commissioners] going to do whatever they want, regardless of what I think.”

Others argue that the Comp Plan was the product of good public input, but was lost when many planners were fired. The majority of people with whom I spoke about county planning department dismissed it as practically non-existent; as one landowner active in island politics said, “There is no planning, just chaos...They [planning department officials] fire good planners who stand up to developers.” He went on to tell me that the process of creating and amending the Comp Plan is so drawn out that most people eventually lost interest, while those more familiar with the political process (banks, real estate agencies, and developers) let the public speak, only to enter the

process later and influence policy and permits as they are being written. As another retired and politically involved longtime resident observed, the members of the community may attend public meetings, but the developers do not, in part because they do not want to share their ideas for fear that another developer might start them first.

The Eastsound Planning Review Committee (EPRC) is comprised of Orcas residents who are dedicated to creating a vision-based plan of Eastsound that would incorporate the public's values, yet fear that without county support, their plans will never be enacted. As a local, subarea planning committee, some members of the EPRC worry that they might lose credibility with the public if they are not able to get anything done, while others suggest that they do not need to be assigned authority to be effective, but do need to be listened to by the county. Members of the EPRC, at a 2006 meeting, disparaged the current situation in which the county permit center would tell residents with permit questions to ask the EPRC, while the EPRC would explain that they are not qualified to interpret the codes and would send them back to the permit center, though no one there is qualified either.

They also discussed the troubles with the planning department itself, claiming that it has been impossible to create a long range plan for the county with its planning department changing every 6 months. Consultants come and go, making both consistency and public participation difficult. For example, committee members described how a consultant hired to work with Deer Harbor on creating a subarea plan was forced to quit because he owned land there, creating a conflict of interest. When a new consultant was hired from off-island, she created a whole plan without ever meeting with any Deer Harbor resident and that they, predictably, hated. The county, as of March

2006, was looking for two long term planners and a permit coordinator. Part of their trouble in filling these positions, suggests an EPRC member and executive director of OPAL, the affordable land trust, stems from the high price of housing in the county, that would cut significantly into the otherwise respectable salary planners would make. The resignation of two senior planners and the planning director from 2003-2004, two of whom left to work on the mainland, was a blow to those hoping for consistency and to hold on to those who had acquired familiarity with the legalese of the Comp Plan and state Growth Management Act, which Washington State approved in 1990. The third planner worked for the county for 20 years until resigning after being demoted as a result of a newly consolidated planning department that cut its payroll budget and then her salary by 20%.<sup>90</sup> As a number of residents have told me, the county's planning department has been "gutted," and, as one landowner insisted, "the county is still functioning as it might have 100 years ago, when building roads was the county's sole function."

### *Building Rural Character*

Building a home is not necessarily a crime in and of itself; building one that everyone can see from the water or road, however, is a breach of an unwritten (though sometimes written) code of scenic ethics. Houses are unnatural until you make them natural; weathering the bright cedar of your brand new guesthouse creates the illusion of age and therefore belonging to place. J.B. Jackson (1980, 101-2) suggests a different motivation behind historic preservation in his discussion of the "necessity for ruins":

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<sup>90</sup> "Planning director quits." *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. Vol. 99, No. 28. July 14, 2004; "Arnold says so long." *The Islands' Sounder*. October 8, 2003.

The whole preservation and restoration movement is much more than a means of promoting tourism or a sentimentalizing over an obscure part of the past—though it is also both of those things. We are learning to see it as a new (or recently rediscovered) interpretation of history. It sees history not as a continuity but as a dramatic discontinuity, a kind of cosmic drama. First there is that golden age... Then ensues a period when the old days are forgotten and the golden age falls into neglect. Finally comes a time when we rediscover and seek to restore the world around us to something like its former beauty.

Jackson maintains that that period of neglect is necessary to provide the incentive for renewal. In other words, without the barn falling into a state of deterioration, there would be no impetus to preserve it. If that barn no longer exists, or perhaps never did exist, intentionally building an old looking barn in order to preserve a certain history—in this case, an agrarian past—suggests that history itself is at risk of being lost. Comparably, when a new resident builds a modern, highly visible home on a mountain peak, others are provided with the incentive to preserve or produce emblems of the history it is supposedly challenging. When some vestiges of the past have been lost or turned into ruins, preservation alone will not do; the rural history must be rebuilt and recent structures must be hidden so that they fit into the idealized rural landscape.

A 2006 building permit hearing addressed some of these concerns about preserving a certain historical character, as attendees considered potential changes to the Orcas Village Store, located right next to the ferry dock. As of now, the building is shaped like a short box. After announcing plans to change its roof and add storage space to the building, the Store received a letter from the owner of the Orcas Hotel, located a short walk across the road from the ferry landing, who was concerned how such changes might affect the view from his hotel and restaurant. An architect working on the remodeling described how the “view cone” from the hotel—the splay in which one’s view would occur from right to left—is not affected by the proposed changes to the Store.

With those concerns addressed, other members of the public were eager to transform the “concrete block” from “something to look past” into a “part of the view.” One woman went as far as to compared the store’s exterior to “a nuclear weapons facility.” Most speakers supported the existence and expansion of the store itself, which is the only significant competition to the Islands Market in Eastsound. Another elderly woman explained she is very concerned about the look of the Village and, since the old store burned down in 1949, she has missed the peaked roof that made it more visually cohesive with the other buildings. The architect promised the new Village Store would match the aesthetics of other Orcas Village buildings, and create “a sense of place” in which the store more readily belongs.

Preserving rural character is not just a matter of maintaining the current environment, but sometime requires further construction—as long as there is careful consideration of historic consistency, location, building materials, and viewsheds. Some county laws do address these considerations, standardizing certain efforts to make homes less visible or more weathered in appearance. In 1991, the county adopted a Shoreline Master Program provision that stated waterfront homes must either be “naturally screened or painted in an earth-tone color that blends in with the surroundings.”<sup>91</sup> Planning Commission Board Chair Gordy Petersen disputed a section of the Plan that he claimed allowed neighbors to halt construction of another’s structures if that structure blocks their water view. Many residents and commissioners framed a 1998 debate over adoption of a Comp Plan that included these provisions as a battle between property rights versus the environment. Property rights advocates like Petersen suggested the Plan went too far in limiting what people can do on private property, while others argued that

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<sup>91</sup> “Split vote on Comp Plan comes as no surprise.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. February 25, 1998.

limiting what one's neighbor can do is pro-property rights because, as another Planning Commissioner argued, "It's keeping our property values from being devalued by something negative next door." A March 1998 editorial cartoon sided with Petersen, showing a house with the words "The Comp Plan Stinks!" painted on it, alongside a man saying, "Please notice that it's painted in all natural colors!"<sup>92</sup> The current Comp Plan has no explicit reference to paint colors, but does encourage the screening or planting of native vegetation around shoreline parking areas, beach access structures, signs, and other potential eyesores to minimize visual impact.

Attention to views is central to many debates about further development and house placement. A 1998 letter to the editor claimed, "One of the great things about where we live, when it's left alone in its natural beauty, is that it looks breathtakingly wonderful, whether viewed from a close-up spot or seen perched from afar. This isn't the case for the man-made changes and blunders that are appearing like blistered scars all over the unprotected surface of our island home."<sup>93</sup> Of course, the home from which one is viewing either a 'natural beauty' or a 'man-made blunder' is also a built structure. Yet, not all man-made structures are built—or hidden—equally. Owners on Entrance Mountain told me they have "reciprocal houseless views" with Mt. Woolard, and that owners of both mountains make efforts to plant around their homes and use natural colored materials. Meanwhile, another working class Orcas resident told me how people at Rosario and the Highlands—both elevated developments—complain that they don't want to see lights on Turtleback Mountain, though they have lights on their own respective mountains. Another retired couple who themselves live on a wooded hillside

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<sup>92</sup> "The Comp Plan Stinks!" Cartoon. *The Islands' Sounder*. March 4, 1998.

<sup>93</sup> "Beauty: Changes hurt Eastsound." *The Islands' Sounder*. December 23, 1998.

criticized a house visible on a nearby mountain with a red roof—an example of “not being conscious of the environment,” according to one of the complainants.

Buck Mountain in particular is often cited as the prime example of what bad development looks like. Described as an “eyesore” or having “acne” on its surface, Buck Mountain is located just east of Eastsound, and is highly visible from the main road along Crescent Beach as well as several other locations. Criticized for having “huge houses, painted white” and lights along its ridges, Buck Mountain is frequently cited as *the* example of development gone wrong. At a Land Bank meeting, a member of the public stated that Buck Mountain “showed people how quickly a mountain can be ruined”—a caution for quick action to preserve the then threatened Turtleback Mountain. A number of interviewees also claimed, as one journalist and resident since the 1970s expressed, Buck homeowners “have views but take away everyone else’s,” a comment which suggests that views are a type of zero-sum game. Several residents express nostalgia for the days when Buck Mountain had no lights, followed by the fear that Turtleback Mountain might meet the same fate.

There are some actions owners can take to make their homes less visible, including use of natural colors and materials. Many residents mention being proud of the fact that their home is not visible from afar—one resident, the same described in Chapter 3 who had used a bleaching agent on his cedar barn to fade its red coloring, regretted having put an aluminum roof on his shed because that is the only part of his shoreline home that is visible from the water. Another retired couple who have planted trees around the house they bought in the 1980s laughingly recalled a guest who had asked them, “What’s the point of having a nice house if no one can see it?” These owners

claim that any visitors to the island benefit from *not* seeing their house, and that rural look is “part of the charm that brings people here.” It seems that building rural character is synonymous with hiding human inhabitation or, in the case of the Orcas Village Store, replicating a quaint and consistent rural architecture.

A hidden house, however, is not the same from an ecological standpoint as no house. The resources that home uses, the waste it creates, and the space it takes up have an environmental impact that is not as demonized in a natural, wood colored house than in a bright red house with a reflective roof. Debates over views can be just as, if not more, contentious as disputes regarding the ecological, economic or political implications of a new development. Is the goal to prevent increased population and its corresponding ecological impacts, or to just avoid having to see them? The answer to this question depends in part upon one’s definition of rural character. Is rural character a visual phenomenon, or an experiential one?

Within experiential modes of rural character, it is also clear that there are further divisions. Rural character, as it relates to property and ownership, can take on a distinctly American element and suggest the staunch support of property rights in defense against unwelcome federal, state and county regulations. Yet, it can also suggest comprehensive, communal planning efforts that strive to maintain a unified vision, even if that means limiting some personal freedoms for a greater good. The ways in which these residents earned their property—through labor or aspiration—does not determine their allegiance to either the private or common. Rather, these variables suggest the multiplicity of rural character wherein labor, aesthetics and property amplify each other to shape a definition as elusive as it is potent.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conservation and Conservation Easements: Managing Nature and the Rural

#### *Metaphors of Nature and Ecology*

Environmental protectionism is not fueled by ecological science alone; it combines ecology with the emotional fervor associated with notions of justice, morality, and aesthetics, making it a particularly potent movement. In other words, conservation and preservation efforts combine ecological knowledge with the idea of a nature worth saving. While ecological principles offer the scientific justification for protection and restoration, nostalgia for particular landscapes provides the impetus for action. Rural conservation and land management are heavily dependent upon ecological models that are intertwined with subjective preferences, such that Orcas landowners frequently use ecology and imagined environmental histories to justify their emotional ties to the present landscape. A closer look at environmental protection and conservation easements on Orcas reveals the ways in which personal histories, memories and emotions shape the rural, nature, and the science used to defend them.

This chapter argues that nature and ecology are repositories of personal and cultural values and memories, thus shaping conservation agendas and contributing an emotional dimension to political ecologies. I begin with a discussion of two conservation projects on Orcas that at one time were in opposition, illustrating the ecological, aesthetic, social and political factors that go into conservation decisions. I then continue to examine the ways in which such ideals—on Orcas, particularly narratives about pastoralism and untouched nature—have masked the history of Coast Salish Indian land

management and how early settlers imagined these pristine landscapes—by virtue of their Edenic appearance—as places untouched, unworked and therefore unowned. This notion that the San Juans should conform to ideals of either pre-settlement unspoiled nature or post-settlement yeoman agriculture continues to motivate land management, in spite of historical evidence that contradicts both narratives.

I then examine conservation easements as a popular conservation tool that allows private landholders to protect these landscape visions, demonstrating that residents frequently create easements in order to preserve views and their associated memories. Conservation easements consist of “permanently enforceable rights held by a land trust or government agency by which a landowner promises to use property only in ways permitted by the easement” (Pidot 2005 3). A common explanation employs the “bundle of rights” metaphor: if we consider property to be a bundle of rights to landownership—like a bundle of sticks—a conservation easement removes some of the sticks from that bundle. When a landowner donates a conservation easement to a land trust, that owner is voluntarily giving up some of the rights to his or her property. An owner may give up the right to further development or mining, for example, while still retaining legal ownership of the land. When a land trust pays for some of these rights on private lands, an easement can be called a Purchase of Development Rights, or PDR. This chapter will use the term conservation easement, or just easement, to include both conservation easements and PDRs unless a distinction between the two becomes relevant. Conservation easements help landowners perpetuate their landscape visions by legally limiting the development rights on a property in perpetuity; yet easements are still flexible enough to permit present and future landowners to continue to shape their property according to personal

and cultural ideals. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the role of land managers in dictating the future of these privately owned lands.

Many Orcas landowners acknowledge that change—in population, land cover and scenery—is inevitable. Yet, this intellectual acceptance of change is frequently overpowered by an emotional attachment to stasis. Part of this desire to keep things the same comes from the notion that ‘what’s there when I arrived is what belongs.’ Many landowners form attachments to the way their property looked when they first saw it, meaning that protecting that land is simply a matter of keeping things the same, and not a question of preserving any supposedly intrinsic landscape characteristics. As one more recent retired resident of a gated community stated in support of conservation easements with specific reference to roadside views, “I like knowing whatever you see driving up the road, that’s going to stay that way. It’ll always look like that.”

Yet, this more emotive side of environmental politics is often overshadowed by sometimes ambiguous discourses of ecology, without reference to specific ecological models. Introducing political ecology to our analysis is useful in its attention to the social and personal factors that influence conservation decisions. As a politically charged term, nature is a powerful ‘authority’ (Spirn 1998) that links science with power dynamics. Paul Robbins (2004, 5) articulates the distinction between *political* and *apolitical* ecologies as the difference “between ecological systems as power-laden rather than politically inert; and between taking an explicitly normative approach rather than

one that claims the objectivity of disinterest.” Political ecology addresses the political dimensions of both nature ideals and ecological science.<sup>94</sup>

The term ‘nature’ is used in a range of contexts in contemporary popular and scholarly discourses. Attempts to historicize the concept reveal the social construction of the term and the powerful role it has played in humans’ understanding of their place in the world (*cf.* Glacken 1967). At the most basic level, says Soper (1995, 15), nature is everything not human, a common definition that pits nature in opposition to culture, history and anything produced. Given the pervasiveness of human activity on the planet, the seemingly clear distinction between human and non-human has become clouded. Particularly when describing factors such as anthropogenic climate change, the notion that certain natural processes exist independently from human actions becomes suspect. Human-made monuments and buildings are made from ‘natural’ materials, while ‘Nature’ parks and reserves are often human-built environments. In Western discourse, nature is most frequently something to be acted upon and dominated, implying that all human interactions with the environment are detrimental or ‘unnatural’.

Ecology, like nature, is ill defined.<sup>95</sup> In spite of this ambiguity however, the concept nonetheless retains a certain authority in conservation discussions. While ecological knowledge is crucial to determining the limits of ecosystems and the point at which their deterioration will harm plant, animal, and human populations, it is also not free of human influence, politics, and biases. For Spirn (1998), ecology has replaced God as the authority of nature. She explains, for Frank Lloyd Wright, “Nature was the

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<sup>94</sup> Critics of political ecology, most notably Vayda and Walters (1999), argue that political ecologists focus on “politics without ecology” (168). For a refutation of this argument, see Walker (2005) or Forsyth (2003).

<sup>95</sup> See Forsyth (2003) for a discussion of the absence of definitions of “ecology” within political ecology literature.

manifestation of God;” science in many cases now replaces God as the authority of nature, using ecological information to create the natural or to support aesthetic or religious conceptions of what the natural should be (Spirn 1998, 247). Nature used to be a divine creation; now it is a product of science mixed with culture—reflecting a sort of popular or vernacular ecology that many use to stand in for scientific principles. We must learn to distinguish, says Spirn, between ecology’s value as a science that reflects world processes, and its embodiment of aesthetic and moral principles.

Ecology, then, is not an antiseptic term, but one that also embodies the ideals and emotions of the people who use it. Holling, Gunderson and Ludwig (2002) describe four “caricatures of nature”: nature flat, nature balanced, nature anarchic, and nature resilient. The second metaphor of balance is the same that has driven a number of Orcas landowners to believe that keeping things the same is true protection, as well as influencing conservation organizations including the World Resources Institute, the International Institute for Sustainable Development, and The Brundtland Commission—the entity frequently credited with coining popular usage of “sustainable development” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). For centuries, the discourse of a balanced nature has captured the imaginations of scientists and lay people alike. They have regarded nature and its workings to be stable entities that are disturbed only through human intervention, which then return to their steady states after the disturbance has ended (Botkin 1990, 8). George Perkins Marsh—the “intellectual father of American conservation”—famously advanced this notion that geological and ecological changes are so slow that they should be considered constant; only human interference can produce the drastic changes that have led to environmental collapse

(*ibid*). This almost sacred belief in the ‘balance of nature’ has historically been a powerful image, and one that has shaped at least the past 30 years of American environmentalism.

Daniel Botkin (1990) attributes the persistence of the balanced nature metaphor to an apparent human desire for constancy, which I would temper by noting this tendency may be particularly potent in modern societies where the desire for progress is balanced with a longing for stasis. This is certainly the case with many residents who fear changes to their rural homes. He writes:

Clearly, to abandon a belief in the constancy of undisturbed nature is psychologically uncomfortable. As long as we could believe that nature undisturbed was constant, we were provided with a simple standard against which to judge our actions, a reflection from a windless pond in which our place was both apparent and fixed, providing us with a sense of continuity and permanence that was comforting (188-9).

It is easier to blame humans for all variation than to consider the possibility of a random universe. Holling et al (2002) maintain that the caricature of balanced nature is not wrong per se, but rather incomplete in that it represents only part of a complexity of multi-scalar, evolving systems. ‘Old ecology,’ characterized by static equilibrium in time and space, has been replaced by a ‘new’ ecology that instead stresses variability and complexity. In other words, rather than considering environments to be static entities, ‘new’ or non-equilibrium ecologies examine the dialectic between human behavior and environmental constraints at multiples scales of analysis (*cf.* Moore 1996, Zimmerer 1996a, 1996b and Scoones 1999).

*Deciding what to save: Turtleback Mountain and Deer Harbor Park*

A look at two conservation efforts on Orcas helps illustrate the ways in which political and emotional considerations frequently overshadow ecological knowledge while making management decisions. What happens when two different types of rural preservation are pitted in direct conflict—at least temporarily? Which will prove more important: a symbol of an idyllic island community, or the preservation of a spectacular regional landmark? The landmark is Turtleback Mountain, a 1,578 acre tract of land previously owned by the Medina Foundation of Seattle, and placed on the market early fall of 2005. Turtleback has been described by many as the “holy grail” of conservation in the Islands and many have told me it is the reason the Land Bank was founded.

Turtleback is visible from miles away on the ferry, and it also crucial to those who live directly below it—as one farmer told me, “I consider Turtleback part of the farm—I don’t want to see 80 houses on it, or even 20 houses.” Onlookers from Seattle have also voiced concern over the future of the Mountain—a Seattle Times reporter covering the story noted how many people want to save the property without ever having been on it. While negotiations were not made public, estimated costs of Turtleback ran up to \$25 million as the Land Bank and Preservation Trust competed against developers’ offers.

Competing for those same funds was a 2 acre proposed public park at Deer Harbor on western Orcas. Deer Harbor residents requested \$950,000 to go towards the \$1.1 million purchase price of the waterfront property (the rest to be collected from local donations and fundraising efforts). The Deer Harbor property has been private for years, but owners have always allowed de facto community access—a model residents say will no longer work as long as new buyers move in who will be more likely to prohibit

trespassing onto their million dollar investment. There is an extremely limited amount of public access to the water on Orcas, making waterfront property acquisition a high priority to the Land Bank and residents from all over the island. However, while the Land Bank charter supports “limited public access,” creating a park is not on its agenda.

