

Boundaries of Imagination

Jaimen Cronk, Victoria Moreno

Introduction

Geopolitical boundaries are artificial and natural delineations between two political jurisdictions or regional entities. Although artificial and natural boundaries are separate notions, the former will often follow the latter, usually in the form of rivers, mountain ranges and oceans. Artificial boundaries are not fixed but rather created at a specific moment in time to represent the dominant political ideology and are intended to construct functional regions like the CRD. The iconological nature of the political ideologies that boundaries represent are conceptually solidified in the form of maps (Harley, 1988).

The initial purpose of maps was to organize the space in which people lived. Maps have been used throughout history by many civilizations to understand their physical environment and to... They have been used for military purposes from the 16th century onwards, especially during the Napoleonic Wars during the beginning of the 19th century. In the creation of maps, there is an intricate relationship between cartography, law and empire, which promulgates the domination of political entities over a specific territory. For British Columbia it was used to reaffirm the dispossession asserted on traditional indigenous territories by the British Crown (Harley, 1988). In the modern context of Canada, it helps to perpetuate this colonial legacy by shaping popular perception through the performative action of naming (Tucker et al., 2015).

The imagination of the population tends to be fixated on the structural representation of regions as defined on maps. Yet, as previously stated, boundaries are not absolute, but rather contestable and can be adapted to changing political contexts. This is especially applicable to regions that have undergone colonization, including North America. This exclusionary conception of boundaries contrasts with typical boundaries found in nature, which tend to have overlap and interdependence. City boundaries are often conceived as a division between people and nature. While this is beneficial because it limits the expansion of territory that humans can occupy, it is problematic when trying to promote ecologically sustainable practices within city limits.

In this project, we would like to demonstrate how boundaries can be rescaled and reconceptualized to suit the overlapping of ecological systems on which humans rely for water, food, air and activity. We hope to shift the perception of boundaries as structures designed to divide humanity from nature to territory as regions of responsibility in which humans are a part of nature. To accomplish this, we present a series of maps that represent the imaginative diversity of regional borders including political boundaries, watersheds, traditional indigenous territories and food-sheds. We also draw on the performative renaming of the Salish Sea as a “bioregion” to demonstrate how reiteration and enactment can change the perception of the public.

Case Study: Renaming and Rescaling of the Salish Sea

In the article “Decolonizing the map? Toponymic politics and the rescaling of the Salish Sea”, Brian Tucker and Reuben Rose-Redwood reviewed the process of naming the Salish Sea as a bioregional unit in reference to the region’s indigenous inhabitants, corresponding to the area of the Georgia Strait, Strait of Juan de Fuca, and Puget Sound. They demonstrate how the contested process of (re)naming is justified through performative enactment using a series of scientific and scholarly articles along with popularization through mediums including geographical magazines and children’s CD. It was a campaign aimed at placemaking through “toponymic rescaling” for the general populous aimed at reshaping how they conceive of the region.

Although this renaming project was proposed in the early 1990s, it was only approved in 2009 after a broad campaign aiming to spread the notion in people’s minds. Indeed, the government would not have approved this proposition until it was a term in “common use”. Yet, renaming that region was an important process to reinforce place-identities to “rewrite the spatial ‘text’ of Canada and the US border region along the Pacific Coast” (Tucker et al., 2015, 196). Tucker and Rose-Redwood (2015) explain how Salish Sea is a bioregion with amorphous boundaries but remains a “unit ecosystem”. The name in itself is a direct reference to the Indigenous population, and finally because it represented the Salish Sea as a bioregional unit.

Tucker and Rose-Redwood demonstrate that this process can be framed as a new form of neocolonialism despite the recognition of Indigenous leaders that the project was an important move in the direction of a pre-colonial indigenous presence. The use of science to justify the framing of the area as the “Salish Sea Eco Region” was vital to the process for both the Washington State Board on Geographic Names and the BC Geographic Names Office. It was necessary to prove that the region fit within one ecosystem, a concept that is to some scientists arbitrary because it is relative to the observer (Veale 201). However, western science is a colonial invention, meaning that the renaming of the Salish Sea was accomplished through colonial practices. There is also the irony of recognizing the region as decolonizing indigenous territory through predominantly non-indigenous use of the term “Salish Sea”, which holds testament to the influence of neocolonial geographical imagination on the process, which could reinforce the neocolonial relations of socio-spatial dispossession. For some First Nations, the continued presence of colonial names on the map makes the renaming feel like tokenism, an arbitrary attempt to account for historical wrongdoing. Therefore, this practice of renaming remains a contested process in which the state “seeks to maintain a monopoly under a ‘political innocence’” (Tucker et al., 2015, 197).

