



Freshwater Ecology

Indigenous

North America

Salmon as Guide to Nowhere

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First name

This review of the paper by [M. Evans and L. Harris \(2018. Salmon as Symbol, Salmon as Guide: what anadromous fish can do for thinking about island ecosystems and the globe. Shima 12: 1-14\)](#) was originally written following an invitation by the editor of Shima, the International Journal of Research into Island Cultures, but my submission was rejected because I could not take that delirious article seriously, although “it has been peer-reviewed”. I had not known that Shima, initially a neat niche journal, had been infected by postmodernism and succumbed, as have many journals, in the Humanities.

Introduction

One could think that a basic knowledge of salmon biology, ecosystem functioning, and the history of British Columbia, along with having lived in or visited some of the world’s major islands and archipelagos should be enough to enable me to assess the article of Evans and Harris (2018) titled “Salmon as symbol, salmon as guide: What anadromous fish can do for thinking about island ecosystems and the globe” (SSSG), but it is not so. One also needs to be able to penetrate the thickets of what might be called “French theory” – also known as postmodernism – and the empty pronouncements of authors such as the ubiquitous Bruno Latour, and the more obscure Deleuze, Guattari and Co. (see [Sokal and Bricmont 1998](#)).

Predictably, one encounters the word “paradigm” in the first paragraph, perhaps as a marker that what follows is going to be serious stuff. Then, an author is cited who stresses that “the relations between islands occurs at sea”, which reminded me of

Donald Trump, who, in the aftermath of hurricane Maria in 2017, informed an amazed world that "Puerto Rico is an island surrounded by water."

And down we go.

It goes downhill from there – Bruno Latour steps in, with an "actor-network theory" ([Latour 2005](#)), which links humans, animals, landscapes, and rocks as equal participants, or "actants" into "assemblages", i.e., "multiplicities of semiotic, material and social flows with no assumptions of what human-non-human entities might be included" (whatever that means), and which, apparently, some people take seriously.

What follows are seven more pages of random prose of this type and even good old Jean Paul Sartre and his Critique of Dialectical Reason is evoked, but we shall not drown in it, and seek refuge on some island of clarity, with rivers where actual salmon may thrive. Unfortunately, the single exhibit in SSSG is a map of the distribution of Chinook salmon populations in the upper Columbia River, far away from any island or archipelago.

So, we must find our way back into the text, i.e., wade through vignettes with salmon-related factoids. One tells us of salmon in Hawai'i, where the fish acquired through a complex trade relationship and consumed, thus linking Hawai'i and the Pacific Northwest. And the point is? Then we go to New Zealand, where introduced Atlantic salmon did not thrive, but trout did. So what?

Only when we get to the introduction of Atlantic salmon to the British Columbia do we get into potentially interesting territory. But even here, the factual elements are well known: Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) is, in B.C., an introduced species, with all that it implies for competition with various species of Pacific salmon (*Oncorhynchus* spp.), intensified by a form of intensive culture which is bound to cause environmental problems ([Brill and Pauly 2004](#); [Morton and Williams 2003](#); [Morton et al. 2017](#)).

Conclusions?

Thus, it is only after 10 pages of largely meaningless wordage that do we finally get to what may be the point of the paper: that before contact and colonization, the First Nations of the Columbia River Basin were successfully managing the Pacific salmon that they had access to, in contrast to the present. This is certainly a valid point, but why the verbiage that preceded this claim? (This claim, incidentally is not substantiated, although it could have been straightforwardly done).

What is the lesson in all this? One could be that this author, a fisheries scientist, is too dense to understand the fine points of a paper applying contemporary concepts of sociology and anthropology to a set of issues that go way above his head. Or, and this would be really sad, SSSG is another case of trivialities being jargonified until they appear to be conveying deep insights.



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