Given the Land Bank’s finite funds, the Board asked attendants at a November 2005 meeting and visit to each of the two sites, “what if creating this park prevents Turtleback from being saved?” Which should be more important—creating a community waterfront space or saving a compelling emblem of island beauty and character? In response, those at the Deer Harbor site visit initially replied, “both.” Ultimately, though, residents replied that the park should be given priority because it would get ten times more use than Turtleback would—“more bang for your buck,” in the words of one of our group. Another went so far to say, “I don’t really care what happens to Turtleback.” The possibility of a park at Deer Harbor harkens to the day when everyone at Deer Harbor knew everyone else, children swam in the water, people dug clams along the shore, and when private property was more of a formality than a means of exclusion. In other words, it suggests a ‘rural character’ or ‘islander lifestyle’ defined by small communities sharing similar values and resources.

After visiting Deer Harbor, a newly comprised group made its way up Turtleback for our second site visit of the day. After arriving at a clearing at the top to overlook a spectacular view of the islands, one Land Bank board member asked, “what did Deer Harbor look like again?” Another board member replied, “this is where our judgment gets clouded.” While the view up the mountain from below would be protected in case of a Land Bank acquisition, would the beautiful view from the top that was ‘clouding’

everyone's judgment become more accessible to the public? What do you do when beauty and existence value conflict with a community's need for public space?

In the end, no choice had to be made. The Land Bank purchased Deer Harbor Park in March 2006 for \$1.1 million after residents agreed to pay \$150,000 towards the purchase price. The Land Bank also purchased Turtleback Mountain in November 2006 for \$18.5 million, using \$10 million of its own funds, \$1 million from the Preservation Trust, and the remaining \$7.5 million from the Trust for Public Lands, which joined the Land Bank and Preservation Trust's efforts when hope for raising the full amount looked bleak. In January 2007, Turtleback became open to public hiking and day visits. An interim resource management plan has been created pending further ecological assessment. Public reactions to each campaign suggest the difficulty in prioritizing conservation values, even when a common goal like 'preserving rural character' is present in both projects. Combining political economic and ecological considerations with a consideration of landscapes as the locus of memories, emotions and values can help us to better understand such conflicts.

### *Preserving the Present*

If nature is always changing, how do we assess what we can—or should—protect? What do we preserve/conserve and why? As Callicott (2003, 257) articulates,

There are no 'original' states of nature—no self-reproducing climax communities that will persist in perpetuity if only people do not disturb them—just multiple historical states of nature, temporarily persisting domains of ecological attraction. Nor are there any ecologically recent historical states of nature free of anthropogenic influence.

There is no single way for nature to be healthy and, as Botkin (1990, 190) observes, “there are ranges within which life can persist.” Holling and Gunderson (2002, 31) explain the trouble with choosing a particular historical state as most worthy of preservation: “ten thousand years ago the treasured Everglades of southern Florida were not wetlands, but a dry savanna. Had we been living then, would we, as people concerned with the conservation of nature, have sought to maintain that savanna state as desirably pristine, holding back the rising seas as glaciers melted?” Of course, we must also make a distinction between natural changes in water levels and anthropogenic climate change, which occurs at an accelerated rate unlike that found in pre-industrial times. Preservation and conservation are not simply matters of saving some pre-human or wholly natural condition, but instead aim to protect fluctuating, historically specific states of nature. Is this ecological preservation or historical preservation?

This is not to say conservation has nothing to do with science or ecology, but rather that we need increased attention to the social and personal dimensions of how we decide what is worth saving. While non-equilibrium ecology shows that change may be in fact more ‘natural’ than stasis, human memory is frequently nostalgic for an unchanging environment, often transforming conservation decisions into political ones over who makes land management decisions. Although some landowners consider conservation easements to be ecological tools, easements are not about saving the ‘natural,’ but function instead to preserve a version of the present or imagined past. A number of residents, when asked what they hope to achieve with their conservation easement, replied that they wanted to keep things the same, presuming a static or balanced environment is a natural one. Yet, as Holling and Gunderson (2002, 31) argue,

maintaining a static environment can be ecologically hazardous: “Efforts to freeze or restore to a static, pristine state, or to establish a fixed condition are inadequate...Short term successes of narrow efforts to preserve and hold constant can establish a chain of ever more costly surprises.”

One Preservation Trust steward told me his goal is not to preserve a particular era, but rather to aim for maximum diversity. While members and employees do debate whether restoration and conservation should be geared toward an ideal ecosystem or a particular point in time, he does not believe the pre-European environment is necessarily better than post-European settlement. Another easement owner told me during an interview, “the Land Bank and Preservation Trust are not trying to keep things as they were, but are trying to keep land from going to a place where it can’t go back.” While the Preservation Trust and Land Bank themselves are not necessarily encouraging static management, the flexibility inherent in easements as private property tools means that many of the specifics of land management (or lack thereof) are left up to the individual owner. Most landowners with whom I spoke named “keeping things the same” as a goal. Whether or not the landowner is actually managing the land to preserve the present is another question addressed below. However, to many landowners, at least in terms of verbalized goals, keeping things the same is synonymous with environmental protection.

### *Historical Ecology and Masked Management*

But is the ‘way it is’ the way it has always been? Coast Salish Indians and historians note that Indians have managed island resources for thousands of years, and more recent restoration and landscaping efforts have produced human landscapes

popularly regarded as natural by virtue of their beauty. The history of land management reveals that white agricultural settlements are just one part of the history of Orcas Island. While some landowners are reluctant to acknowledge that their land has changed over time (perhaps viewing such changes as ‘unnatural’ within a balanced nature paradigm), others readily embrace a more historical perspective of land use and management. As one landowner noted while describing the permeability of private property, “Some people think the land is your own and have no consideration of the passage of time and the effects of their actions.”

People frequently create scenic landscapes, yet still regard them as ‘natural’ by virtue of their beauty. Previous research by Don Mitchell (1996), for example, examines how the beauty of the California agricultural landscapes has concealed the migrant labor that has gone into its production and maintenance. Other studies (Fiege 1999, White 1995) have also explored the often labor-intensive productions of ‘natural’ landscapes. Instead of focusing on a labor history, my research focuses on the Native and Euroamerican management histories of the San Juan Islands that has produced a beauty many believe to be ‘natural’ and thus ahistorical. As described in Chapter 3, this kind of beauty is constituted by a combination of ‘rural’ qualities such as open fields and wooded areas, composed in particular aesthetic proportions and geometries.

Open fields, for one, were not the ‘natural’ features Europeans imagined them to be, but were actually a product of generations of Coast Salish land management practices, which included the use of fire. Richard White (1980) asserts that Salish Indians of Island County, to the southeast of San Juan County, were the first ones to mark boundaries on the land amongst themselves. They encouraged certain species, such as camas and nettle,

which were important to their own survival as food sources or for medicinal, material or ritual uses. He discusses fire in particular as a tool the Salish used to maintain the landscapes that they relied on—and that in turn relied upon them—for survival.

Controlled burnings had several advantages, including the increase of browsing areas for game, maintaining prairies so nettle and camas could settle, releasing nutrients into the soil, and reducing forests' susceptibility to insects and disease. Shepard Krech III (1999) also shows fire to be a critical element of maintaining subsistence species, creating an ecosystem that could only be sustained through further burnings until it was halted by Euroamerican managers in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. As White (1980, 25) ironically declares, "In a sense, fires were so common and critical that the species composition that would have developed without fire would have been unnatural."

Boyd (1999) argues that European settlers shared the Indian aesthetic for more open fields and prairies. The mistake these early settlers made, however, was in assuming that these "lawns" were a product of 'Nature' alone, and not generations of anthropogenic fire management by Northwest Coast Indians which, Boyd claims were the most considerable force in shaping the Northwest Coast's landscapes (*ibid*, 1-3). To the Colonists, the Northwest looked 'natural' because it matched certain European conceptions of untouched lands and their generalizations about the Americas. Mary Louise Pratt (1992, 112) describes how "the reinvention of America...was a transatlantic process that engaged the energies and imaginations of intellectuals and broad reading publics in both hemispheres." Settlers came to America with visions of what it should

look like, often expecting idealized images of an American Eden<sup>96</sup> based on romanticized accounts by travel writers.

Antonello Gerbi (1973) analyzes the writings of one of these early travel writers, Alexander von Humboldt, who was critical of others who over-idealized the New World, while still exalting the properties of America after his turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century visit. Gerbi suggests that it was easy for Humboldt, as well as other European exiles, to “discover a crude rationality, a naïve perfection, a possible imitation of ancient Eden in this landscape of low thick woods furrowed with cast rivers, and soaring white peaks dropping into the sea” (*ibid*, 408). Particular landscapes, such as the ‘vastness’ of a cleared field or the combination of “thick woods,” water, and mountains, fit Europeans ideas of a nature left to be taken. Widespread belief in the pure and pristine New World—a place that lacked “historical associations,” other than perhaps its evocation of a mythical Eden—was critical to Colonists’ justification of the significant actions they took to settle the ‘untouched’ territories. Richard Judd (2003, 22-3), in fact, argues that this apparent lack of history and attachment to place made it even easier for Colonists to alter their new home. This notion of course parallels the criticisms made by Orcas residents of newcomers who have, in their eyes, irresponsibly altered their property as a result of their lack of historical attachment, as described in Chapter 3.

The fundamental reason for the differing management strategies of Indians and colonists was their desire to encourage particular species; Indians used fire to encourage

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<sup>96</sup> Africa’s Eden, like America’s Eden, is characterized by similar notions of ‘unspoiled wilderness.’ Yet, Africa’s Eden is distinct in terms of Europeans’ regard for Africans as “primitive” peoples who were either akin to “fauna” or were deemed to be unworthy destroyers of the European Edenic ideal, as opposed to American Indians who were considered nature’s protectors. Further, while American Eden was a wilderness that could be made productive (i.e., used for agriculture) while still retaining its garden-like qualities, African wilderness was no place for humans, and valued primarily in its opposition to culture (Nash 1975, Neumann 1998).

deer, camas and huckleberries while colonists rejected fire and instead encouraged the production of wheat, timber and cattle (Boyd 1999, White 1980). The differing needs of colonists thus led to an “ecological transition” (Boyd 1999) whereby understandings of and actions towards landscapes changed dramatically, mirroring the cultural differences evident between Native actors and Euroamericans.

Thus, far from being untouched pristine wilderness, much of the land of North America, including San Juan County, was greatly manipulated and managed to support its inhabitants. This history is particularly important in contemporary resource struggles, where past use is frequently a prerequisite to contemporary access. Geographer Bruce Braun (2003) discusses various environmental and state groups’ attempts to identify Culturally Modified Trees (CMTs) as a means of proving continued use of forest resources by Indians on Vancouver Island. The extent to which these CMTs are mapped or somehow *made visible* corresponds with Indians’ ability to reclaim access to such territories. The importance of various kinds of archaeological research to asserting these rights implies a connectedness to place and the need for material indicators of ownership or use. The myth of the “Ecological Indian” (Krech 1999) thus counters these indigenous claims, instead assuming a passive Indian inhabitant who took no motions to maintain resources other than preservation. Anthropologists Donald Hardesty and Don Fowler (2001, 86) also cite Krech’s (1999) reference to Native anthropogenic fire management, claiming that such information must factor into contemporary debates about ‘restoring’ ecosystems.

On the San Juan Islands, the history of Coast Salish Indian inhabitation is frequently overlooked in conservation discussions. For example, Sucia Island, a smaller

island 2.5 miles north of Orcas, is a State Park and a popular visitor spot to those with private boats. A researcher with the Samish Indian Nation told me the National Park Service is cooperative with the Samish, yet is also responsible for unknowingly placing park benches and trails over Coast Salish burial sites and middens. The tourist website [www.sanjuansites.com](http://www.sanjuansites.com) lists the following entry alone under its historical background of Sucia: “The island's name originated with the Spanish Captain Eliza on his map of 1791. He named it ‘Isla Sucia’. Sucia in Spanish means ‘dirty’ or in a nautical sense ‘foul’. This word was chosen because the shore was deemed unclean and reefy.” There is no reference to past Lummi Indian inhabitants or the archaeological record they left behind, and history is presumed to have begun only after Europeans arrived.

Since 2002, the Samish Indian Nation’s Center for the Study of Coast Salish Environments has been conducting archaeological and ecological research throughout San Juan County and neighboring Fidalgo Island, where the tribal offices are based. By documenting paleoecological changes, the Samish hope to illuminate the role of their Coast Salish ancestors in managing and adapting to their environment. One goal of such research is to establish the Samish as stewards of traditionally Coast Salish territories, so agencies like the National Park Service will ask them for management advice. To the Samish, who never received any tribal lands and were only re-recognized as a tribe in 1996 after almost 30 years of lawsuits, gaining access to land management through knowledge rather than ownership has been a creative way to assert their presence in the San Juans. The Environmental Center has become an informational resource, not just for Natives, but for non-Native inhabitants on the San Juan Islands as well. In addition, the

Center trains and provides scholarships for undergraduate Samish students who are studying ecology and archaeology.

Conservation easements do not preserve the past, but are generally intended to maintain what is *now* an open space, a forest, or a farm—though those versions of the present are often inspired by nostalgia for the past. In spite of many residents’ stated interest in restoring their property to an authentically pristine nature, very little is often known about the history of the given land. A Land Bank employee told me learning of the history of protected lands could be an interesting volunteer project, but is not directly relevant to management efforts. Residents then often do not know whether the conservation easement property they are mowing to maintain its appearance as a farm was ever managed for a different purpose by Coast Salish Indians, for example. Such easements purport farming to be the most suitable land use, choosing a particular era and its associated ideals as the basis for the present. For instance, while I was visiting Lopez Island’s historical museum, I met an elderly woman who, when I mentioned I was studying land use, immediately told me “they’re not taking care of the land,” and lamented how much time and hard work has been lost as brush continues to encroach on agricultural lands. This woman grew up on a farm. For her, ideal land use began when the land was cleared for agriculture, and not during an earlier period of Coast Salish management, for example. ‘Nature,’ in this case, is not just about being pristine or untouched, but reflects one’s notions of what visual qualities and social formations belong to a particular place.

Easements help preserve this present, preventing development while providing private landowners with the flexibility to determine which contemporary features should

continue in perpetuity, often based on frequently idealized notions of the past. Ultimately, easements on formerly agricultural lands are not preserving the agricultural production of the past, but the rural *look* of the present. It may be common for landowners to want to preserve what was there when they arrived, but more comprehensive studies of landscapes reveal that looking only at the present can imperil both ecosystem health and the rights of American Indian inhabitants. What exactly are conservation easement property owners trying to preserve, and are conservation easements the best way to achieve those goals?

### *Managing with Conservation Easements*

In recent years, conservation easements have emerged as the most widely used private conservation tool in the U.S. Although human intervention is usually thought of as a source of environmental change, in many conservation easements people instead work to prevent future modification. Some of the earliest uses of easements were in the 1930s to protect scenic open spaces along the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia (Wright 1993, Pidot 2005, Roe 2000). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, organizations like the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service used easements to preserve scenic vistas and areas surrounding historically and ecologically significant lands like Mount Vernon and Pfeiffer-Big Sur State Park (Wright 1993). It was not until later that easements would become a tool more widely used by private landowners.

At a national level, the Tax Reform Act of 1976 recognized conservation easements' status as tax-deductible donations, launching a new interest in the conservation tools. The amount of the deduction is calculated by subtracting the current

value of the property from the potential value had property rights not been donated. The Uniform Conservation Easement Act (UCEA) was approved by the National Conference of Commissioners in 1981, establishing the legal foundation for land trusts and landowners to create and enforce conservation easements (Gustanski 2002). The introduction of these two acts spawned a dramatic increase in the number of land trusts nationwide, rising from approximately 400 land trusts in 1980 to over 1,500 in 2003. The area of land encumbered by trusts over that time period is even more dramatic, increasing from 128,000 acres in 1980 to over 5 million in 2003 (Pidot 2005, 6)

Washington State is not one of the nineteen states (plus the District of Columbia) that has adopted the UCEA, though Washington has had its own set of conservation laws since before the creation of the UCEA. Washington's state legislature enacted the Open Space Tax Act in 1970 to relieve economic pressure placed on owners of agricultural or open space lands. The legislature has also enacted a state mandate that achieves the same intentions of the UCEA, enabling perpetual conservation measures and accompanying tax relief (Hutton 2000). Over 1.4 million acres of land in the United States is protected by conservation easement, and over 12,000 acres of that land is in Washington State (Gustanski 2002, 19-20). Easements are currently the number one method of preserving private lands in the United States, though they are not the "apolitical" or purely private and technical conservation tool they are sometimes made out to be (Brewer 2003).

There were 34 Land Bank purchase of development rights (PDRs) and 173 Preservation Trust conservation easements in San Juan County as of 2005; 13 of those PDRs and 66 of those easements were on Orcas. Over 9,000 acres of San Juan County is protected under Preservation Trust conservation easements. The San Juan County Land

Bank is the county's land conservation organization and is funded by a 1% tax on all new land sales. Founded in 1990, the Land Bank was conceived after a 1990 public opinion survey determined that sixty-nine percent of respondents were willing to pay additional taxes to preserve open space.<sup>97</sup> The county ordinance that created the Land Bank was renewed by a nearly 73% majority vote in 1999, ensuring the continuation of the Land Bank for another 12 years. The San Juan Preservation Trust, on the other hand, is a private non-profit organization funded by donations and grants. The Land Bank and Preservation Trust collaborate on certain conservation projects, most notably the recent purchase of Orcas Island's Turtleback Mountain, discussed above.

Conservation easements are a main focus of the Preservation Trust, given their limited funds for fee simple acquisitions and their faith in easements' potential. A former member of the Preservation Trust Board of Trustees described to me the criteria the Preservation Trust developed to decide which lands to target. They seek, when possible, larger or contiguous plots of land,<sup>98</sup> specific kinds of flora such as oaks, and they also hoped to spread easements more onto non-ferry islands. Specific sites, namely Turtleback Mountain, were also included as conservation objectives.

According to several early advocates, the Land Bank also initially intended to dedicate most of its resources to create easements rather than to purchase properties outright, though some residents have complained to me that the Land Bank spends too much of its funding on fee simple acquisitions instead of PDRs. Lands that the Land Bank purchases outright are removed from the San Juan County tax roll, but lands with

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<sup>97</sup> Madrona Group Consultant. "San Juan Islands Community Opinion Survey." Prepared for The Friends of the San Juans and the San Juan Islands Economic Development Council. Spring 1990.

<sup>98</sup> See Myhr, Bob (2000) for a case study of efforts to create a grouping of contiguous easements on Orcas Island.

easements are privately owned, and landowners continue to pay county taxes. From the time it was created until 2005, the Land Bank created conservation easements on 1,878 privately owned acres and purchased 1,226 acres. According to the Land Bank, the impact on the county-wide property base during that time has been slight at about a \$0.05 decrease in tax revenue per thousand dollars of assessed value.<sup>99</sup> The Land Bank also has a conservation buyer program, in which it sells properties back to private owners while sharing responsibility with the new owner for protecting conservation values.

For both the Land Bank and Preservation Trust, the process of creating an easement is similar. Both land trusts provide those interested in creating easements with a standard deed that both parties then negotiate. The Land Bank's easement deeds are all public documents because the Land Bank is a county organization, while the Preservation Trust's are private, though a few Preservation Trust landowners shared copies of their deeds with me. The standard easement document for both land trusts restricts activities such as cutting trees, mining, and hunting, though exceptions can be made—particularly with regard to tree thinning or removal, wherein trees over a certain size can be removed only with a forestry plan permit.