The renaming of the Salish Sea was a step in the right direction when it comes to decolonizing British Columbia, but it is not the name that was traditionally used by First Nations when referring to the region. By a scientist of European descent following criteria determined and practiced by colonists, the renaming process falls into the category of neocolonialism, which may continue to impose European values on First Nations.



Figure 1: Map of the Salish Sea and surrounding area (Tucker et. al., 2015)

Conventional Planning vs Ecosystem Planning

Conventional boundaries are used to outline jurisdictional territory within which the governing body has control over resource management and land use. Clear borders between regions mark the extent of the responsibility of those governing that region. Historically, this approach has led to anthropocentric thinking, where humans see their territory as a region of extraction to suit their needs, which has led to environmental degradation within city limits. As technology improves, this phenomenon has been exaggerated. Water systems have been altered to serve as transportation routes or sources of electricity. Ecosystems are bulldozed because they are in the way of new development necessary for the ever-expanding demand for new subdivisions of single family homes. While the practice of creating parks as natural sanctuaries has ensured the maintenance of ecosystems where human activity is restricted, the natural environment within city limits has been neglected as secondary to economic development. As the boundaries of the human built environment continue to expand, this mentality of inevitability becomes more problematic because of the consequential environmental degradation and the diminishing natural environment. This has culminated in urban sprawl, inefficient and overlapping political jurisdictions and fiscal inefficiency (Tomalty et al., 1994).

To alleviate the implications of the division created by conventional planning, ecosystem planning is based around the concept that humans and the built environment are not separate, instead placing humans as a part of the region's ecosystem. It recognizes that the health of humans and the health of ecosystems are mutually dependent, which contrasts with conventional planning, and recognizes that resource management is vital to the sustainability of the region. By recognizing that everything is connected to everything else, stakeholders are more likely to be concerned about ecological health for the sustainability of the region (Tomalty et al., 1994). This is not to say that development cannot occur, only that development must occur with the maintenance of healthy ecosystems in mind.

Environmental wellbeing is not the only benefit experienced by ecosystem preservation. Contact with nature has been shown to improve people's happiness, aversion to illness and life expectancy. Those with less contact to nature experience higher levels of cancer, obesity, depression, and many other health issues. Patients recovering from surgery healed faster in the presence of nature, even if that were just a window or a plant. When people were asked to evaluate different places based on how happy they felt, they consistently felt happier in spaces with nature.

By recognizing that maintaining natural ecosystems within city boundaries is vital to economic, social and environmental wellbeing, ecosystem planning ensures that development coincides with natural processes. It replaces the anthropocentric perception of conventional planning with the idea that humans can develop with nature to ensure that both parties benefit.

Traditional First Nations Territory

The philosophy of land applied by the First Nations is very different from the European one. There is no notion of landownership; this was imposed on them. Their boundaries were not fixed, as it is supposed in the Douglas Treaties, but rather amorphous with much crossover and exchange over the entire territory. Their relationship between culture and nature is not a dichotomy, but are interrelated (Mawani, 2007). Indeed, one of the goals of the First Nations is the protection and sustainability of the environment and of the natural resources of the ancestral lands and waters (First Nations). A place was a source of food, materials, place of teaching, spiritual renewal, and medicine to name a few. First Nations lived in communion with the nature and neighboring tribes.

Between 1850 and 1854, fourteen agreements were signed on Vancouver Island between the Indigenous population and the colonial Settlers, known as the Douglas Treaties. They ensured that the First Nations surrender their land "entirely and for ever", although for them it did not mean that they had to give up their lands. After 1854, while settlers kept coming, the governor Douglas decided to allow settlers to come into Indigenous land, leading to the displacement of Indigenous people onto reserves. Although this system existed long before, its use spread during the 19th century. Indian reserves are "tracks of land set aside under the Indian Act and treaty agreements for the exclusive use of an Indian band" (Indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca), although they have no claim of possession on this particular place. With the increase of settlers, some Indigenous and some colonial authorities saw the creation of reserves as a pragmatic response to the increasing numbers of conflicts. Yet, over the decades, reserves' territory decreased. These lost places were called "cut-off lands". Often, reserves were created outside societies, and the First Nations have been established in isolated areas. Yet, despite these restricted lands, Natives don't hesitate to cross the border to hunt or fish on their traditional grounds, or to go to one of their sacred place which are often located outside the reserves. "The reserve system undermined the Aboriginal peoples' relationship to their traditional boundaries but did not destroy it" (Indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca).



(Source: Section D, page 1 Times Colonist Sunday Feb 19th)

Figure 2: Douglas treaties map used to arbitrarily classify traditional First Nations territory.