The most prominent feature in most easement deeds I examined is the limitation of built structures. Easements do not prevent all future development, but rather permit the landowner to donate or sell some of his or her building rights. For example, a 40 acre property zoned R-5 (that is, one structure allowed per 5 acre area) has the right to build 8 houses. When donating an easement, that owner can give up the right to 3 of those homes, for example, allowing 5 to still be built in the future. One owner with a 'forever

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<sup>99</sup> "Public Land Conservation and the Impact on Property Taxes." [http://www.co.san-juan.wa.us/land\\_bank/pr/property\\_tax.doc](http://www.co.san-juan.wa.us/land_bank/pr/property_tax.doc). (accessed 1 March 2007).

wild' easement explained that the restrictions in his easement had nothing to do with identifying and preserving some 'pristine' ecosystem, and much more to do with restricting development. In addition to limiting the number of buildings, many easements on Orcas restrict the location of structures. For example, many easements specify a building circle in which all permitted structures must be placed to prevent sprawl across the property. Another Land Bank easement deed states, "dwellings shall be screened from view from [the road] by a seventy-five foot deep vegetative buffer."<sup>100</sup> One easement owner claimed his deed restricted any structures in "plain view," to which he responded he could just plant trees or bushes around any small structure he decided to build in the future. In addition to specifying buildings' locations and visibility, other restrictions sometimes include that "no fence or other barrier that will obstruct views across the agricultural fields of the Property from [the road] shall be placed or planted on the Property."<sup>101</sup> The preservation of open space is a key condition in most easements, but the protection of public views is especially valuable to residents as well as the IRS, who consider these public benefits in determining the public benefit of the easement.

Some easements also contain management plans to be executed by the landowner. For example, one Land Bank landowner's easement contains a simple management plan that states he cannot cut a tree unless there is another tree within a 20 foot radius. A Preservation Trust owner with a forestry background tells me the Preservation Trust is flexible about allowing his timber gathering. His easement includes references to "sustainable forestry" without specifying numbers or desired species composition. Such documents do not seem to need further clarification when the owner may be experienced

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<sup>100</sup> Schaefer Deed of Easement. Held by San Juan County Land Bank. 15 August 1996.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid*

in managing the given land for decades. Yet, will future owners—who may perhaps lack such land stewardship experience—manage according to similar environmental philosophies and guidelines? And will the Preservation Trust be able to enforce its own definition of ‘sustainable’? Yet another easement landowner raised such queries as he explained that his easement permits him to extract 5000 board feet of lumber per year. He was expecting to get 1000 feet, but said “why not” when his land trust offered more. While he has never come close to meeting this limit, in his opinion a future owner could potentially clearcut if they removed the maximum amount allowed in the easement.

Baseline reports are conducted on all new easement properties, using photos, maps and other documents to provide a representation of the present state of the property. In the language of the standard Preservation Trust conservation easement, the “Baseline Data shall be relied upon by Grantor and Grantee as the descriptive base to establish the present condition and guide in the future uses of the Property.” The easement deed also depicts the ecological importance of the given property; for example, one Preservation Trust deed describes a property that is “part of a significant coastal ecosystem, the San Juan Islands, which is relatively intact and undeveloped.” The area includes, “meadows, mossy balds, woodlands, and wetlands that provide habitat for native animal and plant species.”<sup>102</sup> Baseline reports also include a complete inventory of existing structures, the breakdown of acreage by land type, and may also record detailed species inventories.

A Land Bank steward told me the Land Bank has no systematic method of targeting lands for conservation. Lands threatened by development, like Turtleback Mountain was in 2005-2006, are prioritized, as are lands adjacent to already protected areas. With the IRS’s increased attention to verifying the public benefits of easements in

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<sup>102</sup> *ibid*

order to justify the accompanying tax break, scenic easements emerge as a straightforward way to meet the standard of public good—although that may sometimes only apply to a very small public, which raises issues about access and viewing rights as addressed in the previous chapter. While low intensity recreational activities are usually permitted on Land Bank owned lands, public access on easement lands is extremely rare. Several agricultural easements on lands without agricultural production are maintained as open fields for scenic reasons. One easement, located along a much travelled road, reads, “It is not mandatory that farming operations be conducted on the Property. Nonetheless...preserving the agricultural productivity of the Property and preserving the views of agricultural fields from the... Highway, would be served by continued mowing of the existing agricultural field.”<sup>103</sup> The Land Bank, according to this Land Bank steward, focuses more on “these treasured views” than the Preservation Trust does because they are a public entity. Most residents with whom I spoke, including many who were early architects of the Land Bank, believed that the Land Bank’s main goal was the preservation of the visual landscape.

I contacted the 77<sup>104</sup> conservation easement holders by letter, email and/or phone. In writing letters to and calling conservation easement owners, I contacted the person or people’s name listed with the easements as given to me by the Preservation Trust and Land Bank. In many cases, upon calling a married couple, for example, one spouse would tell me that his or her partner was the one more involved or knowledgeable about the easement. I still invited both heads of household to be interviewed, but sometimes only one would accept. In tallying these answers, I am considering a household’s answer

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<sup>103</sup> Schaefer Deed of Easement. Held by San Juan County Land Bank. 15 August 1996.

<sup>104</sup> There are a total of 79 conservation easements and PDRs, but two separate landowners own both a Land Bank PDR and a Preservation Trust easement.

singularly, unless differences arose within a couple as indicated below. Due to the significant number of absentee landowners on Orcas—whose permanent addresses range from Texas to Austria, I was able to reach 35 of them for extensive interviews. The fact that I was not able to interview a number of these absentee owners means that the data below are perhaps more representative of residents who spend all or most of the year residing on Orcas. Those who were not reachable for interviews are more likely to own multiple properties or to keep their Orcas land primarily as an investment or vacation home. In general, these individuals may consider themselves less involved in Orcas civic life and are more likely to value their island house as a retreat rather than be invested in it as a home. Subsequently, the answers below may reflect a greater interest in island conservation and sustainability than is present among the entire group. Alternately, those who spend less time on Orcas might be more concerned with visual preservation issues, which are more immediately evident, than they might be with issues that take more time to perceive, such as affordable housing availability.

Of these 35 landowners I interviewed, nine bought their property with the easement already in place, fifteen created their easement primarily due to aesthetic concerns,<sup>105</sup> eight created their easement specifically to prevent future development (i.e., home building), and three named specific ecological features or benefits as their reason for creating an easement.<sup>106</sup> These categories, while painting a broad picture of why people create easements, are still incomplete and overlapping; distinguishing between ecological protection, aesthetic considerations, and development prohibitions is a

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<sup>105</sup> 'Aesthetic concerns' here includes the preservation of views or the owners' reference to less tangible qualities including the feel, ambiance, or character of the property.

<sup>106</sup> I asked informants, "Why did you create your conservation easement?" and determined their primary motivation by considering their first response to the question, which was also typically most elaborate in each case.

challenge. For instance, when a landholder equates beauty with environmental health it is difficult for that person to choose one over the other. One landowner, for example, convinced of the correlation between aesthetics and ecology argued, “under visual preservation are real benefits to the land.” In addition, ensuring a house will not be built in the future might be considered a benefit by reducing population and providing privacy for residents; it also suggests ecological benefits in terms of availability of open space and less strain on resources. Both of these (open space and fewer structures), of course, contribute to the preservation of scenic views. A further discussion of the characteristics of easements and the motivations of their owners will help reveal the causes and effects of easements.

Who creates easements? Of those interviewed, twenty-two (two of whom are second or third generation islanders) have lived on or owned property on Orcas since at least 1990 when the Land Bank was founded, and thirteen moved there or bought land during or after 1991—including all of the owners who bought land with easements already established. Of those, six are part time residents of Orcas who live in other locations part of the year. The fact that the majority of residents with easements have lived on Orcas for longer periods of time suggests that it takes a certain familiarity with or attachment to the land for one to commit to creating an easement. As one easement landowner told me during an interview, “old residents have a sensitivity to the island that newcomers don’t have. Stewardship means something to us.”

Twenty-three of these landowners are retired or have left their full time positions for part-time work (usually telecommuting), eleven work on-island as real estate agents, artists, and landscapers, and one telecommutes from Orcas. In terms of class then, the

majority of landowners I interviewed are retirees living off investment or retirement income, while others earn wage labor from one or more island jobs. Given the high number of retirees on Orcas, these statistics are fitting with county demographics, in which 19% of the County's residents are over the age of 65 in the 2000 census, as compared with a state average of 11.5% and a national average of 12.4%. The high number of retirees also suggests that landowners are most likely to create easements later in their lives—a trend suggested by much of the qualitative data as well. For example, three farmers with whom I spoke replied that they would consider an easement later in their lives, but probably not in the near future. Why the hesitation? For one, many landowners create an easement at the point in their lives when they are planning their estates or wills, and are motivated by the desire to preserve their heritage on the land. Defining this heritage, of course is not always a manner of personal history but often involves paying tribute to the perceived past, as described further below. Secondly, many landowners create easements later in life because younger owners may not yet know what they want to do with their land. It is one thing to restrict future owners' actions, but limiting oneself is not always desirable. Having to live with restrictions and possibly regretting self-imposed limitations can be a deterrent to some, and has occurred in some cases discussed in Chapter 6.

The tax benefit was mentioned as a motivator for creating an easement only as a secondary reason by five of the landowners. Some said the tax break was not much, while others would not have been able to keep their land without the financial assistance from their Purchase of Development Rights. At the same time, many owners and one

Land Bank employee told me a landowner can still make more money by subdividing and selling his or her land than by creating an easement or PDR.

The IRS tax deduction associated with conservation easements is dependent upon the public benefit of easements. But who do conservation easement owners see as benefiting most from their easement? During interviews with landowners, I asked who the respondent(s) saw as the main beneficiary of their conservation easement. I found that responses fell within two main categories: oneself, or the public. Eleven with whom I spoke claimed themselves and their immediate neighbors benefited most, namely due to the privacy and restricted development on and surrounding their properties. Twenty-four owners named the public as the main beneficiaries of their easements. Of those, more specifically, eighteen named visual benefits to the public, from the road or water for example, as the major advantage and six named public ecological benefits, including watershed protection and increased wildlife habitat. While the majority, in this sample, did recognize a public benefit, breaking down the source of that benefit reveals a more complex understanding of public benefit. One owner who stated that the public benefits most for visual reasons went on to clarify that the benefit accrues to only those with private boats who are able to see the beauty of the mountain on which he lives from offshore. At the same time, his reason for creating the easement was because, “I didn’t want to ruin the aesthetics of the land—for me.” Other easements protect roadside views along private roads, meaning that access to these vistas depends first upon entry on private and sometimes even gated roads, as was discussed in Chapter 3.

Public visual benefits sometimes benefit only a select few. In one case, the Preservation Trust paid for an easement to protect the views of a resident’s neighbors.

Like several other settlers to San Juan County, this owner bought his property and, until he could afford to build a house, lived in a tent near the road. Neighbors initiated discussions with the Preservation Trust to prevent this “eyesore,” as the owner described the situation. The owner consented and an easement was created including the conditions of open space in roadside areas and the building of a house further away from neighbors’ visibility. The conservation easement, according to the landholder, was “under the veil of environmentalism, but really about preserving private views.” As described earlier, part of the potency of environmentalism is that it can appeal to both science and emotion. Harvey (1996, 182) resonates with political ecology literature in claiming, “all ecological projects (and arguments) are simultaneously political-economic projects (and arguments) and vice versa.” I would add to this statement the notion that ecological projects also invoke emotions, particularly in this case where aesthetic considerations—which I argue are in part the product of personal experience and nostalgic longings—are largely driving the conflict. While the impetus for creating the above mentioned conservation easement was to protect neighbors’ coveted views, these same individuals could claim to be helping the environment by supporting efforts to reduce density and preserve open space. Yet, this brand of ‘environmentalism’ is part of a “class-based aesthetic” that contributes a political dimension to discussions of nature preservation (Duncan and Duncan 2001, 388). Personal and cultural experiences shape aesthetic preferences, which are then fulfilled through the institution of private property and aided by conservation easements.

As for those who declared public ecological benefits, answers ranged from the preservation of a specific watershed to the broader, sometimes elusive, benefits of open space. One owner replied quite defensively to my question about who benefits most, “we

all breathe the air from those trees. Land doesn't have to be a public park for the public to benefit." While it may be true in broad terms that more people benefit from oxygen than benefit from a view easement on a private road, demonstrating an easement's public benefit depends upon place-specific properties, and not general 'greenness.' But, as described above, 'ecology' itself can be an ill-defined term and used to justify conservation efforts when other political and personal motivations are also at play. The suggestion that easements may not be as uniformly beneficial as landowners and land trusts—and the IRS—might hope them to be is clearly threatening to some easement proponents, causing them to sometimes appeal to broader environmental values. Yet, while conservation easements might be an effective tool for preventing development on a historic farm, for example, they are not necessarily the best tools available to curb large scale environmental threats.

Ecologically sensitive landowners also answered in terms of the familiar balance of nature ecosystem model. The same landowner who cited her land's oxygen production as a public benefit also told me her easement was intended to "leave it [the land] in its natural state and not develop it." Conservation easements, to these individuals, are a way of keeping things the same and therefore healthy. As one owner explained in defense of her conservation easement, "This is the way it's been and it's been good."

### *Enforcement and Stewardship*

In large part, enforcement of conservation easements and purchases of development rights is untested in the San Juans and the rest of the United States. Jeff Pidot (2005, 9) explains, "relatively few court cases have tested or interpreted

conservation easements...The scarcity of such decisions to date is due more to the novelty of conservation easements than to the strength and clarity of their design.” The Land Bank and Preservation Trust first deal with violators by asking for compliance. If the easement’s conditions are not met, the land trusts are not empowered to fine easement violators, but are left only with legal recourse. The Land Bank and Preservation Trust must then decide whether they are able and willing to use courts to enforce easement conditions.

The Land Bank and Preservation Trust each conduct a yearly monitoring of their easement properties, checking for new structures and other potential violations. In response to the yearly monitoring, most landowners are content with their respective land trust’s level of involvement; as one owner explained to me during an interview, “the Land Bank and Preservation Trust don’t act like police. We like them.” Others note that the Preservation Trust annual visits mostly check for new structures or chemical dumping, but do not check the status of specific trees or invasive species. Generally only the ‘forever wild’ easements mention species, making most easement monitoring more a matter of checking for more visible infractions, like excavation, building, or resource extraction. Other landowners are confused by the annual visits; as one claimed when asked about monitoring, “I don’t know why they [the Land Bank] inspect us. I haven’t built any skyscrapers.” Another owner told me he resents the monitoring and bitterly explained he wishes he had not created an easement on his land because, “they [the Grantee land trust] haven’t done a thing—and then they bother us with insulting letters and check-up visits.”

Given the limitations of annual visits, monitoring also comes from neighbors who—in the case of both easement and non-easement lands—are frequently attentive to potential violations of county or land trust restrictions on nearby properties. The Land Bank has received calls and emails from easement properties' neighbors both reporting questionable activities and asking for specifics regarding the conditions of a neighbor's easement. For example, one landowner wrote a detailed email asking about her neighbor's easement and whether he was required to mow a growing number of weeds on his property. The Land Bank, in this particular case, replied they could suggest that the owner mow, but have no legal right to enforce such mowing.

Writing an easement requires a balance of protection with enforceability. At a monthly Land Bank meeting that I attended, Commissioners discussed a violation of county wetland law on easement property that ended up garnering county and state attention. Initially, neighbors—knowing the land had restrictions on it—reported seeing workers moving soil on the property. The easement itself was created for scenic reasons, and does not even mention the word 'wetland.' In response, a Commissioner suggested including adherence to county and state laws as a condition of the easement. Another Commissioner also noted that few trusts have an easement violation policy until a violation is made, and the Land Bank could benefit from creating a checklist of what to do in case of a violation.

While deciding how to deal with violations may seem like a basic consideration in creating a legal document like an easement, several factors make enforcement difficult. For instance, one Land Bank employee told me she would like to see restrictions on pesticide use on some easements, but such a restriction would be impossible to monitor

through yearly site visits. In such cases, restrictions may simply not be enforceable and therefore not worth mentioning in the legal document. Perhaps this accounts for the emphasis on maintaining visual criteria rather than ecological standards—one can easily inspect the mowing of grass or limitation of structures, but monitoring the input of chemicals into the soil would require a much more complex monitoring procedure—one that appears to be outside the scope and budget of most land trusts.

In addition, beyond verbal or written warnings advising compliance, land trusts cannot impose fines but must be willing to commit time and money to commit to litigation in the case of noncompliance. Pidot (2005), in a report published by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, argues that legally enforcing and defending easements can be more costly than monitoring. Yet most land trusts, including even the Nature Conservancy, lack funds for enforcement or stewardship. Further, he states that although the IRS requires land trusts to enforce easement conditions, the IRS lacks the capacity to determine whether monitoring or enforcement are taking place (*ibid*, 18-19). In addition, how can one determine what monitoring will cost in 50 or 100 years? The notion that a land trust must be able to financially support the monitoring and enforcement of an easement in perpetuity before creating it is a difficult concept for landowners and land trusts to accept, particularly in places like Orcas where the threat of development creates a sense of urgency to save whatever one can.

Some easement holders throughout the U.S. set aside money for the stewardship of their protected lands, though there are no requirements to do so and many holders do not have funds specified for future land management (Pidot 2005, 18-9), “To their holders, conservation easements should be considered liabilities rather than assets. They

have no marketable value, but do impose long-term stewardship costs. This essential monitoring work has none of the fundraising or political glamour associated with easement acquisition” (*ibid*, 19). During a conversation with Tim Seifert, the director of the Preservation Trust, about the challenges facing land trusts and funding conservation efforts, he affirmed the difficulty in attaining funds for stewardship or monitoring: “People are willing to give money to save a place, but then they see it as saved and don’t realize we need funds to take care of it too.” At this point, acquisition has been the primary goal, though in the future, according to Seifert, the Preservation Trust’s new challenge will be the management and maintenance of all of these properties. The Land Bank sets aside money in a stewardship fund each time it completes a project, generating interest that will be used to manage Land Bank preserves and easements. The Land Bank reports that at the end of 2006, their endowment fund was \$3.2 million.<sup>107</sup> Yet, one longtime farmer on Orcas still claimed he does not understand how the Land Bank and Preservation Trust will maintain the lands they are protecting, insisting you need committed workers to manage fragile properties.

So far, many of the original creators still own the easement property, and thus are less likely to violate the condition they themselves created. However, some owners already foresee problems with their own children, who will be unable to subdivide the easement property—one landowner told me her son has already been asking her if he would be able to remove the easement in the future. Rather than passing on a large chunk of property to one’s children that can be subdivided and shared, many easement landowners intend for their children to sell the property and share the profit, rather than

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<sup>107</sup>San Juan County Land Bank. [http://www.co.san-juan.wa.us/land\\_bank/stew\\_funding.html](http://www.co.san-juan.wa.us/land_bank/stew_funding.html). (accessed 4 December 2006).

the land itself. With new generations of property owners beginning to buy up easement properties comes the possibility that these new owners will not share the same intentions as the original easement creators.

Landowners who bought land with an easement already on it have a range of reactions to the conditions with which they must comply. For instance, 3 of the 9 owners who bought their property with an easement already on it responded that they would not have created one themselves, while a fourth married couple disagreed as to whether they would or not. Others described changes they would have made to the easement if they themselves had created it, including restrictions on the height of structures or creating differently shaped building areas.

One owner who bought property with an easement already on it told me the easement was almost a deterrent, but then he saw the conditions were “vague” and that “there just couldn’t be any more buildings.” In response to a mowing requirement in his CE, he replied, “I’m not afraid of an argument. If I don’t want to mow it, it won’t be mowed. If I have a reason for it, I can substantiate the reason.” He told me friends with whom he spoke warned him that he would not be able to do anything with the land and that the land trust would always be checking him. He told them, “I own it, they just have an easement on it.” The deep rooted faith in private property may prove to be difficult to reconcile with easement restrictions that were self-imposed by the first owner, but may be undesirable to subsequent owners.

How effective do land trusts think easements are? Pidot (2005, 18) quotes a Land Trusts Alliance survey of land trust representatives that found that “more than 80 percent of respondents considered it likely that some of their holdings will not continue to be

protected in 100 years, while only 8 percent considered this unlikely.” On Orcas, landowners have a range of opinions regarding the effectiveness of easements. Seifert acknowledges the gravity of dealing with the notion of perpetual conservation: “The only other non-profits that dare deal with terms like ‘forever’ are churches when they’re talking about your soul...Forever’s a pretty scary thought.” One landowner responded to my question about the permanence of his easement in preventing development, “nothing works better than easements. They work too well, so that there’s not enough room for the development of affordable housing”—an issue addressed further in Chapter 6. Others relished the idea that their land would be protected “forever” and were confident in their continued success. An elderly easement landowner explained she told her children that they can sell her land to whomever they wish after she dies because she is confident that the easement will protect it, regardless of the new owner’s intentions.