Watershed

A watershed is a geographic region within which water drains through streams, creeks and rivers into or from a lake. They have been used historically by many different cultures to define regional boundaries, because of their supposed distinction and geomorphological stability (Davidson and Loe 2014). Watersheds within city limits are the source of that specific city's water, meaning that the maintenance of their health is vital to the health of the city's residents and land. Unfortunately, historically water has been used mostly for economic purposes such as transportation, irrigation and energy production, which has led to neglect and degrade natural water systems because of subsequent alteration and pollution that comes with such activities (Veale 2010).

As modes of transportation have improved, cities, or core regions, have become less reliant on the maintenance of their natural environment for access to resources because they can rely on distant rural settings, or peripheral regions. Food and water can be packaged from distant periphery regions. As the divide between the core and the periphery grows, so does the divide between the urban dweller and the natural environment. As a result, people perceive themselves as separate from nature, subsequently distancing themselves from responsibility to nature because they see the human environment as separate from the natural environment.

By thinking in terms of watersheds as determinants of regional boundaries, there is a higher chance that stakeholders will consider their role in the health of their water source and surrounding ecosystems and will actively participate in their maintenance. It inherently encourages consciousness of the effect that a region's actions are having on the water supply and it promotes more effective management of water because quality of life is directly linked to the health of water systems. It also encourages residents to think in terms of working with, rather than against, nature. The benefits of this do not stop with ecological well-being. People have evolved with nature, and research indicate that people are much happier and healthier in the presence of nature than they are in an entirely man-made environment.



Source: CRD website

Figure 3: Victoria Capital Regional District boundaries overlaid with watershed boundaries



Source: Provincial Agricultural Land Commission Website

Figure 4: The most formal boundary that defines land designated for food production is the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), which restricts the use of this land to purposes related to agriculture and covers approximately 4,700,000 hectares of land in BC to protect. However, the allotted boundary of food producing land has been transgressed by an urban farming movement which has led residents to produce food in neighborhoods.

Foodshed

A food-shed is the geographical location from which a region receives its food, including local, regional, national and international sources. With major technological advances in food production, storage and transportation removing spatial restrictions, the food-shed boundary has expanded to all corners of the world, shaping food production into globally-oriented agribusiness. The emergence of the industrialized global food market has provided abundance and diversity of food choices for consumers. However, this abundance has come at the expense of lost connections between farmer and toiled land, consumer and the origins of their food, and ultimately humans and their natural environment. The boundary of the food-shed has expanded beyond the ecological scale of production and consumption.

Victoria's food-shed is decidedly connected to the global food chain despite being situated in a fertile region with the longest growing season in Canada. It is estimated that British Columbia only produces approximately 48% of the food that the province consumes. To suit consumer demand, BC farmers will export their high quality and therefore high cost product to global markets. Meanwhile, grocery stores in BC will purchase the same product for cheaper imported from regions with lower production costs (Ministry of Agriculture and Lands 2006). This practice and others like it serve to perpetuate the reliance of BC, and consequentially Victoria, on a global food-shed. Agricultural land is also being lost to

Shortening the food chain to a local level oriented towards self-sufficiency in Victoria would force residents to consider the ecological implications of consumer habits, which improves region's economic and social viability. By restricting the boundary to a regionally ecological scale, consumer interactions with the processes of food production would make them conscious of the effect that farming has on the environment like erosion of nutrients pesticide, which pressures farmers to practice sustainable production. When environmental degradation resulting from unsustainable production methods are close to home, consumers are more likely to pressure farmers to engage in more sustainable practices like organic farming (Renting et al., 2003). People are also more likely to feel a connection to the integrity of their natural environment because they are aware of its necessity for their survival.

Conclusion

The way that society understands the region is influenced by the way that the territory's borders are defined and the region's name. Conventional boundaries typically define their borders as the division between nature and the region that humans have jurisdiction over. This is problematic because it restricts our sense of environmental responsibility by framing humans and nature as separate entities. As people grow more distant and less reliant on nature for resource provision, the necessity of changing the definition of borders to broaden the scope of their responsibility to the health of surrounding ecosystems. Fortunately, boundaries are not fixed and can be modified to shape the population's perception of their environment. Shifting the way that Victoria's stakeholders imagine the regional boundaries to an ecological unit will take time and effort. However, demonstrating that people are not separate from the ecosystems in which they reside would change their mindset to work with nature to ensure that both humans and nature can prosper, a lesson that was understood and practiced by First Nations. A change to an ecosystem planning approach would improve the region's social, environmental and economic sustainability for future generations, and would promote One Planet thinking.

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