Yet, others claim an easement is at best a “short term solution” that will protect the land for at least the next 30-40 years—“it’s the best you can do,” declared one landowner. A retired lawyer and landowner laughed at the notion that an easement is forever, saying that there will always be someone to find a way to modify or get around an easement. One couple who bought an easement property from the original grantor told me the original owner interviewed them to see what they would do with the property before she sold it to them, not trusting that the easement would guarantee her specific wishes for the land would be respected. Conservation easements must balance the need for future adaptive management with enforceable, consistent standards. What impact this flexibility will have on easements’ longevity—and the extent to which private owners

will be able to shape landscapes outside of the original easement intentions—remains to be seen.

### *Land Managers*

“I don’t want to manage it—I just want it to stay the way it is.” This claim by a partially retired conservation easement holder and two year resident of Orcas expresses a popular opinion of land management in the United States; on natural lands, let nature take its course. To several landowners, the notion of managing one’s land to keep it the same seems counterintuitive. Instead of regarding land management as a way to mitigate change, many landowners regard management as unnecessary or undesirable. The ‘balance of nature’ ecosystem model suggests an ahistorical nature in which human interactions have played no significant role in shaping the environment—except to harm it. The way to return to nature—one that existed before human (or more specifically, white) settlement— is not through management, but through non-interference.

In contrast, other landowners are more familiar with dynamic ecological models, instead asserting, as one easement grantor did in justifying his more hands-on management approach, “You can’t do nothing and have it stay the same.” Instead of seeing land management as somewhat counterintuitive to the idea of preservation, this group of landowners regards nature as a dynamic system that ironically requires human management just to stay the same. As another easement holder who has been active in island conservation efforts for years declared during a discussion with members of the Center for Coast Salish Environments and myself, “People tell me my land is so

beautiful, and not to do anything with it and just leave it the way it is. I tell them the reason it looks the way it does is *because* I manage it.”

Therein lies a question about easements—while they guarantee in a general sense the protection of lands (usually via the prevention of development), they commonly fail to specify the role human management will play in that effort, again, tending to overlook or minimize labor. The individual, drawing from a combination of personal and shared nostalgia, is permitted via private property the right to perpetuate a particular landscape vision. In spite of the notion many islanders share that a conservation easement means a property is ‘saved,’ management (or lack thereof) is left largely to the private landholder, except in rare cases where the easement includes a vegetation management plan. It is also not necessarily within the scope of a land trust to determine the fate of private properties; as a Preservation Trust land steward told me as I asked about their role in monitoring and enforcement, “We don’t tell landowners how to manage their lands.” The question then becomes one of determining the role of private land managers in shaping these protected landscapes, recognizing that even inaction impacts a property. The balance between ecological knowledge and personal memories, emotions, histories and imagination again emerges as a central tension in determining the future of Orcas.

For example, one complex scenario combines an owner’s longing for an agrarian look with uncertainty as to how to achieve it. One Orcas retired lawyer and easement landowner with whom I spoke owns a large, scenic, roadside field on which Douglas firs are starting to encroach. While the owner, who revealed to me the urgency of his aesthetic landscaping efforts since he has been beginning to lose his eyesight in recent years, thought it was “marvelous to see a forest springing back to life,” a previous

Preservation Trust employee told him that the people who cleared that field generations ago would be distressed to hear him say that. Yet, this owner also spoke about the field as the pride of his property—the preservation of this scenic vista “the way it is now” is his main goal in having created an easement in the first place. When I asked if he intended to remove the young trees to maintain the field, he replied he will not. Yet, when I continued to ask if he would be satisfied if this field became a forest in 100 years, he again insisted he wants it to remain open space, and regrets not having included requirements to maintain the field in his easement. Perhaps faith in nature’s self-preservation drives this owner’s refusal to remove the young trees. The ‘balanced nature’ model would suggest that the field is somewhat stable as it is, and that perhaps the new trees are not the threat to his field that others see as inevitable. On another level, deciding between an open field versus a new forest raises conflicted feelings over which “nature” is more worthy of protection—the one that is a product of human labor, or the nature where humans play no role in management.

Deciding which nature to protect can be driven by collective imaginaries of a rural past, but also by more personal visions of what should be. One owner I visited walked me through his property and talked about the landscaping and building he planned to do on his newly acquired easement property. He talked about his forestry plans, and told me what species he considered weeds and planned to remove, but also repeated his intentions to keep all the ferns and moss intact. When I finally asked what moss and fern species were present that he was so concerned with, he replied with a laugh, “I have no idea what kind of ferns they are—I just love them. I believe in little elves and gnomes, and ferns and moss just remind me of that fantasy world.”

This ecology is not simply scientific, nor is it just political—so many landowners express an emotional political ecology in which personal preferences trump concerns of ecological health in making management decisions. Richard White (1980, 67), in his account of neighboring Island County, WA, describes how white rural editors “almost always placed their ideal rural landscape in northern Europe,” and thus strived to achieve that same aesthetic. Protecting or shaping a landscape is a powerful way of asserting one’s right to be there (see Hughes 2001, Hughes 2005), and Orcas residents are no different in manipulating landscape features to create their own sense of home. With so many Orcas residents having emigrated from “the mainland,” there are many attempts to bring “home” to the island. One oldtimer described her neighbors who planted strawberries on their property because they had them growing up in Kansas; “everyone brings their home with them,” she complained, “but this isn’t Kansas.” Raccoons ate the strawberries, just as deer ate the roses another neighbor planted, just as countless other residents report changes they or their neighbors have made to their land to make it more like what they imagined. Just as Europeans arrived in the ‘new world’ with visions of beauty and wildness (Marx 1968, Nash 1975), so have residents come to Orcas with dreams of how to make it the home of their past or imagination.

Many landowners have described their intention in creating an easement as an effort to “keep things the same,” or “preserve what’s been there.” Yet, many of these same individuals plant exotic species on their properties, for example, trying to create a Japanese garden feel on their Pacific Northwest property. This is not to say that planting exotics is ‘wrong,’ but rather that when landscaping a property, some landowners appear to contradict the ecological values they claim to value most—in this case, native species.

It is clear that individuals regard certain plant and animal species as healthy or belonging—often independent from knowledge of that species’ historical place or ecological value.

Ann Whiston Spirn (1998) discusses how scientists, writers and other researchers appeal to the ‘natural’ qualities of certain plants, for example, to justify landscape decisions. In that same vein, certain species are labeled ‘unnatural’ when simply ‘unwanted’ might be a better description. Red alders (*Alnus rubra*) are a fairly common tree species on Orcas, and one that even the most squeamish preservationist does not seem to have a problem removing. A number of landowners have cut alders, sometimes for firewood, sometimes just to get rid of them, telling me, “they’re really just weeds.” The same landowner who told me of the extensive landscaping he executed just to save one cedar tree also dismissed a stand of alders he cut down, explaining, “most people consider them weeds anyway.”

Alders are themselves fast growing and aggressive, which perhaps partially accounts for their designation by some as weeds. Yet, a number of sources describe alders as an important early successional species. Alders produce nodules on their roots that receive nitrogen from the air and transform it to increase soil nitrogen levels, which is generally the nutrient most limiting of tree growth in the Pacific Northwest (Pojar and MacKinnon 2004, Arno and Hammerly 1999, Atkinson and Sharpe 1993) Alders help enhance the nutrient levels of disturbed sites, preparing the soil for the establishment of new plant life. In addition, Coast Salish Indians used parts of the red alder for medicine, dye, and to smoke salmon—still an important use today. Arno and Hammerly (1999) suggest that foresters have historically regarded the red alder as a “weed tree” because it

lacked commercial value and supposedly made it more difficult for Douglas-firs to establish themselves. More recent research, however, shows that Doug-firs in fact “grow more rapidly on sites that have been pioneered by red alder” (*ibid*, 160). Yet, many landowners continue to regard the alder as a pest on the basis of defunct ‘scientific’ reasoning. But perhaps alders’ unpopularity also draws in part from their physical qualities—narrow in diameter, often clustered close together, with grayish bark that looks as if it is covered in lichens—qualities that cannot compete aesthetically with the dramatic tall cedars or the beautiful orange-red bark of the madrona. Again the distinction between visual appeal and ecological health becomes blurred.

Still, determining what belongs and what is in fact ‘native’ can be problematic. One landowner (without an easement) with a forestry background told me he has been planting redwoods on his property “because I’m from California.” At the same time, he explained that redwoods were originally in the area before the ice age, but after that they moved further south. Now, he claimed, they are reestablishing themselves further north again. The question is not always native or non-native, but native when? When I asked what weeds he has seen on his property, he replied, “Well, they’re all weeds.” Attention to the broader time scale of ecological change complicates the value that native species are always preferable. Another landscaper explained to me when I asked about his views of native versus non-native species, “with global warming, non-natives are going to be the tree of choice.” He continued, “I tell people the native landscape is what you already have.” Such acknowledgements of environmental change over time complicate conservation easements’ use of ‘forever,’ introducing the possibility that even with

conscientious local management, another scale of human actions could lead to unpredictable ecological changes.

This is not to say that any species goes. To the contrary, certain species—like the European import tansy ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*)—have indeed become a nuisance and threatened the biological diversity of parts of the island. Landscapers have told me that other species, like ivy, are bad for ground water absorption—a potent threat on Orcas, which already faces freshwater limitations. As one Preservation Trust volunteer told me, native landscaping is not about which plant has been here the longest, but “is it spreading? Is it taking away habitat of plants that have been here longer?” suggesting a distinction in how they deal with exotic versus invasive species. Land trust organizations frequently advise on weed removal, but none of the easements I examined placed restrictions on species used for landscaping—and indeed, it is not necessarily within the scope of restriction and enforcement of easements to create such specific, permanent limitations.

Management in easements is a double edged sword: on one hand, the flexibility allows for adaptive management to cope with future ecological changes; on the other hand, this flexibility also means that management is largely a personal endeavor, in spite of the rhetoric of environmental conservation and public benefit. In another sense, easements are a microcosm through which to explore private property more generally—how do people decide what to do with their property? And to varying extents, easements allow owners to preserve an ideal landscape into perpetuity. There are multiple ways for a place to be, and human memory and emotion are frequently what shapes that place.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Landscapes of Labor and Labors of Love: Agriculture and Affordability on Orcas**

#### *The Country and the City in the 'New West'*

As examined by both Raymond Williams (1973) and, more recently, Don Mitchell (1996), the countryside must look unworked if it is to fulfill its aesthetic potential. Instead of just trying to hide the labor of the country, many residents envision Orcas Island as a place where labor does not, or should not, take place, returning to fictitious images of the simple (non-capitalist) rural. While discussing affordability on Orcas with a partially retired realtor and landowner, he told me, "This isn't a place to make money. You go to New York City or New Jersey if you want to work." Now that people can make their money in Seattle or elsewhere and then retire to the islands, it is even easier to imagine the possibility of Orcas as a place without the need for employment opportunities. How can we explain this relationship in which urban capital finances rural leisure, particularly in the context of the 'new West'?

A 1979 letter to the editor in the local newspaper shows that even in the early days of island planning and development, some residents recognized the contradiction of saving money to move to a place where others are unable to earn any:

It seems to me that the only persons who are able to afford the luxury of not being motivated by a desire to fatten their wallets are the ones who were previously very successful at just that activity. Having put aside enough that they no longer need to strive, they find earning a living is tainted when others do it.<sup>108</sup>

While it may be true that many islanders made their profits elsewhere so that they could afford to move to Orcas, these same individuals sometimes resent the notion that Orcas is

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<sup>108</sup> Letter to the Editor. *Islands Sounder*. Vol 15, No. 10. 4 May 1979.

a place to make money. Part of the rural character of Orcas depends upon the image that work (except family agriculture) is done elsewhere. Orcas, to many, is a place of leisure and not labor, and to create employment opportunities or even affordable housing would be to deny its full potential as a rural retreat. Farming is one profession that makes sense in rural places like Orcas, though even then residents frequently regard farming as a lost cause financially. Still, the notion that farm work is a labor of love is appealing to many residents and visitors, though such characterizations often mask the need for services like affordable housing in encouraging agriculture to continue. This chapter demonstrates how images of workers who labor out of love, drawn from romanticizations of historical yeoman agriculture, foster unrealistic portrayals of the challenges facing Orcas farmers today. It then goes on to show how demographic factors like age and income are also central to definitions of rural character, though they are often less recognized as such when compared to the primacy of aesthetic considerations. Ultimately, the service economy in the form of tourism and especially real estate is the number one industry in the county, making it a challenge to address these less visible but equally potent dimensions of rural character while maintaining the views that give a place rural appeal.

In the context of US economic growth in the last sixty years, the trend of urban migrants contributing capital to the economies of rural retreats is creating a type of reversal of earlier trends in which the agriculture of the country spawned urban growth. Williams (1973, 48) describes the growth of towns largely as a trend that depended upon the labor of the country:

Directly or indirectly most towns seem to have developed as an aspect of the agricultural order itself: at a simple level as markets; at a higher level, reflecting the true social order, as centres of finance, administration and secondary production...in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the ideological

transition occurred, the effective bases of the society were still property in land and the consequent rural production, and the towns, even the capital, were functionally related to this dominant order.

Williams continues to explain how there is no “simple contrast between wicked town and innocent country, for what happens in the town is generated by the needs of the dominant rural class” (53). The value created by land and labor in the country is concentrated and sustained in the city. In spite of images that contrast the innocent and moral country against the corrupt and depraved town, both spaces are inextricably linked.

City and country are still interrelated, but the town is not solely dependent upon rural production—to reconfigure Williams’s argument, what happens in the *country* is also shaped by the needs of the dominant *urban* class. While rural production still exists in the country, the “aesthetic consumption” (Walker 2003, 17) of the country by exurban migrants is made possible by wealth produced in the city. In one sense, the labor of the country is no longer driving the growth of the town; instead, the wealth produced in the city allows for the exurban migrant to promulgate the notion of country as retreat rather than a place of labor. Romanticizing the country as a place free from the immorality of the urban economic order continues today on Orcas as it does in Williams’s analysis, though such assumptions continue to mask the economic needs within rural areas.

Much ‘new West’ literature tends towards a similar understanding of the countryside. Carl Abbot (2000, 80), for example, discusses the “conversion of resource-producing districts into ‘weekendlands’ for city folks—and the reshaping of these areas in the image of the expansive city.” While affirming the influence of urban needs and desires in shaping elements of the countryside, attention to the rural as “resource-producing” solely as a historical condition can overlook the current state of rural

production. In fact, descriptions of the ‘new West’ as a place in which the service economy has replaced extractive industries are only a partial truth. Of course, in one respect, even the recreational and aesthetic uses of western lands consume local resources, including water and land. But it is also true that tourism and recreation opportunities for wealthy urbanites have long existed in the west (see Ch. 2), and rural resource use is still central to many people’s economic livelihoods. James McCarthy and Julie Guthman (1998) argue, “nature is as central to capital in the West today as in the emergence of a ‘new West,’ supposedly built on service industries and environmental amenities as it was in the nineteenth century.” The transition to an economy dominated by the service industry has not eliminated other lifestyles, though it has perhaps made them less visible to those who like to imagine a purely recreational west.

The transition from the ‘old West’ to the ‘new West,’ however, is not marked by the departure of capitalism, but rather a shift “from landscapes of natural resource production to landscapes of aesthetic consumption” (Walker 2003, 17). Agriculture in particular forges a link between aesthetics and resource use that makes it a particularly appealing rural pursuit, such that it has become one of the few ways to work and still ‘be’ rural on Orcas. Agriculture occupies a somewhat unique space in the old West/new West discussion; while farming is a form of ‘old West’ rural extraction, idealized images of farming, unlike generally more destructive representations of mining or logging for example, can be compatible with the aesthetic requirement of the scenic new West. Roadside views of (either working or dormant) farms enhance the pastoral experience—the feeling of having gone back in time to a simpler lifestyle that is inexplicably free of modern economic demands. A particular kind of agricultural labor, described further

below, can actually enhance the rural experience while other forms of value production seem to hamper it.

The rural aesthetic, as described in Chapter 3, however, is not the whole story and can distort the economic needs or priorities of farmers themselves. As Peter Walker (2003, 18) notes, “The irony of the New West is that newcomers attracted by diverse imaginaries of rural lifestyles often make *real* rural livelihoods unviable.” Contemporary producers face problems caused by the new economic order, yet also benefit in terms of the new type of customer able to buy their produce. Beginning with a look at the challenges facing agriculture on Orcas, I continue to look at how these questions fit within the broader picture of affordability, economic diversity, and demographic trends on the island.

Imagining a laborless island strikes many parallels with ‘natural’ landscapes that are actually the product of deliberate human conservation management, as described in Chapter 5. Both visions hide the history and contemporary social relations that have shaped and continue to shape a place and, in both cases, the markers can be subtle. People retire to Orcas to get away from it all—but they still want to have the services and facilities that can make their new house like their former home. These amenities are proof of the need for workers to maintain a landscape that provides more than just recreational opportunities: including a large grocery store, realtors, landscaping firms, police and fire forces, a library, gas stations, construction companies, restaurants, schools, post offices, and, sometimes, domestic workers. While these employees might be critical to ensuring that others have a comfortable retreat, their ability to afford housing and basic needs is in jeopardy. Similarly, while certain types of agricultural

labor (described further below) enhance the rural aesthetic, some consider the affordable housing needed to accommodate these workers as a blemish on an otherwise ideal landscape. Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 discussed the history, aesthetic ideals and management principles that made the Orcas landscape what it is today; this chapter explores the economic and demographic issues—with particular attention to agriculture—that play a less visible but equally important role in maintaining a semblance of rural character.

### *Orcas Agriculture: Past and Present*

Agriculture has indeed been central to the history and settlement of San Juan County. The first written Euroamerican records of agriculture in the San Juan Islands date to 1853, when the Hudson Bay Company introduced 1,300 sheep. The year 1900 brought a peak in the sheep population to 12,000, and poultry became a major agricultural resource in the 1930s and '40s. From about 1900 until the '20s, San Juan County was a critical producer of tree fruits for the state of Washington and had a significant population of milk cows. After irrigation reached Eastern Washington, the San Juans could no longer remain competitive and the fruit industry collapsed. Currently, the commodity with the greatest sale value is cattle and calves, though the majority, 53.69% of farmland, is devoted to crops. The top crop by acreage is forage, which includes land used for all hay and haylage, grass silage and greenchop.<sup>109</sup>

San Juan County farming heavily relies upon state and federal subsidies, though much of that support has been disappearing in recent years. In 1987, only 13 of the county's 155 farms received some federal subsidy, averaging \$585 per farm in contrast

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<sup>109</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. "2002 Census of Agriculture, County Profile: San Juan, Washington." [http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2002/County\\_Profiles/Washington/cp53055.PDF](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2002/County_Profiles/Washington/cp53055.PDF).

with the state average of \$30,420.<sup>110</sup> While 2002 subsidy data has not been disclosed, in 1997 the average farm received just \$133 in government payments.<sup>111</sup>

A 1987 census reported that 50 of the 155 farms in San Juan County were profitable, while the remaining 105 had losses averaging \$3,534. Of the 225 farms in the county in 2002, 133 of them brought in under \$5,000 in sales, while 197 brought in under \$25,000 annually.<sup>112</sup> In contrast, the average production expenses per farm were \$21,635, and the average net cash income per farm was -\$10,240, down from 1992 when it was -\$1,530 and 1997 when it was \$755 (see **Table 7**).<sup>113</sup> Market agriculture has always been challenging in the San Juans as a result of the difficulty of transporting goods off-island, but additional recent barriers exist as well, discussed further below. In national and state contexts, San Juan County shows lower production expenses and significantly lower net cash incomes. If breaking even is the goal on a national scale, the negative income average in San Juan County suggests that other non-monetary values are at play in motivating agriculturalists.

<b>Table 7:</b> San Juan County, United States, and Washington State Farm Income and Expenses Source: United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. <a href="http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/index.asp">http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/index.asp</a> .						
	SJC		US		WA	
	Net cash income per farm	Production expenses per farm	Net cash income per farm	Production expenses per farm	Net cash income per farm	Production expenses per farm
1997	\$755	\$13,541	\$15,848	\$71,213	\$32,108	\$94,659
2002	-\$10,240	\$21,635	\$19,032	\$81,362	\$33,925	\$123,215

<sup>110</sup> Frank Leeming, "County's farm icons are receiving a lot of support." *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. 1 July 1992; Tom Schultz. "A quick overview of agriculture in SJ County." *Island Neighbors*. January 1997.

<sup>111</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. "2002 Census of Agriculture, County Profile: San Juan, Washington." [http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2002/County\\_Profiles/Washington/cp53055.PDF](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2002/County_Profiles/Washington/cp53055.PDF).

<sup>112</sup> Frank Leeming, "County's farm icons are receiving a lot of support." *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. 1 July 1992; Tom Schultz. "A quick overview of agriculture in SJ County." *Island Neighbors*. January 1997.

<sup>113</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. <http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/index.asp>. (accessed 26 October 2008). 2007 census results will be released in spring of 2009.

In 1992, a local newspaper declared: “Farming in San Juan County, one of the icons of island life, has become a subsidized industry supported by wealthy landowners and operators who work elsewhere to cover losses at home.”<sup>114</sup> While there are farmers on Orcas that have been giving market agriculture a dedicated try as part of their total income, there are also a number of “hobby” farms operated by wealthy landowners who are nonetheless part of the agricultural presence on Orcas. Now, as many residents have noted, those with the land do not need to farm it for profit because they already have financial security. One elderly resident who retired to Orcas over 20 years ago explained to me why she and her husband decided to purchase and raise 39 llamas: “The llamas were for fun, so we wouldn’t watch TV all the time.”

### *Why Agriculture?*

To many residents and visitors, agriculture just makes sense on Orcas. In terms of density, Orcas is a rural place and its wide open spaces make agriculture a natural choice. While the majority of islanders may agree that agriculture should happen, there is more disagreement as to *why* it should happen—a question that ultimately impacts the actions that are taken to preserve it. As in Mitchell’s (1996) *Lie of the Land*, people may value the crops and fresh food that agriculture produces, but may not want to see the (migrant) labor that has gone into it. In other words, agriculture is not just a ‘thing’ or a moment in time, but a process composed of varying phases and products that people value for different reasons and at particular stages. So, if agriculture is purely a scenic pursuit, then land preservation and ‘mow farms’ might suffice, even if no food is produced. But

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<sup>114</sup> Frank Leeming, “County’s farm icons are receiving a lot of support.” *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. July 1, 1992.

if food production and farming labor have values of their own, then a more comprehensive conservation effort is necessary.

### Farmers' Priorities

San Juan County farmers are a diverse group, consisting of men and women, young and old, and those with varying commitments to agriculture itself as either hobby or primary source of income. Representing many of their interests, the Agricultural Resources Committee (ARC) is a countywide agricultural advocate group created by the Board of County Commissioners in 2005. It engages in public outreach, support to local farmers, and advises the county on economic, ecological and food security issues to promote local agriculture and farmland preservation. The committee is comprised of five to fifteen voting members, half of whom must be farmers (other members may represent local farmers' market or restaurants, for example.) Farmers are defined broadly as those "engaged in agriculture in some way," and monthly meetings, which are held all year except from June-August, are open to the public.<sup>115</sup> As of 2008, the thirteen voting members included eight men and five women.

Prior to a 2006 ARC Meeting, two board members eagerly told me their plan to introduce a discussion as to why agriculture was important to different people in the community. At the meeting, the question was met with less enthusiasm. Introducing the question, one of the Board Members listed food security, community, and scenery as potential answers, to which some attendees responded, "Well, you covered all of them," and then wanted to move on to other issues. With a little extra push, some attendees

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<sup>115</sup> San Juan County Agricultural Resources Committee. <http://www.sjcarc.org/about.asp>. (accessed 8 January 2007.)

responded with their own personal priorities. One replied that she wanted to preserve open space, and had not thought about food security as a benefit of agriculture, while another answered, with a hint of the obvious, “to make a living.” Another suggested that potential conflicts that could arise in the future might require some prioritization; for example, how would people react if a large industrial hog farm wanted to move to the islands, which would aid food security but harm scenery and ecology? In response, one member said she only supports, “ecologically sane food production” while another suggested that sustainable agriculture is the implicit underlying principle that shapes all island agriculture. One farmer insisted, “there isn’t any really harmful agriculture in the county—maybe a few cows in streams...This is the kind of community that brings in the organic sustainable farmer type.” By maintaining the shared ecological concerns of island farmers, members dismissed the possibility of future conflicts of interest.

Yet, there was also fear that, in other areas, as one member put it, “prioritizing will provoke controversy.” A brief debate did in fact ensue over whether, as one farmer and activist wanted, global climate change should be on ARC’s agenda. This issue sparked some disagreement over the scale at which ARC should operate, with one Board Member claiming, “we can’t affect global warming, and it’s time wasting to address this political issue without helping a farmer get his sheep to market. I want to see tangible results.” Another member responded that encouraging people to buy local food addresses both global warming and local needs by consuming less transportation energy. To discourage a discussion that might polarize members, an attendee replied, “It’s a non-issue to get into issues we can’t answer.” Perhaps, agricultural producers being the minority that they are, the attendees did not want to risk any further fracturing in their

collective identity; as one Board member replied, “Agriculture in the county is bleeding to death. We have to be careful which issues we fight.” Clearly, to most members present, addressing immediate issues of farmer survival took priority over seemingly less tangible concerns and debates. Even among a group composed mostly of farmers, the reasons for preserving agriculture are still not uniformly prioritized.

A 2006 ARC survey (discussed further below) asked participating farmers why they farm, and found that, “‘Because I like it and want to preserve the land’ was a consistent comment.” Producing healthy food for themselves and others was a close second, and financial rewards including tax incentives, supporting family values, preserving agricultural land, and the feeling of “doing the right thing by their land” followed as answers. The fact that the question of why farmers farm was quickly dismissed at an ARC meeting, though an ARC survey asked and received responses to the same question, suggests that ARC members are interested in farmers’ priorities, but feared causing a debate at a monthly meeting might overshadow immediacy of other issues.

### Food Quality, Community and Environmental Health

In one-on-one interviews with a range of property owners, other reasons for agricultural preservation emerged. Some non-farmers with whom I spoke mentioned good food and scenery, as discussed in Chapter 3, as benefits of having agriculture on the island. Knowing from where one’s food comes is desirable to many people, for health and safety purposes as well as less tangible reasons having to do with the wholesomeness associated with knowing the person who is growing your vegetables. Buying produce

from a neighbor at a farmers' market or roadside stand is more consistent with the rural lifestyle many have in mind when they move to Orcas, though it is still important to note that many residents do not frequent the farmers' market and are content shopping only at the island supermarket. Even when not growing their own food, buying it locally makes some residents feel a "connection to the land" and a "greater appreciation of what it takes [to grow food]" than they would if they had no exposure to farming. Wendell Berry (2001, 76) describes the consumer's separation from the economic and ecological history of many of the commodities he or she buys, and suggests that local organic agriculture is valuable because it "is really a market for good, fresh, trustworthy food, food from producers known and trusted by consumers, and such food cannot be produced by a global corporation."

Others have suggested that local agriculture is synonymous with 'healthy' communities and land. As one resident of 5 years told me, "it's healthy to have an environment where there is farming with sheep." While properly managed sheep may not be harmful, they also do not necessarily make an environment healthier, though they may enhance its aesthetic or rural appeal. Another islander and supporter of the local farmers' market asserted, "Agriculture is healthy for the environment and people. Local organic food is important and having people devoted to growing food around you is great. It's an art and a way of life." Equating beauty with health (as discussed in Chapter 3) is not always appropriate, yet is a powerful reason that many people would like to preserve agriculture. One working islander complained of a neighbor who kept a cow next to a stream, which is ecologically unhealthy but has a "rural ambiance" to it. Agriculture, depending on how it is performed, might contribute to or detract from bodily

and environmental health; but ‘local’ agriculture—a sheep in a field or a cow next to a stream—is visual shorthand for health, beauty, and community.

### Labors of Love

Others cited similar reasons having to do with the knowledge that farming labor was being done on the island; instead of living in a gentrified home to retirees, many residents embrace the fact that agriculture is still taking place as proof of the authenticity of their rural experience. While people may not like to see migrant laborers shaping the landscape as, for example, in Mitchell’s (1996) study of California agriculture, seeing a white landowner or leasee working the land to reap his or her own reward harkens to the frontier dream of working the land as a yeoman laborer. Agriculture also gains value as a result of the labor that has historically been necessary to clear lands for farming. One elderly Lopez resident who grew up on the islands lamented the loss of farmland to brush and development alike: “People spent so much time and work clearing land for farming and making a living for themselves. But now they’re letting it all grow over.” These labors are not primarily for profit, but are inspired by moral virtues and historically-inspired ideals; they are labors of love.

Yet, seeing that work take place from a distance sometimes diminishes the other factors necessary for a farm to be successful on contemporary Orcas. When discussing with interviewees the feasibility of island agriculture and the value it embodies, several non-farmer residents referred to one particular plot of land as the embodiment of local farming; as one interviewee described it, “Here’s agriculture happening.” Another retired resident declared, “I love seeing that hard work [of the farmer] when I drive by.”

Notably, this acre plot of cultivated land is situated along the island's main road and, further, is located at a curve in the road so drivers are forced to slow down as they pass. The high visibility of the spot surely contributes to its being foremost on many people's minds as representative of island agriculture. While the woman who worked this plot of land was, by all accounts, a dedicated and hard worker, her enterprise ultimately failed. Some other farmers described her attempt at farming as imperiled from the beginning, due to her lack of financial and business experience. One farmer told me how she had not budgeted appropriately to get herself through the growing year, and ultimately she moved out of state. That land was soon informally leased to another, more experienced farmer.

This case is not unusual—many farming enterprises fail in their early years due to the high start up costs of farming and difficulty in combining hard physical labor with the skills needed to run any successful business. What is significant here is the fact that so many residents cited this particular spot as “agriculture happening” when in fact there are several other farms that have been more successful as producers and businesses. These residents were valuing actually seeing farming taking place, regardless of whether it was ultimately successful or not. Most islanders know farming is hard work, and that it is extremely difficult to make a profit; but this only makes their respect for those who attempt such work even greater, because it is not about the money, it is about the virtues of the work itself. While many would like to see agriculture in the county succeed, the fact that it is unprofitable only emphasizes its intrinsic value.

Some residents expressed greater admiration for non-commercial farming enterprises than those who were aiming to make a profit. One resident of almost 20

years, who earned a living as a landscaper, made a distinction between the commercial elements of agriculture and the less tangible virtues of growing food. As we sat in his home discussing the values of farming and whether agriculture was central to rural character on the island, he told me about how he used to garden to sell his produce, but soon began to grow just for himself. He and his wife moved to Orcas because they wanted an “artists’ community,” and they wanted their garden to be a “labor of love.” When it became about making money, he explains, they lost that, going on to make a distinction between ‘farmers’ and those who grow their own food. They did not want to be farmers: farmers are forced to think about profit instead of just the wonder of making things grow and feeding oneself. In fact, agriculture, in his view, has nothing to do with rural character:

Agriculture isn’t critical to the personality [of the island]. Agriculture is commercial, and that doesn’t exist on this island. Growing food organically is a lifestyle that has nothing to do with agriculture. Lots of people here grow food—it’s part of the character and what draws people here. Some people make money off it, but it’s still a lifestyle. *Growing* is rural character.

Separating the moral virtues of farming from its economic associations is critical to maintaining Orcas’s agricultural identity, while still being able to regard it as a landscape of leisure. Making money off farming is secondary to the desire for self-fulfillment that should motivate it. And indeed such ideals do motivate most if not all Orcas farmers—one does not get into farming primarily to make money. One farming couple told me, “You can’t justify farming financially. You need to have the passion and commitment to do it.” The fact that agriculture perseveres in spite of its economic challenges attests to the existence of a less tangible dedication that is making people farm, and that devotion is why people enjoy seeing people laboring. Laboring on the

land for sustenance, and not for one's own or another's profit, is one of the American virtues that defines rural character. While the 'faux-agro' or 'yuppie farms' described in Chapter 3 may be beautiful in their own right as landscapes of leisure, landscapes that exhibit "labors of love" have their own appeal, particularly in contrast to those who labor primarily for profit.

### Self-sufficiency

Hopes of strengthening the local economy were also mentioned by residents, as well as achieving a degree of self-sufficiency and sustainability. Being on an island—a space with distinct water boundaries—makes spatial limits more apparent and, to many, suggests the possibility of attaining a closed system. While complete independence from the mainland is a pipedream that few genuinely pursue, the idea of becoming less dependent on resources that arrive by ferry is more popular.

This vision of self-sufficiency has manifested itself specifically with regard to food production, perhaps because other needs that cannot be met locally have less romantic solutions than local agriculture. As one elderly woman exclaimed to me, "where am I supposed to buy socks??" Would having a Wal-mart on Orcas make it more autonomous? Clearly this is not what residents have in mind when they speak of a self-sufficient Orcas. Many residents make regular trips to the mainland to buy supplies—one couple I met owns a small plane and flies to Costco to load up on supplies. At a 2007 town meeting, a local article reported a public comment that, "fifty cents of every island resident's dollar is spent at Costco." A book entitled, *You Know You're An Islander When...* includes the entry, "... You buy local whenever you can, and mention Costco

and Eagle only to your closest confidants” (Jameson and Rouleau Burns 1999: 24).

Catalogs and more recently the internet allow for the absence of many stores on the islands—longtime islanders are often religious catalog shoppers. Such ‘inconveniences’ are part of the appeal to many islanders, who want to distance themselves from the commercial landscape of the urban mainland.

Food production, however, is one arena where a degree of self-sufficiency is both possible and desirable. One resident, discussing his support of the farmers’ market and the benefits of consuming locally, suggested it is “senseless” and an “unnecessary waste of resources” to ship vegetables onto the island. Others have argued, in both public meetings and one-on-one interviews, that “there’s a vulnerability to food being trucked in,” or that Orcas has a “natural abundance” that makes it the perfect place to grow food. Producing one’s own food is a way to reduce transportation energy, reduce dependence on outside resources, and to help fulfill Orcas’s productive potential.

Others, however, wonder what self-sufficiency would look like and how attainable it might be. At a San Juan Conservation District meeting, one Board Member asked, “Is food security really a possibility here? Would people really grow and grind their own grains?” He continued to note that even if future food supplies became threatened due to high gasoline prices, for example, there would probably still be more vegetable gardens than staple grains. Others as well have supported the notion that staple crops would be difficult to grow on Orcas.

Historically, settlers grew a range of vegetables as well as grains and oats, which were more marketable before Eastern Washington began to outcompete the islands in the 1940s. In spite of economic barriers that have arisen over the last several decades, many

residents have cited Orcas's agricultural past as evidence of its potential for the future: "Orcas was self-supported initially—we shipped food to the cities," claimed one non-farmer resident in defense of the idea that Orcas can become an exporter once again. The idea that the country can once again nurture the city is appealing, rather than urban money allowing for people to move back to the country. Islanders' attempts to grow their own food and become self-sustaining are also efforts to become independent from the system and revert to an earlier order in which the country provided to the city, and thus reclaim the moral virtues associated with the independent yeoman.

### *Challenges to Island Agriculture*

While some are perhaps more realistic in their assessment that agriculture cannot become the central economic industry it once was, others idealistically regard agriculture as one of the few economic pursuits that 'make sense' on Orcas. With a dearth of economic opportunities on the island, agriculture to some seems like a 'natural' and place-appropriate way to generate income as opposed to, say, opening a Wal-Mart to create jobs as might be attempted in another rural area. Realistically, though, farming is one of the most expensive and difficult pursuits to break into.

What are the major challenges to agriculture on Orcas Island? How are these challenges related to demographic changes and the "aesthetic consumption" of the rural landscape? While some residents insist Orcas can only sustain "boutique" or "handsome" farms, such statements can overlook the efforts of and challenges faced by those farmers who are trying to make a living through agricultural production. While no Orcas farmers generate all their income from agriculture, addressing some of the

challenges they face brings a greater understanding of the state of extractive ‘old West’ economies in places purportedly replaced entirely by service industries.

In 2006, San Juan County’s Agricultural Resources Committee (ARC) held outreach meetings on Lopez, Orcas and San Juan Islands and conducted a survey of producers. Out of approximately 200 county residents who “engaged in agriculture in some way,” sixty-seven (34%) of surveys were returned, and 26% of those were from Orcas Island. Participants were asked to rank 10 potential barriers to farming in order of importance, and results were as follows<sup>116</sup>:

1. Regulatory Barriers
2. Access to Markets
3. Water Resources
4. Information on Farm Support and Grants
5. Access to Farm Labor
6. Education and Technical Support
7. Access to Business Planning Services
8. Access to Finance
9. Energy Resources
10. Access to Land

The survey results did not specify the number of respondents who listed each barrier as greatest. Further, it is worth noting that listing regulatory barriers as number one may have been a way of expressing discontent to potential regulators or, since the proclaimed agenda of the survey was to help ARC identify the needs of farmers, farmers may have felt that addressing regulatory barriers was the issue upon which ARC could have greatest impact. Notably, when I spoke to non-farmers about agriculture in the county, rising land prices and access to land, in addition to distance from markets and transportation costs, were consistently named as the most pressing barrier to agriculture,

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<sup>116</sup> SJC Agricultural Resources Committee. “Produce Survey 2006- Summary.” Available online at [www.sjcarc.org](http://www.sjcarc.org).

though farmers ranked the same concern tenth out of ten. One artist with a conservation easement who I interviewed declared, “Getting the land is the nightmare of all farmers.” While the rising price of land is a logical barrier to farming, the visibility of land preservation issues and threat of development have surely given disproportionate attention to land access concerns among non-farmers.

I would like to address some of the challenges identified by this survey and complicate the results with data from my farmer interviews and attendance of ARC meetings on Orcas. I conducted in-depth interviews with the owners and operators of 6 productive farms on Orcas. Part of the results of these interviews was directed towards a photography exhibit with photographer Peter Fisher, in which I wrote text to accompany his pictures. I also interviewed a number of sometimes self-described ‘hobby’ farmers and other productive farmers with conservation easements on their property.

### Regulatory Barriers and Access to Markets

The first challenge, regulatory barriers, refers to a range of county, state and federal regulations that have cropped up over the years. For example, the introduction of the first ever USDA approved mobile slaughter unit in May of 2002, funded in part through a state grant, allowed for grassfed animals to be slaughtered, inspected and sold directly to consumers, stores and restaurants. Previously, federal regulations prohibited ranchers from selling cuts of meat directly to restaurants and buyers, forcing farmers to haul livestock on the ferry to get their meat to market and greatly reducing their profits. The mobile semi-truck now serves farmers in five counties in Washington State,

including San Juan County, where the idea originated in 1999.<sup>117</sup> This case demonstrates the burden that health and safety regulations can place on small farms, increasingly so as fears of terrorism and animal diseases, like avian flu and mad cow disease, have gained national attention. While SJC farmers are not against public health regulations per se, the federally imposed “one size fits all” regulations are generally geared towards larger industrial farms and cause undue burdens upon smaller producers.

Many producers have also voiced the desire for a commercial kitchen which would allow them to sell value-added items without fear of being shut down by local or state health inspectors. State regulations set the minimum standards for ready-to-eat products including cheeses or salad mixtures, requiring the use of commercial kitchens that are generally too expensive for an individual farmer in SJC to afford. Selling a carrot or a head of lettuce to a restaurant is fine, but mixing those carrots with romaine is considered a “process”<sup>118</sup> that, if not properly regulated, could create a liability for the producer and any establishment that purchases those products. In 2003, a cheese producer on San Juan Island was forced to shut down production entirely after a call from the state Department of Agriculture told her to stop selling her products. While in the past local health officials supervised her preparation process to ensure its safety, the sudden lack of flexibility in enforcing state regulations left this producer out of business.<sup>119</sup>

While there has been talk of establishing a commercial kitchen through public-private partnerships that could be shared by several producers, as of yet no such kitchen has been created. At a 2006 ARC meeting, producers expressed a desire to be able to

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<sup>117</sup> Scott Rasmussen. “Recent history offers precedent for farming solution.” *Islands’ Sounder*. May 21, 2003; “Processing site and mobile slaughter unit purchased.” *Journal of the San Juan Islands*. June 19, 2001.

<sup>118</sup> Scott Rasmussen. “Threat to local farms.” *Islands’ Sounder*. May 14, 2003.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid*

turn their produce into value-added products like soups and sausages, by either creating a commercial kitchen or by petitioning the state to set different health standards for small operators as opposed to larger ones. For example, in the past Washington state legislators approved an exemption for poultry producers with fewer than 1,000 chickens.<sup>120</sup> Farmers argue that their products are safe and often healthier than the food found in most grocery stores,<sup>121</sup> yet they are being punished because the scale at which they operate does not match the scale for which the regulations were created.

Most recently, talk of the National Animal ID System (NAIS) has had many farmers worried. The program, originally designed to give large meat producers access to international markets that require disease controls, mandates the electronic tagging of all livestock animals and the recording of all of their movements. Advocates of NAIS argue that it will help reduce the risk of outbreaks of Foot and Mouth Disease, particularly after the recent United Kingdom outbreak, and prevent the agricultural economic collapse that could occur in the case of a national epidemic.<sup>122</sup> In addition to charges that the plan intrudes upon private property, opponents argue that the fees associated with the tagging system could hurt smaller livestock owners.<sup>123</sup> While NAIS is currently voluntary, the USDA reserves the right to make it mandatory, prompting the creation of national groups like NoNAIS that represent small farmers and both commercial and pet animal owners.

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<sup>120</sup> Scott Rasmussen. "Recent history offers precedent for farming solution." *Islands' Sounder*. May, 21 2003.

<sup>121</sup> Scott Rasmussen. "Threat to local farms." *Islands' Sounder*. May 14, 2003.

<sup>122</sup> The Land Online Magazine.

[http://www.thelandonline.com/l\\_education\\_safety/local\\_story\\_059104604.html](http://www.thelandonline.com/l_education_safety/local_story_059104604.html) (accessed 25 October 2008).

<sup>123</sup> NoNais. <http://nonais.org/timeline/> (accessed 15 August 2008).

With the continual arrival of new regulations that threaten small farms, it is no wonder regulatory barriers were ranked number one by survey participants. Yet, many of the challenges listed are interrelated regulatory barriers that encompass other categories. For example, access to markets, in addition to referring to the water boundaries that make transporting food costly, is also impacted by regulations that limit where food can be sold. The cheese producer on San Juan Island without a commercially licensed kitchen was permitted to sell at the local farmers' market where vendors are not targeted for inspection, for instance, but not to restaurants, which made up the bulk of her sales. It is frustrating to producers who may use their own set of stringent organic and safety production criteria, yet still face state and federal regulatory fees and sale prohibitions.

### Land and Leasing

From 1992 to 1997, the average value per acre for farmland in the county was \$3,900-\$6,000, while the average value in Washington State at that time was \$892.<sup>124</sup> The price of land in the County has increased over 750% since 1999.<sup>125</sup> Then why was access to land ranked last as a barrier to agriculture?

First, it should be noted that the owners of two farms I visited named land cost among the top barriers to the continuation of agriculture, as the survey did not identify the number of people who ranked each barrier in each position, but rather only ranked according to the net number of votes each received. These married couples were also the most elderly and experienced farmers, and perhaps were looking to the future of farmland

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<sup>124</sup> Frank Leeming (1992). "County's farm icons are receiving a lot of support." *The Journal of the San Juan Islands*. July 1, 1992.

<sup>125</sup> OPAL 2004 newsletter. [www.opalclt.org/documents/04fallOPALnewsletter.pdf](http://www.opalclt.org/documents/04fallOPALnewsletter.pdf) (accessed 10 February 2006).

more generally and the barriers that might prevent would-be farmers from getting their start, and not just the challenges facing existing producers. One resident I spoke with told me he grew up on a farm and would love to become a farmer himself, but that he never would because the start up expenses and particularly the cost of land is too great. Another former intern who was working as farm manager at an Orcas farm in 2006 told me she would like to start a farm of her own one day, but would probably move to Oregon or California, in part because of the high land prices and limited markets on Orcas. The survey asked current farmers, who either own land already or have established leasing arrangements; for someone starting from scratch and without appropriate funds, access to land might prove a greater barrier.

Another perspective is that the price of land is but one of many seemingly insurmountable start-up costs. I asked one of the more successful Orcas farmers, “how do you become a farmer on Orcas?” He answered, “you bring lots of money with you.” He continued to detail the many expenses: “You have to build a fence because of the deer, you need to figure out where you’re going to get water from, are you going to have to dig a pond? Because that’s \$25,000 right there. What are you going to use to till, what equipment will you need, including irrigation equipment...You could drop \$20,000 in a heartbeat and not even see it.” While any business has initial startup costs, one does not get the return from farming that one might in another business. When asked if farming would work if the land cost were eliminated, say by leasing conservation easement land, the farmer replied that it is still extremely expensive even without buying land, and that there’s just no money in it. Access to capital, he said, not land, is a bigger problem: “I could get land for someone, but could they afford the tractor?”

Still, leasing has been an important, though informally utilized, development in Orcas agriculture. A couple who purchased land with a conservation easement already on it are now supportive of leasing to farmers, but admit that two or three years ago, they would not have wanted to lease their land: “It’s hard to give up the management of your land—it’s a pride thing.” Yet, many landowners have been eager to offer their open pasture to farmers and ranchers. From the leaser’s point of view, leasing one’s land to a farmer is a way to experience the agricultural lifestyle without the labor. One conservation easement holder with whom I spoke usually mows her ‘farm’ to keep the brush out, but in the past has allowed horses to graze on her pasture. She told me she “liked having the horses without the responsibility,” and also “love[s] it when farmers come to cut the hay” on her property. While she has had an offer to keep a farmer’s cows on her land, new fences would be needed which were too expensive for the rancher to afford.

Another retired landowner with whom I spoke said he would allow farmers to put animals on his “roadside beauty” land if they built the necessary fencing, though none have been able to afford to do so. This landowner explained that agriculture is important and that he personally enjoys seeing animals grazing, though he is doubtful that agriculture is a viable pursuit in the islands due to high land costs and transportation expenses. He went on to suggest that more landowners should let others farm on their land, and proposed the San Juan Preservation Trust could facilitate such arrangements; “owners get something,” in form of a tax break, “they should give something too,” by allowing the use of their land. “People would work with free land...a lot of kids would farm but can’t afford the land,” he argued. However, one ARC Board Member noted that

there is more land available for grazing than there are interested parties—but fencing and water are limits. A number of people keep their land in open space for the tax break and, with no interest in farming themselves, look for farmers to put animals on their land. As one farmer explained, “Those with the land don’t need to farm,” referring to the financial independence that allows many owners to keep large tracts of land without any need or desire to profit from it.

In spite of almost constantly running into financial barriers like fencing costs, many landowners still propose leasing as a way of keeping their (frequently conservation easement protected) ‘farmland’ in agricultural production. While leasing may not eliminate all barriers to farming, it certainly has made agriculture possible for some island farmers. One active farmer on Orcas told me he used to laugh at the idea of leasing, but now sees it as the only economically viable way to farm in the islands, unless you are a wealthy hobby farmer. In 2005, he had four unofficial leasing agreements to grow produce on the land of owners who want to see it productive. In addition to providing more land on which to grow produce, he explained that working on multiple plots is also a sort of safety net; if there is a bad season at one plot, at least there are others to fall back on. He emphasized, however, that although he can lease the land for free, fencing, irrigation, seeds, and other needs can cost over \$20,000.

Such arrangements are frequently informal agreements; the above farmer told me one of his ‘leases’ began at a party when a friend suggested, “why don’t you grow something on my land.” He insisted he is not really a “lease guy,” but is more into shaking hands and verbally agreeing on conditions, with money never changing hands.

In other instances, some producers have paid the landowner in food for the use of their land.

While informal leasing arrangements may keep access to land from being ranked higher on the above list of barriers, leasing itself has its own challenges, many of which are product specific. Raising animals versus different kinds of crops bring particular needs. One farmer who raises lambs says there is land available for pasture, but then there is no fence and the owner will not give you a lease long enough to justify the investment to put in the infrastructure. Conservation easements may preserve the soil quality of former farmlands, but owners generally do not maintain the fences that may already have been in place for livestock. Further, the uncertainty sometimes affiliated with informal leases can also be a deterrent: “You build up your flock according to how much land you have, and then suddenly it’s taken away if the lease ends,” explained one farmer. Orchardists face similar needs for longer term land commitment. One farmer noted at an ARC meeting: “An orchard lease would have to be at least 20 years to mean anything; but no landowner would accept that and no farmer would accept any less.” Many farmers want leases to survive transfer of ownership of land, much like a conservation easement does, so new owners would not be able to end an existing lease.

Growing seasonal vegetables, while still requiring infrastructure investment, is in some ways more compatible with shorter term leases. Potatoes and garlic, according to farmers with whom I spoke, are the two things you can grow without fencing, which makes them the perfect crops to grow on fenceless leased land. However, yet another farmer told me leasing land to ranchers is more feasible than leasing to gardeners. Tilling the land to farm takes water and plowing and, he argued, requires much more labor and

changes to the land than letting animals graze. He believes fewer landowners would be comfortable with tilling and other forms of physically moving earth on their property, especially if the enterprise is unsuccessful. One near-retired farming couple told me they have let landless workers till their land, but they failed and left a mess on their property, including weeds, trash and dug up areas.

There are other potential drawbacks to leasing. Some farmers noted that if you are stuck with a bad tenant or owner, problems could arise. Additionally, the above farmer who leases 4 separate plots of land, in addition to growing on his own property, complained that he spends most of the day driving and moving equipment between his five plots of land. Aside from the environmental and financial costs of the driving, he loses time that could be spent working if the plots were contiguous. For a farmer raising livestock, a large contiguous piece of land would be the only option.

Some farmers have expressed interest in the Land Bank facilitating viable agricultural land uses, and even helping with infrastructure costs. While the Land Bank has considered leasing its (publically owned, and possibly private as well) agricultural lands to farmers, as of a November 2005 meeting, the Land Bank Board still had many questions as to how such a system would work and what kind of conditions it would include. Overall, they were tentative about what their role would be in such an arrangement, and some suggested coordinating with the San Juan Preservation Trust. Yet, a representative of Orcas's affordable housing trust told me the San Juan Preservation Trust has been hesitant to get involved with leasing farm land, in part because they are unsure whether it is their role to do more than help preserve farmland from development.

### Access to Labor, Finance and Support

Access to farm labor, ranked as the fifth barrier to agriculture, is inexorably linked to housing issues and demographic shifts on the island. Though a number of island farms have interns working on their farms, they are usually seasonal workers. A few producers advertise online to attract interns who will work in return for a room, some meals, a small stipend, and the learning experience. Some farmers with whom I spoke noted interest in these internships has generally been steady, allowing for them to each hire about 2 or 3 a year. Lack of housing space is a major limitation in the number of interns one can take on, causing one farmer to consider moving into his smaller guesthouse to provide room for more interns in his main house. Other informal agreements also provide some farm labor; sometimes friends donate their time or work in exchange for produce, and in at least one case, a young woman has been helping with farm work in exchange for a small plot of land on which to grow for herself.

Another farming couple nearing retirement told me their ideal situation would be to supervise three full time workers, though at present they have one full time worker living in a yurt on their property. Because of their conservation easement, they are prohibited from building more farmworker housing, which has been distressing to them as they have been looking for young workers to help maintain their farm. The only way they can afford to keep help is by offering housing and a few meals. They told me they have been thinking recently that they wished they had not created the easement because it is too restrictive, and they did not realize what they would need in the future. Under county law they would have been able to have a trailer, but the easement is more restrictive than county law. Though the couple is hoping to find someone to continue and

expand their farm after they retire, they know that even with a conservation easement, there is no guarantee the land will stay in agricultural use. They explained that in an easement, “there’s a lot of talk about what can’t be done, but no reference to what *can* be done or what the owner wants to be done in the future.” While Turtleback Mountain was under threat of development (described in Chapter 5), this couple stressed they would hate to see any houses on the mountain that, because of its proximity and great view, feels like a part of the farm. Yet, if those houses could be used for farm worker housing, one of them declared, “that wouldn’t be so bad,” even if it did ruin the view.

Access to grant support and financial aid that might either allow a farmer to get by with fewer laborers or afford to pay them are also important barriers that were ranked 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, respectively. Several farmers reported that it is “daunting” to go through all the paperwork necessary to apply for a government grant; as one farmer put it, it is not something he has “the time or expertise to do.” A farmer and sustainable farming advocate insisted that there are private and county tools available to farmers, but that no one uses them. He advocates more institutional support for programs already in the Comp Plan, such as a farm worker accommodations plan that encourages seasonal only occupancy on Rural Farm-Forest lands, though it has had no takers. Other county tools, like the open space agricultural land designation requires farms to make a certain amount of money to qualify for the tax benefit, and farmers argue it is hard to meet the standards to get into the program.

Others complained that banks will not back agriculture because they do not see it as economically viable. Many would of course prefer grants, for as one farmer claimed at an ARC meeting, “no one can afford the interest” that would accrue with a loan. For

example, federal money is available for new farmers through the Farm Service Agency which has its state branch in Mt. Vernon, with interest rates ranging from 3.75% to 5%. Farmers at an ARC meeting reported that one must be turned down by 3 banks to qualify for some of their programs, and that in general it is difficult to gain approval.

### *Demographic Changes*

Labors of love can only suffice for so long, and eventually economic needs must factor into a discussion of rural character. Of course, part of the problem of lack of farm labor comes from less interest in farming in general in the United States. But other limits, including lack of affordable housing, fewer young people on the island, and low wages impact the potential for a broader definition of rural character to succeed.

Agricultural labor is just one type of labor that is impacted by demographic changes. Looking at the population trends in San Juan County provides another perspective from which to look at rural character—with increased attention to the people in the landscape and the economic realities that shape their lives.

What are some of the impacts of these demographic trends described in Chapter 2? Some argue that the first, fewer young people, has changed the character of the community in a negative way. During a Land Bank tour of the proposed Deer Harbor park site, one old-timer remarked on the lack of children to play by the shore, clearly saddened by the loss of what many view as a critical part of the island community. In contrast, while I was seeing a movie at Orcas's movie theater in 2005, the previews began rather loudly, prompting one movie-goer to exclaim, "Everyone turn down your hearing aids!" These two images—children playing in the water versus an audience of

hearing aid wearers—help illustrate the type of place many hope Orcas can again become, versus what it perhaps already is. The thought of Orcas turning into a community of retirees caused one working resident to tell me his plans of moving off island after his own children graduate high school, claiming, “I don’t want to live here with a bunch of old people.”

With the constant influx of new residents, children represent the continuity of the island population from within rather than depending upon migrants. Children who have grown up on the islands presumably have an attachment to the land that goes beyond just ownership; being born and raised on the islands signifies a sense of belonging to the land that cannot be bought. June Burn (1946, 22), a Waldron Island resident who wrote about the San Juan Islands in the 1940s, asserted the deeper significance of island children, writing, “These children are growing up like natural, free, healthy little animals, learning to do a thousand things at two and four and six which most children wait till they are in their teens to do and then whine at having to do because they learned too late for it to be an adventure.” Island children themselves are romanticized as “natural, free, healthy little animals” who are capable and independent, representing a future where these values will continue into the future. Young working families provide a certain authenticity to the island lifestyle that stands in contrast to the dreaded “Martha’s Vineyard” comparison—a soulless wealthy retiree community. Working families harken to the yeoman vision—even if they are not supporting themselves through farming.

Many interviewees have suggested to me that young families are also more likely to be invested in the community and willing to get involved in civic activities—if they have the time. An Orcas fireman complained that the fire department has been receiving

fewer volunteers over the years; “old people don’t want to get involved and young people are too busy working multiple jobs to be able to stay here.” One oldtimer, discussing changes to the island community, cited generational conflict as a major concern, as many elderly residents move to Orcas precisely to escape the PTA meetings and fire department fundraisers they attended while they were raising their own children on the mainland. Another resident, himself a retiree, told me, “old people don’t care about planning and young people are too busy to go the meetings—they have kids and work all day.” At a 2004 meeting on Orcas about how the newly approved charter government would work, attended by approximately 70 residents, I was possibly the only attendee in my 20s. Upon leaving the meeting, a few people approached me and suggested I run for office as a freeholder, based solely upon my age, while another sarcastically declared, “Oh no, not a young person trying to get involved.” While there are certainly a significant number of retirees who are involved in island organizations, there are also plenty who have moved to Orcas not to be part of a community, but to gain privacy. For residents who value the grassroots, democratic qualities they see as central to the rural character of their island home, young people’s involvement is a critical ingredient in maintaining a vital, functioning community.

The next trend, the income gap, places lower wage workers living next to wealthy retirees, summer homeowners, and telecommuters. This juxtaposition can sometimes create class tension and resentment on all sides. Some retirees expressed resentment towards those who apply for affordable housing rather than living elsewhere. One retired resident of about 10 years, while discussing affordable housing on Orcas, told me: “I wouldn’t try to live someplace I couldn’t afford,” while another resident similarly

suggested, “there are other places to live besides the San Juans.” From the perspective of some working residents, wealthier individuals are transforming their rural experience into a country club-like atmosphere; as one longtime islander told me, “I refuse to acknowledge that there’s a tennis club on Orcas.” Another working longtime resident explained his view of the new breed of “good old boys” that has invaded the island: “Not all ‘good old boys’ drive hummers and wear cowboy hats. But they still live under the paradigm, ‘live for profit.’ They think those who are losers deserve to be losers, and those that have too much can just keep it.” To many, recent wealthy residents have transformed the character of the island and created an unaffordable and exclusive atmosphere that prompted one oldtimer woman to declare, “Orcas Island is a gated community.” The income disparity also causes resentment over those who have used their money to influence the planning process; one local female business owner, in response to my starting to ask about county planning, abruptly replied, “Land use goes to whoever has the most money, that’s it.”

But many working individuals also recognize the benefits of having wealthy neighbors. A 2001 article in the local paper remarks on the income data revealed in the 2000 census: “though you may not spot these folks [those with second homes] at the local ballfields or various community events throughout the year, their fine homes are heavily taxed and we appreciate their largess.”<sup>126</sup> A resident who has been working and raising his children on Orcas for 15 years echoed this sentiment during our conversation about the changing island demographics: “Wealthy people pay high taxes and don’t use the services that much. What if the only way there can be roads on the island is because of them? What if their taxes are the only thing keeping schools on Orcas?” In this sense,

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<sup>126</sup> Jeff VanDerford. “Census paints a portrait of county.” *Journal of the San Juan Islands*. April 11, 2001.

wealthy residents are helping to maintain some critical community needs, and several residents do indeed regard them as a potential resource. At a 2006 ARC meeting, one farmer suggested perhaps some wealthy residents would donate or invest in island farming, since they benefit from seeing it on the island. The director of OPAL, Orcas's affordable housing trust, told me many residents are both wealthy and generous, and their donations help balance out the high costs of purchasing land on which to build affordable homes.

From a similar perspective, some residents have commented on the aesthetic contributions of wealthier residents. One longtime resident discussed with me the failure of county planning efforts, recognizing that without wealthy landowners who own big tracts of land, there would be a “mess of roads and driveways.” On lands that are not being farmed, the agricultural look can also be a product of affluent landowners. As the same resident referred to above explained, “I’ve been working here for 15 years, raised 2 kids, and yet it’s not the romantic farm life people imagine—there are no horses grazing in the field. Only rich people can afford to have that.” A different landowner who has been working as a landscaper on Orcas for almost 20 years gave a similar appraisal: “In a way we’re lucky to have all these rich people who can afford to keep their land looking nice, because no real farm would have the time or money to keep up that appearance.” Yet, the downside to such aesthetic landscapes, he notes, is that adjacent properties increase in value, “keeping others from moving here.” Like conservation easement lands, wealthy landowners’ properties help preserve the beauty that attracts people to the islands, yet also contribute to the high land prices and taxes that make it harder for many to afford to live there.

Finally, the combination of wealth, race and education on Orcas makes it a perfect place for organic agriculture to gain support. The largely educated, 95% white population of San Juan County represents a target market for organic agriculture. Somewhat ironically, it is the tastes and money of the new class of residents—the same that are contributing to higher property prices and increased land speculation—that are also allowing Orcas specialty agriculture to flourish. Several farmers with whom I spoke noted an increase in sales and general support for local agriculture in recent years. While most of the farms on Orcas use organic methods for growing, they have generally avoided the costs of obtaining the official ‘organic’ label by selling goods through local and informal channels to customers who understand their ‘organic’ status (see Guthman 1998, 146). Nonetheless, the prices of such goods still reflect the arguably higher prices of certain organic crops (*ibid*), combined with the additional costs of land, equipment, taxes, etc. associated with farming in general and island farming in particular. During a conversation with two farmers, I asked if they have any theories why they have been more successful in recent years, when land prices and other expenses are much higher. One replied that a lot of their relative success is consumer driven because many newer residents are willing and able to pay more for food that is organic and local. ‘Local’ food is especially easy to define and value on an island where the ‘local’ has distinct physical boundaries. They both agree it is also a “broader cultural phenomenon,” in which many people are beginning to value the slow food movement as a response to the fast pace of urban and suburban life.

Some social scientists have also argued, “those involved in alternative food tend to be economically and/or socially middle class,” and possess “the wealth to buy organic,

the inherited or schooled knowledge about nutrition or the environment, and they are politically liberal to left” (Slocum 2006). These criteria apply to many islanders who buy local and organic, ultimately sustaining the “fetishization of fresh, local, sustainable” practices and the bodies they produce (*ibid*). Julie Guthman (1998, 140) explores how “the existence of a sophisticated urban market, made up of those who will pay for their organic salad mix as a ‘vanity good’” has created a space for the growth of an organic agribusiness market in California. As more people move to Orcas from cities like Seattle and San Francisco, the island has increasingly become a rural place with urban tastes and money that have allowed for the growth of specialty agriculture.

In fact, one newcomer resident characterized certain island subcultures in comparison with Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)—as a “new age, retired Californian” type enterprise. CSAs are often synonymous with local agriculture and invariably raise many of the same questions of class and taste. Community Supported Agriculture traditionally refers to a group of individuals who commit money and/or labor to a farmer in return for that farmer’s seasonal produce. CSAs can be an important tool to farmers who need capital to finance the coming growing season, in effect giving them shareholders to support their production. There are several different incarnations of CSAs, which differ in terms of size, amount of financial and labor contribution, and methods of food distribution (Lyson 2004). Dan Imhoff (2001) summarizes some of the critiques of CSAs:

CSAs continue to cater mostly to well-to-do city dwellers rather than rural residents; the same people who can afford to buy microbrews can now purchase hand crafted fruits and vegetables and feel good about them. Viewed even more skeptically, these farm-in-a-box schemes could be seen as just another form of entertainment, in this case for people who have the time and tools to prepare high-quality meals. Critics also agree that low-income families and farmworkers are

shut out of the movement because of the hardship of paying cash at the beginning of a growing season...Others point to CSA arrangements in which members have little connection to the work at all, other than writing a check and reading weekly newsletters (24).

CSA models do exist on Orcas, often in modified forms as a way of addressing some of these criticisms. One farmer told me he once tried to start a CSA where customers help with the harvest, but he could not even get one person interested in doing that; the majority just wanted to come in and pick up their stuff, and not to be involved in the growing or harvesting. At the end of the season in October, the customers just went away, even though he still had a lot of produce they could have taken. Many customers, he explained, did not understand they could not get basil in the summer instead of fava beans, because of the growing cycle. He has since made many changes, and is hesitant to even use the term 'CSA' when describing the new system. Recently, he has been running a modified CSA with about 25 customers, in which he knows all the customers by name and has created flexible arrangements to meet his and their needs. He also felt the old CSA model could be very exclusionary to those who cannot pay \$400, so now he lets some people pay \$50, while others pay up to \$1,000. Other farmers as well have worked out systems that benefit from their wealthy clientele while still trying to remain accessible to those unable to pay quite as much.

In response to the increasingly educated inhabitants of the county, one longtime resident told me the community is benefitting and has become more "enlightened and eclectic...when I was a kid, this place was like something out of *Deliverance*," referring to the James Dickey novel and movie in which 'hillbillies' attack suburban vacationers. While the agricultural sector is in many ways benefiting from the food preferences of the

new class of residents, it is also suffering from a dearth of laborers and affordable housing—largely as a result of increased land speculation and climbing prices.

### *Affordable Housing*

A 2006 article<sup>127</sup> from the *Islands' Sounder* features the commute of Eddie Valenzuela, a former Orcas resident who was forced to move to Anacortes due to high housing costs. Valenzuela has instead been commuting three hours to and from Orcas for the past 5 years to keep his job as foreman of a roofing crew, which provides a better salary than mainland work, but few affordable housing opportunities. Several people use the hour/hour and a half long ferry ride to commute from the mainland to work on Orcas, often to provide a variety of services, from landscaping to window repair. Though Valenzuela and his wife applied for affordable housing through OPAL, Orcas's affordable housing trust, their combined income exceeded the maximum income set by the state to qualify for assistance. In addition to the amount of time spent commuting daily, the San Juan County Planning Department predicted that ferry rates would increase 121 percent from 2003 to 2009, making commuting an even less feasible proposition.<sup>128</sup>

The Washington Center for Real Estate Research, which publishes quarterly reports on San Juan County housing data, reported that the median price of a home in San Juan County in 2005 was \$449,500, up over 36.6 percent from the previous year.<sup>129</sup> San

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<sup>127</sup> Joe Floren. "Forced to commute from Anacortes." *The Islands' Sounder*. March 15, 2006.

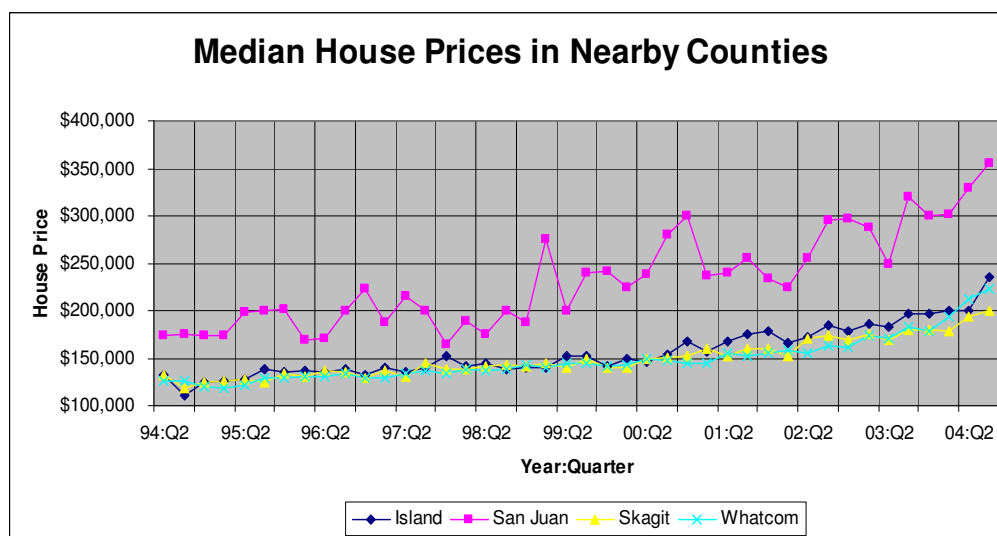
<sup>128</sup> San Juan County. <http://www.co.san-juan.wa.us/Planning/Housing%20and%20Population/Affordable%20Housing.html>

<sup>129</sup> Washington Center for Real Estate Research. <http://www.wcrer.wsu.edu/> (accessed 12 December 2007).

Juan County's affordability index<sup>130</sup> was 54.1, the lowest in the state, and its affordability index for first time buyers was 31.6, also the lowest in the state during the second quarter of 2005. As of the third quarter of 2007, both figures have dropped, to 39.1 and 23.1, respectively. To emphasize the exceptionality of these statistics, the next lowest affordability index in the state is found in King County, at 64.7. Additionally, the median resale rate for a home in San Juan County is the highest in the state at \$585,000, seconded by King County at \$472,000.<sup>131</sup> This figure for SJC marks a 33.6 percent rise over the median price just a year earlier. The median house price in San Juan County is greater than double that of neighboring counties, a trend that has been intensifying since the 1990s (see **Table 8**).

**Table 8:** Median House Prices in Nearby Counties

Source: Washington Center for Real Estate. [www.orcasresearch.org](http://www.orcasresearch.org). (accessed 12 December 2007).



<sup>130</sup> Affordability index measures the ability of a family to make payments on a median price resale home assuming a 20% down payment. A score of 100 would indicate that a typical family could afford a median home.

<sup>131</sup> Washington Center for Real Estate Research. <http://www.wcrer.wsu.edu/> (accessed 12 December 2007).

Renting is also difficult; San Juan County rental prices are higher than the state and national averages, and Washington State itself is the 14<sup>th</sup> most expensive state in the country in terms of housing costs. The hourly wage needed for a household to rent a two bedroom apartment in the county was \$14.13 an hour in 2004, making it nearly impossible for individual minimum wage earner to afford rent.<sup>132</sup> According to the San Juan County Planning Department, housing is considered to be affordable if that household pays no more than 30% of its gross income for basic housing costs, including rent, utilities, or house payments (including property taxes and insurance). Again, given the low wage incomes in San Juan County and the high land, housing, and rental prices, this leaves low to middle income earners in trouble.

Though several organizations on Orcas support affordable housing research and efforts, Of People and Land (OPAL) is the island's only community land trust and currently provides affordable homes or rentals to 65 families, comprising 2% of the 3,100 households on the island, with new projects underway. OPAL, originally standing for "Orcas Permaculture and Land Trust," began as a way of addressing open space, agricultural land, and housing, intending to focus on providing farmworker housing, but has since narrowed its focus to housing alone. OPAL almost died early on when neighbors opposed proposed buildings. One early member described early reservations about the project: "There was no organized opposition, but some people were suspicious (the hippies were up to something) or worried that a commune of some sort might be forming."<sup>133</sup> But after OPAL asked neighbors for input and explained the projects, they were able to gain the needed support.

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<sup>132</sup> "Rents higher in San Juan County." *San Juan Journal*. October 15, 2004.

<sup>133</sup> OPAL Annual Report 2002, Spring 2003.

OPAL works by purchasing land and holding it in perpetuity, thus eliminating the cost of land from the price of homes. Since OPAL purchased its first plot of land in 1994, the price OPAL has had to pay for land has increased by over 750%, while other home building costs have increased 83%.<sup>134</sup> OPAL leases their land to homeowners, who must qualify for a mortgage to buy a home. Homes are designed to suit the needs of pre-qualified applicants, and have set re-sale limits, helping the home remain “permanently affordable,” which, under current county code, means 50 years for houses and 20 years for rentals. Taxes, however, are charged on the houses at a normal rate, causing some islanders with whom I spoke to fear that residents of such affordable houses will be taxed out of their homes.

OPAL receives money through donations, low-interest loans, and state and federal grants. For example, to purchase a \$400,000 twenty acre plot of land in Eastsound in 1995, OPAL received \$380,000 from a federal Community Development Block Grant given to the County and then passed along to OPAL. While such federal grants are a huge boost for OPAL, they also limit to whom housing can be provided. Legally, to qualify to receive funds from federal housing programs, applicants can earn no more than 80% of the median income for San Juan County<sup>135</sup> (in 2004: \$33,650 for one person, \$38,450 for two, and \$43,250 for a family of three).<sup>136</sup> The applicant must also live in the county three years before his or her application can be approved, and OPAL also sets asset limits, community service requirements, and checks employment records. The federal housing income limit allows only those with ‘very low’ to ‘low’ incomes to

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<sup>134</sup> OPAL Annual Report 2004, Spring 2005.

<sup>135</sup> This definition of who can qualify for federal housing assistance, was set by the U.S. Department of Housing and Development, and has been adopted by Washington State Code in most cases pertaining to affordable housing. San Juan County Community Development and Planning Department. “Affordable Housing Defined.” September 23, 2003.

<sup>136</sup> OPAL. [www.opalclt.org](http://www.opalclt.org). (accessed December 13, 2007).

qualify for assistance, leaving a gap in which moderate to middle income families are not eligible, but are still unable to afford property, discussed further below. The average applicant for an OPAL home earns \$23,950 annually, and has lived on island for 13 years, sometimes in rented apartments, yurts, tents, boats or, in some cases, school buses.<sup>137</sup> As of 2005, there were 59 applicant parties on the waiting list, which included 64 adults and 53 children.<sup>138</sup>

One key argument in support of OPAL is that affordable housing is necessary to maintain an economically and socially diverse population. As one farming couple nearing retirement told me, they support OPAL because they “can’t imagine anything worse than a bunch of retired people living by themselves.” While some have called affordable housing projects “artificial” and “unnatural,” this couple told me OPAL is “part of the evolution of rural life...pricing, without OPAL would keep most working people out. And it would be a dead community without teachers, firemen, etc.” A 2004 survey conducted by the Orcas Research Group, an advocacy group that has explored a range of island issues including housing and agriculture, reported that an 18-29% turnover in infrastructure workers (teachers, deputies, paramedics, utility workers, medical staff, and others) will occur in the next five years, estimating that 10-20 moderate to middle income families will be needed on the island to meet the needs left by their absence.<sup>139</sup> Yet, referring to a range of positions, from teachers to county government employees, hirers have reported trouble finding candidates due to the high

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<sup>137</sup> “2003 Countywide Housing Survey Results” (with an 18% response rate from 8,098 households contacted via mail) reported 8 respondents live in yurts, 12 live in boats, and 3 live in school buses. Results published in: OPAL Annual Report, 2003. Spring 2004. Actual figures are likely higher, given the likelihood many of such residents may not have mailboxes or time to complete surveys.

<sup>138</sup> OPAL Newsletter: Special Edition. Fall 2005.

<sup>139</sup> Orcas Research Group. 2004 Survey in “San Juan County Workers: A Report by the Orcas Research Group.” 6 April 2005. <http://orcasresearch.org>.

cost of housing.<sup>140</sup> OPAL newsletters, in fact, make a point of listing homeowners' occupations, as well as their volunteer and civic commitments, so readers can see the services that would be lost without places for them to live. Advocates argue that houses, as opposed to short term renting arrangements or commuting, provide residents with a sense of stability that gives them more time to commit to community involvement, fulfilling the need for civic engagement addressed above. They could also cite the sense of dignity that comes with owning a home, particularly in the US, where ownership is tied in with notions of independence and democracy. Owning a house is something all "real" families have; a *New York Times* poll indicated that owning a home factored above all else as an indicator of wealth and status in America (cited in Mooney 2008, 169). Renting symbolizes insecurity and transition, while ownership means success and stability.

Aside from the loss of needed skills, many islanders also seeing rising home and land prices as a threat to the spirit of the island; as OPAL's motto declares, "Housing island people, maintaining island character." One OPAL supporter warned, "Be aware that if our island families leave, it will be a different place. It is not going to be the place that we've come to love."<sup>141</sup> Another reluctant supporter admitted she used to resent OPAL because she saved her money and worked hard to move here, but now she understands that land is so much more expensive now that no working person could afford it: "It would be lonely without them [OPAL residents]." The loss of island families represents a threat to yet another definition of 'rural character,' one in which a

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<sup>140</sup> "Affordable housing back in the spotlight: Parts I and II." *The Islands' Sounder*. May 16, 2007.

<sup>141</sup> Scott Rasmussen and Finn J. John. "Clash of views on housing tax." *The Islands' Sounder*. April 26, 2006.

diversity of ages, occupations and community involvement all enhance the rural experience.

In contrast, others opposed OPAL's approach to affordable housing, expressing a range of doubts over to whether such a form of "charity" is merited or even helpful. Upon my asking his views on affordable housing, one longtime resident argued that "OPAL buying land creates unnatural events," and creates a large class gap, when what the islands need is a progression of the economic range. Instead, affordable housing, he argued, creates a tension between the lower and middle classes. A retired doctor also suggested the inevitability of increasingly expensive housing, telling me there is nothing you can do about the affordability of the land—it is a market force. She explained she has mixed feelings about OPAL because it is "artificial" and difficult to maintain, and suggested a certain lack of utility of applicants: "It's not because these people *can't* make a living, but because they choose to be artists and massage therapists." Yet, she agreed that diversity of income levels is important, though she is not sure how to achieve it. Another retired resident, who moved to Orcas in the 1990s because it was "the last pristine place on the west coast," told me, after I asked about whether she sees a need for affordable housing, "people want to live here but don't know the trades." Yet another retiree similarly asserted, "I wouldn't move someplace I couldn't afford." Such comments are perhaps less relevant to OPAL applicants who have not moved from the mainland in recent years, but are longer term residents who have been moving between short term housing arrangements based upon seasonal availability and their current income. For people who are not moving to the islands, but are just trying to stay there,

the issue is not trying to force one's way into an expensive vacationland, but rather maintain employment, family and community ties in a single place.

Others regard living on Orcas, and particularly in highly valued 'view' spots, a luxury that should not be 'given' to those in need of assistance. For instance, one recent acquisition of land on which to build seven affordable homes in a prominent view spot in Deer Harbor prompted neighbors to question why affordable housing was being built on such valuable property. One working resident rhetorically asked me why OPAL should get view homes when people with 6 jobs cannot afford their own place and get no assistance: "OPAL's a great concept, but why do they build on expensive properties?" The director of OPAL explained to me that many of their land purchases are examples of jumping on the few opportunities that arise in an expensive and crowded land market, and that they often learn about available properties through word of mouth. The Deer Harbor property, for example, was purchased after the previous owner, Lahari Hospice and Respite Care, sold lots to OPAL at below market rates. Another example of an opportunity sale is a pasture that the former owner sold at a discounted rate to OPAL, figuring that "no one could afford to buy the farm and keep it a farm, and eventually it would be developed anyway." The pasture will soon be converted into up to 28 affordable homes. Not much land is available for purchase, let alone land that is appropriately zoned so as to allow multiple affordable homes.

One affordable housing advocate told me there is no contradiction between OPAL and open space because OPAL occupies few acres overall. The bigger issue is NIMBY (Not in My Backyard). Just as having an open field in conservation easement next to your house can raise your property value, some residents worry that having affordable

housing next to their land will lower their property value. As another OPAL supporter explained, “people think of affordable housing as tenements or trailers. But affordable *quality* houses can be green and well done.” The director of OPAL told me some neighbors of future developments have told her they would rather see a sheep pasture than houses—concerns OPAL tries to allay by incorporating neighbors’ input into the construction process.

Clustering development offers the potential to place more homes on available land, but also raises questions as to whether and how such plans can fit within a rural aesthetic that favors long vistas and long meandering roads. One landowner and part-time resident told me he is conflicted about the concentration of development: on one hand it is important to avoid sprawl and maintain open spaces, but he also does not like the idea of concentrating low income residents into tight developments, saying, “Low income people should not be herded. They should be able to enjoy wide open spaces and rural character.” He suggests allowing small dwellings on large properties as a way of letting low income people live in open spaces, as opposed to what he considers the small spaces in OPAL developments. While this plan may seem to resemble the guesthouses described in Chapter 4, it differs in two respects. First, guesthouses would likely be rented rather than purchased and second, there is no guarantee these homes would be rented at affordable rates. Another islander suggested OPAL put three or four homes in a small valley on Orcas, to set a “good example” for the rest of the islands as how to spread affordable homes throughout open spaces. Whether zoning restrictions would allow or developers would have incentive to build such developments, however, is another question.

OPAL recently acquired property near Madrona Point in Eastsound, and was faced with the decision of whether to build three attached units or two separate houses. Ultimately, they went with two houses, deciding, as the director put it, “three didn’t feel like Orcas.” Affordable housing, one islander told me, can be part of rural character, but it depends how it is done. Aesthetic considerations play an important role in making a development ‘fit’ into the rural environment. The director of OPAL told me views are also considered when planning new homes, from the perspective of both the neighbor and prospective homeowner. Single family homes (as opposed to duplexes or condo-like units,) spaces between homes, and gardens all convey ‘rural character.’

Many residents become increasingly supportive of affordable housing if it is made less visible or more attractive. Even at an ARC meeting, after asking the audience the extent to which lack of farm worker housing has been a challenge, one member asked, “what if more affordable housing ruins the rural look?” OPAL held a meeting in early 2006 at which the public could review a series of three design charrettes<sup>142</sup> for a new Eastsound development that would create 28 to 34 affordable homes, measuring approximately 825 square feet each. Maintaining a rural feel was a key consideration during the meeting; as one of the project’s architects announced to encourage input, “If you don’t feel like you’re on Orcas, there’s no point to all this.” The architect went on to explain that he understands the “character of Orcas” and is committed to maintaining the “open space feel and views,” without which it “wouldn’t be Orcas anymore.” He described how “visual tricks can reduce the perception of density,” such as the use of

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<sup>142</sup> Charrettes refer to the use of collaborative sessions to produce potential design solutions, in this case in the form of a series of blueprints.

different materials and colors to make homes more in keeping with the “rural atmosphere.”

The first charrette proposed attached houses, that most audience members felt looked too “linear” and “urban,” though it would also provide the greatest open space. Again, utility and environmental health came up against aesthetics, as the architect also suggested this plan would work best with proposed solar roof panels. The suggestion of having water catchment tanks outside the homes would also be more environmentally sustainable, but more visually unappealing. The topic was left to be further researched.

The other two charrettes proposed detached homes and a mix of the two. Plans with detached homes offered sinuous paths between houses, but less open space. Creating privacy was also an issue, and creating natural buffers like shrubs rather than fences was prioritized. The positioning of homes was drawn to consider the sight lines of each resident, as well as existing adjacent neighbors. Creating spaces for “chance” meetings by clustering mailboxes, for example, was also considered to be important to creating a ‘neighborhood feel’ where residents could get to know each other. Ultimately, most in attendance favored one of the plans with more detached homes, hoping to balance the look of a single family rural home with the open spaces and views that help define rural character.

The new challenge to affordable housing is to acquire non-government funds so moderate income people can also receive support. Many who make just enough to not qualify for state or federal housing assistance are also in need of financial help to live in the county. School teachers, for instance, often fall within this category. A recent proposal to create a county housing bank, to be funded through a .5% sales tax on all new

property sales in the county, failed when it came to a vote in February of 2006. The housing bank, advocates hoped, would be able to secure funds from sources other than state and federal grants, and thus be able to provide assistance to moderate income families, defined as those who earn 80-95% of the county's median income.

The need to balance affordability and conservation raises the question of possible collaboration between OPAL and the Land Bank or San Juan Preservation Trust. A Land Bank employee told me that they could coordinate with affordable housing efforts, but their interests do not always overlap and, ultimately, affordable housing is not their mission. The OPAL director told me that the Land Bank and OPAL are complementary in that both are interested in preserving elements of rural character. Class issues, she continued, often divide the Land Bank and San Juan Preservation Trust from OPAL in that OPAL supports the “disenfranchised and powerless” while the two land trusts “are mostly about preserving the rights of those with a lot of rights.” While there is of course overlapping membership among the organizations and the land and housing trusts do communicate and collaborate on a personal level, they still have different agendas—or at least different ways of approaching the agenda of preservation of rural character.

### *The ‘Real Rural’*

To return to Peter Walker's (2003, 18) statement: “The irony of the New West is that newcomers attracted by diverse imaginaries of rural lifestyles often make *real* rural livelihoods unviable.” On Orcas, the specific obstacles to “*real* rural livelihoods” include skyrocketing land prices, demographic shifts, a lack of affordable housing, and a range of specific barriers to agricultural production—some of which, such as federal regulations,

are not specifically linked to newcomers. Yet, many residents' desire to be near "*real* rural livelihoods" while simultaneously wishing to experience a landscape of leisure leaves a very narrow definition of what kinds of labor can exist. Recognizing only two extremes—'capitalist greed' and wholesome labors of love—can tend to neglect the economic needs of those living in rural areas who do not seem to fit either category and are just trying to make a living.

Still the question remains, what are these rural imaginaries, and what is the *real* rural? The rural imaginary is more than purely visual; it also encompasses a particular economic order in which only particular forms of labor—primarily yeoman farming—are acceptable in a supposedly non-capitalist landscape. The earlier accumulation that allowed newcomers to move to Orcas was done precisely to escape the commercial world in which they made their living. The *real* rural, then, is somewhat of a historical imaginary that never fully existed, and can only be reproduced to the extent that one is able to overlook particular rural elements in favor of the ones most individually appealing. Specifically, in pining for a rural imaginary that never truly existed, many residents focus on visual appeal and the absence of commercial influences to the exclusion of economic sustainability. It will take a combination of these factors to maintain a rural that a majority can support, as well as perhaps a more nuanced understanding of the role of past imaginaries in shaping the present.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Conclusion

#### *Planning for Rural Character*

In practical terms, the previous chapters examine the many dimensions of rural character: aesthetics, property relations and the built environment, ecology and conservation, and agriculture and affordability—demonstrating how narrow definitions of rural character fail to incorporate social and economic components into their conservation strategies. Rural character is difficult to define, but claiming to “know it when you see it” implies it is something that is primarily *seen*. While the aesthetic components of the rural are compelling to visitor and resident alike—though perhaps in different ways— aesthetics can also be deceiving. What is beautiful to some may also be lacking in some of the social and economic components that make for a more sustainable, even ‘authentic’ rural. ‘Authentic’ rural landscapes, as many Orcas respondents have made clear, are places that have the rural look as well as semblances of yeoman agriculture, non- or pre-capitalist economies, and a non-commercial atmosphere. Ultimately, visual indicators remain potent because they are most immediately evident to the viewer and because of the pastoral values and histories they represent. For example, maintaining a particular rural aesthetic can be a tool that can make affordable housing efforts more palatable and even embraced; the pastoral images of the past can be employed by affordable housing advocates to contribute substance and style to the landscape. Landowners foster the rural look with an awareness of all that it represents, opting for the symbol of rural character when the content—in terms of actual agricultural

production and the lifestyle that accompanies it—is not something that can be so easily attained.

Many place their hopes of achieving these other dimensions of rural character in local non-profits. Land trusts, like the Land Bank and San Juan Preservation Trust, are largely effective in their missions of helping to preserve open space and aesthetic landscape qualities. Of People and Land Community Land Trust (OPAL) has also had many successes in securing properties for sustainable, attractive and affordable housing. While each organization is pursuing a beneficial mission, open space and affordable housing are largely considered to be independent causes, rather than different arms of the same larger goal of protecting rural character. Ideally, county planners would be the authority to make sure these goals were pursued in concert, though such planning seldom is able to match need with reality. For example, in 2001, county planners estimated that San Juan Island will require 300-400 affordable homes by 2020. However, county officials also recognize that zoning restrictions leave little room to accommodate this need.<sup>143</sup> The lack of a unified vision creates many such impossible situations. In the absence of consistent planning, private and county trusts have asserted their missions in the hopes of doing what they can, understandably sacrificing a larger vision for more immediately attainable goals. Some have criticized these efforts, seeking a more unified vision than an individual land trust can offer; as one resident told me, “The Land Bank and Preservation Trust just try to keep people off land, but that’s not how to do it. They’re just keeping land open, but that’s not population or resource management.” Other residents, however, describe the Land Bank and Preservation Trust in particular as

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<sup>143</sup> Scott Rasmussen. “County appeals town’s lack of affordable housing plan.” *The Islands’ Sounder*. December 4, 2001.

making up for the inconsistencies of the planning department, claiming, as one resident did, that they “fulfill the county’s lack of planning.” Still, when OPAL and the Preservation Trust are in essence competing for the same lands—one to build homes while the other to prevent such structures—the question of use is often left to circumstance rather than planning.

Not all dimensions of rural character, of course, can be fully planned. The issue of social reproduction can be partially addressed by attempts to provide employment and affordable housing to working families, but these forms of assistance and planning can only go so far. The limited number and range of employment opportunities means that because of its relative isolation, working families must be willing and able to work within the limited number of professions represented on Orcas, and may also have to wait for the chance to be the one optometrist or pharmacist, for example, on the island. Further, when the grown children of residents are generally unable to afford a home of their own on Orcas, the generational continuity necessary to maintain a longer term connection to place is lost. This leaves retirees as ideal residents in the sense that they no longer need to work, though they are of course still reliant upon the services provided to them by other working residents. Since these elderly residents have already raised their children elsewhere, maintaining the population has largely become a matter of migration rather than reproduction. The transitory nature of the Orcas population poses another challenge to the desire for social cohesion and interdependence—what some residents referred to as the “people piece” in reference to these less tangible components of rural character.

Agriculture, too, can be encouraged through San Juan County planning efforts, but broader national trends have made family farms increasingly unviable, meaning that

the county level can only do so much to address the issue. Jacobs (2003, 170) claims that “family farmers lost their land because they were too efficient,” such that, historically, the surpluses they created led to declining commodity prices and a space for the success of corporate farms. Small scale agriculture is marginalized in the US, where half the food grown in America is produced on 4 per cent of the farms (*ibid*, 177). Micro-farms that grow specialty items catering to an often wealthy and educated population have emerged as a partial alternative to large scale agriculture, but with limited success because of the narrow market for such items and the great amount of time farmers must spend to juggle the production of diverse goods ranging from herbs to organic eggs (*ibid*, 183). Federal economic incentives that favor corporate agriculture often confront local efforts to preserve small scale farming, meaning that opposition to such policies cannot remain at the local level, but must engage national and even global politics as well.

Part of the appeal of the ‘natural’ landscapes of North America to early settlers was their belief that they were viewing “a place unlike the one they had known in Europe;” it was “landscape untouched by history—nature unmixed with art” (Marx 1968, 36). Now, maintaining rural character is very intentionally about using art (within the guise of planning and land management) to maintain a type of nature, one that imagines a sustainable and romantic relationship between humans and the earth. The insertion of human influence into the landscape via management and planning is nothing new; yet the conscious use of such techniques to produce a ‘natural’ sense of place reveals the persistence of pastoral imaginaries in the face of clear evidence that would seem to render these narratives unattainable. In other words, even when so many residents are aware of the factors that challenge the existence of the rural lifestyles they treasure, including the

high land prices, the aging population, and more recent economic instability, they keep their faith in the pastoral ideal and the maintenance of rural character.

*Nostalgic Landscapes in Times of Modernity*

The rural is so appealing in part because it represents the “unmodern;” it is a reminder of values and lifestyles from an earlier time (Tovey 1999). The fact that this kind of escapism is desirable to so many suggests the alienation that modernity can produce, and the nostalgia it in turn generates. Traditionally, “modernity” implies a faith in universal morals, laws and knowledge as the means to pursue human emancipation from myth, superstition and injustice, breaking with history while simultaneously seeking to (artificially) preserve the nonmodern (Harvey 1996, Harvey 1990, Boym 2001). While nature is frequently constructed as something outside of human activity and a potent alternative to modernity (see DuPuis and Vandergeest 1996), rurality creates a space for humans while continuing to posit commercial influence as the outlier. For example, Jeffersonian agrarian myths include a rejection of the modern city and the idea of confining exchange to local bartering between farmers (Mills 1997, 31). David Harvey (1990, 100) similarly describes Marx’s approach in which a modern “money economy” has replaced “traditional” communities that depended upon different types of social relations for survival; the presumed rationality of the market supplanted the unreliability of dependence upon personal interactions. Historically, the San Juan Islands were a place where one relied upon neighbors; now residents can opt to exist in isolation, supporting themselves entirely through the purchase power of money with no need for the personal relationships upon which earlier settlers depended. People used to need each other for

advice and goods—to survive. Now they can exist independently, transforming ‘community’ into more of a luxury than a necessity.

This new pattern introduces both the possibility of an influx of a new type of resident and, in turn, nostalgia for the “traditional” social model. While there are spaces for more “traditional” social relations—Community Shared Agriculture, the informal leasing agreement, or even the community potluck—the overarching logic of the political economy of the San Juans is that of capitalism. These challenges to mainstream (and mainland) economic realities are ultimately attempts to preserve rural character, as are the landscape preservation efforts that appeal to the look of the landscapes that have come to represent the rural. Even conservation easements can be viewed as attempts to rethink market logic, in that they encourage landowners to work against their economic self-interest (albeit with a tax break,) voluntarily reducing the building and development potential of their land. Yet, these easements are ultimately made possible through the institutions of private land ownership, and remain largely legal and economic transactions rather than social or community-based actions. In spite of the goodwill of donors, some of whom regard their donations as having public benefits, conservation easements are not the product of communal consensus building or informal social exchanges, but are ways to address the broadly defined aesthetic preservation of private property.

The irony of modernity, as Harvey (1996, 302) articulates, is that deliberate appeals to the heritage of a place are often the final mark that the modern has prevailed. The preservation and reconstruction of historical landscapes, for example, suggest a consciousness of what is lost and threatened, as well as the frequent commercialization of these efforts—perhaps in the form of tourism and promoting real estate speculation. In

this sense, any attempts to recreate a particular historical narrative can never be ‘authentic’ because they are always consciously constructed with an image in mind. Yet, this raises questions about whether even the original Jeffersonian yeomen were truly ‘authentic’—did not they too move West with the image of themselves working their own land and fulfilling the destiny God had assigned them? Contemporary Orcas Islanders may be striving for this same ideal; the difference between them and their forebears is the legal and political economic realities in which they are seeking to subsist. Within the confines of current planning and zoning regulations, escalating land prices, and local and national agricultural challenges, the yeoman dream is simply not attainable as it has been historically imagined. Nostalgic appeals to the past are thus limited by the material conditions of the present.

Returning to the concept of nostalgia is useful in terms of understanding the relationship between history, modernity and landscape. Boym (2001, XVI) argues that nostalgia and modernity are not opposites, but are more like alter egos; they develop hand in hand, reflecting widespread concerns with both newness and tradition. Further, nostalgia is made possible through a modernity that has helped establish the distinction between local and universal, past and present (*ibid*, XVI). In other words, modern economic and technological innovations made the global possible, leading to a loss of commitment to place and a simultaneous increased longing for it. Yet, place retains important social value even within the supposed disconnect of modernity and postmodernity (see Harvey 1990). Harvey (1996, 304) quotes Brueggemann, “Place is space which has historical meanings.” Landscape, I would add, as the embodiment of place, has become not only the object of nostalgic longings, but the means through which

people acting on personal and cultural identities attempt to reject modernity. Thus, it is through landscape management and imagining that individuals attempt to recreate nostalgic ideals, changing the physical symbols of the social past and present in response to their inability to mitigate modernity itself. In the absence of being able to recover idealized historicized social and economic values, those nostalgic landscapes have come to represent not just physical beauty, but the virtues of a romanticized era.

*Landscape Winners and Losers: A Political Ecology of Landscape and Emotion*

Since Blaikie and Brookfield (1987, 17) defined political ecology as an approach that “combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy,” numerous scholars have considered the social processes implicit in resource degradation. Many political ecologists have built upon this initial definition, contributing and refining various approaches to political economy and ecology in efforts to better understand environmental conflict and decline. In the previous chapters, I have argued that contributing an ethnographic look at everyday relationships with landscapes to political ecology can further reveal the social and political dimensions of history, ecology, and memory. Environments are politicized not just in terms of resource access, but in terms of access to views and their associated memories. While ecological principles do factor into conservation discussions on Orcas, emotional preferences are also used to justify environmental management. Similarly, history itself is often reclaimed and selectively employed to justify current management and future plans. This is not to say that personal subjectivities should be removed from land planning decisions, for they should not and cannot. Instead, this suggests that attention needs to be paid to the processes

through which certain experiences are preserved while others are not. Social processes like ownership, access and land planning determine the physicality of the landscape, as well as the persistence of particular relationships with it. Combining political ecology with “structures of feeling” brings greater attention to the way landscapes are lived as social experience, and the political economic routes through which those experiences are sustained.

To many Orcas residents, there is a sense that what was there when you arrived is what belongs. Conservation easements provide a legal tool for preserving this present, in effect also preserving its associated past. When studying the end product, a return to E.P. Thompson (1963, 12) is useful. Looking only at social products is to:

[read] history in the light of subsequent preoccupations, and not as in fact it occurred. Only the successful (in the sense of those whose aspirations anticipated subsequent evolution) are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten.

Who are the ‘losers’ in Orcas Island land management? Broadly stated, the losers are those whose landscape visions are not being fulfilled. The ‘winner,’ in this study, is the white agricultural past—one that, at least in appearance and imagination, has become the goal of many management efforts. From another perspective, the ‘winner’ is also the private land holder, who is able to make management decisions within the confines of county regulations. Conservation easements have become a valuable tool in response to development pressures. Yet, there remain important questions to be answered regarding the actual intentions and effects of this private management technique on a wider social landscape. Far from being an “apolitical” tool, easements are a means by which an individual landholder can solidify a particular landscape vision into the future. The

effects of such actions are numerous and varied—from contributing to higher land prices to preserving a particular historical narrative.

Further, as social products in terms of both physical management and the meanings assigned to them, landscapes are a useful frame for examining the intersection of social and environmental relations. Landscape preservation efforts may present ecological justifications, many of which raise legitimate concerns regarding human and environmental health and sustainability. But landscapes are also repositories of meaning, history and identity. Using a landscape as a unit of analysis contributes a physical, tangible dimension to the power relations that come into play as some environmental and social agendas are addressed while others fail to garner attention. In other words, landscapes can reveal the ‘winners’, in terms of those whose visions have been fulfilled, while more thorough looks—whether they are archaeological, ecological, or ethnographic—can reveal the historical and social processes that led to the land’s current incarnation. Hirsch (1995, 7) describes landscape as a means of “bringing nature into visibility as a significant form of social experience;” ethnographic readings can illuminate how particular social and personal relationships have been made visible in the landscape. Mitchell (1996, 17) writes, “The look of the land plays a key role in determining the shape that a political economy takes.” In this sense, landscapes do not just reflect meaning and action but produce them, such that the real estate and tourism industries have thrived because of the Islands’ unique look and the ways in which people have fostered that appearance.

As global economic inequality contributes to more landscapes of leisure, it will become increasingly clear that conflicts over resources are not just about ‘use’ in the

strictest material sense of the word, but that they are sites of conflict over how places are imagined as vestiges of the past and models for the future. These socioeconomic trends have made it possible for an increasing number of locales to find their way into a global real estate and tourist market. San Juan County, for example, is listed in the popular tourism book *1,000 Places to See Before You Die: A Traveler's Life List*, which describes Orcas as the most “scenically varied” of the islands (Schultz, 2003). While rural communities may never have been as homogenous as many have imagined them, tourism places rural development interests on a broader national and even global scale, meaning that an even more diverse array of interests and hopes are staked upon the future of a locale. As the crowding and commerce of urban environments becomes even more common and generates unprecedented wealth and inequality, rural beauty will become increasingly desirable, contested and expensive. It remains to be seen what the effect of the current economic crisis will be on these trends. While prices may drop in the short term, ultimately speculation has likely forever altered the relationship between land price and the type of buyer who can afford these relatively more expensive properties.

The study of land use in the American West is not an exceptional case, but rather an extension of international studies that reveal how resource conflicts do not just engage the ways land is owned and used, but how it is seen and imagined. Rural resource struggles are frequently posited as a matter of aesthetic preferences of ‘outsiders’ versus the livelihood concerns of ‘insiders,’ though such characterizations are incomplete (DuPuis and Vandergeest 1996). A closer look at aesthetic considerations in particular reveals that aesthetic responses are not only experienced by the ‘outsider,’ but they are also the source of significant emotion to the ‘insider’ as well. Aesthetic concerns are thus

not reserved for the tourist, but they also play an important role in how locals experience their homes. Preserving these aesthetics then also engages cultural and personal definitions of beauty and what belongs, meaning that debates over landscape aesthetics are also highly political in that they can privilege particular experiences and histories over others. Landscapes are constantly contested—not just in terms of material appropriation, but with regard to the alternative subjective experiences that have been silenced.

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## CURRICULUM VITA

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### EXPERIENCE

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