

A 'Road to Nowhere'?

The Political Ecology of Environmental Conflict over the North Shore Road in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park



Laura Kerr
Geog 488
Comparative Environment
And Development Studies
Fall 2006

A 'Road to Nowhere'?

The Political Ecology of Environmental Conflict over the North Shore Road in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Laura Kerr

As you enter Swain County, North Carolina, one of the most Southwestern counties of the state nestled in a small valley of the Smoky Mountains, a trend becomes apparent. The landscape is dotted with signs that exclaim, "Build the Road! A 1943 Agreement!" Then, you will notice the same slogan begins to appear on the bumpers of numerous pickup trucks and other automobiles. With no prior knowledge of what this signage is referring to, it becomes apparent that you have descended into a valley embroiled in a contemptuous debate.

This debate dates back to the building of the Fontana Dam by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) as part of an overarching Tennessee Valley development project. In November of 1944, the gates of Fontana dam, the largest dam in the United States east of the Rocky Mountains, closed marking one of the biggest successes of the TVA to date. The reservoir behind Fontana dam, Fontana Lake¹, flooded over 10,000 acres of land once part of the Little Tennessee River valley. Lands that once were communities, farms and cemeteries were lost. In addition, the only road providing access to many communities in this part of Swain County, Highway 288, was flooded. Once the TVA finished constructing Fontana Dam, the surrounding land became a part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. As a result of the reservoir and the inclusion of the

¹ Fontana Lake refers to the reservoir behind the Fontana Dam. There are no natural lakes in this region of Western Carolina. However, the terminology "reservoir" and "lake" are used interchangeably.

remaining nearby land into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, numerous families were displaced from their homes and relocated to surrounding counties.

After resettlement became inevitable, an agreement now referred to as “The 1943 Agreement” was drafted to appease those being displaced by the Fontana Project. A complex agreement between Swain County, North Carolina, the Department of the Interior and TVA was made which promised the rebuilding of the North Shore Road so old homesteads could be accessed. Construction of the road began in 1948 and continued slowly until the 1970s. In 1973, road construction was halted due to environmental and engineering concerns. What resulted was a seven-mile stretch of road that abruptly comes to a dead end in the Great Smoky National Park and thus is referred to by many as the “Road to Nowhere²”.

This controversy is over the building of the North Shore Road, which, if built, would cut through the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, one of the largest roadless tracts of land in the eastern United States. Nonetheless, the construction of this road would allow people to access lands that were once home to several thriving mountain communities and were part of their heritage. The debate over whether or not to build the North Shore Road has existed since 1943. Yet no consensus has even been reached. Why has this controversy remained unresolved for over 60 years?

Operating from the understanding that actors of separate social classes possess differing ideas over proper land usage and ownership, political ecology, grounded predominately in the Third World, has provided a particularly informative perspective on

² The official name for this road is the “North Shore Road”. Nonetheless, most local people refer to it as the “Road to Nowhere”. For the entirety of this paper, the official name of this road, the “North Shore Road” will be used. However, within the public discourse surrounding this debate, these names are used interchangeably and thus, will both appear in this paper.

environmental conflicts. Some of the environmental conflict research has shown how struggles can become “ecologized” by changes in conservation policy. Conflicts become environmental due to these changes and groups are forced to defend their land rights against a new set of actors, most notably environmental groups (Robbins 2004, 14).

In this paper, I will examine the North Shore Road debate using a political ecology approach. The dominant narrative surrounding this debate is that this is a conflict between locals who want the road to be built to access old homesteads and environmentalists who do not want a road built through the wilderness of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. An explanation of events surrounding the Fontana Dam Project provides the necessary background for understanding this conflict. By placing this present day conflict within a historical context, a more complex and nuanced case study emerges. This paper uses the political ecology lens to reexamine the history of the area and shed a new and crucial light on this controversy. By examining issues of class and perceptions of proper land use, the North Shore Road conflict can be better understood, and perhaps more easily solved.

In this paper, I will demonstrate how numerous projects in the area have claimed they would bring economic development to this “backwards” region. At first, this claim was made by the extractive industry of logging. Then, it was made by the Fontana Dam project. Lastly, it was the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. These projects, all aimed to bring economic development to this area (though in radically different ways), have not done so and this has led to immense frustration on the part of local residents. In fact, many local residents feel as if they have seen none of the benefits of these economic development projects. I will argue that the contemporary pro-road

movement (comprised exclusively of local residents), at its root, is not anti-environmental but rather a symbolic effort of some local residents of Swain county, a marginalized rural Appalachian population, to reclaim economic and political power over a landscape that, under the auspices of development, they perceive as wrongfully taken from them.

In order to meet the objective stated above this paper will consist of six overarching sections. Firstly, I will briefly discuss the methodology employed for the study of the North Shore road case study. Then, this paper will provide an overview of relevant literature particularly relating to the study of environmental conflict employing the methods of political ecology. Following a selective historical analysis of this region of Western North Carolina from pre-industry to post-Fontana Development project, the paper will focus on the current day North Shore Road conflict. An analysis section will provide a discussion of my findings in the field. Finally, the paper will conclude with a discussion of how the reframing of the North Shore Road conflict provides an important example of the practical applications of political ecology research surrounding environmental conflicts in the First World.

Methodology

The study area of this project is the Southern Appalachian region. Specifically, this controversy has revolved around the building of a road in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The residents displaced by Fontana Dam were residents of Swain County. After displacement, most residents remained in Swain County, many moving to Bryson City, the largest town in the county.

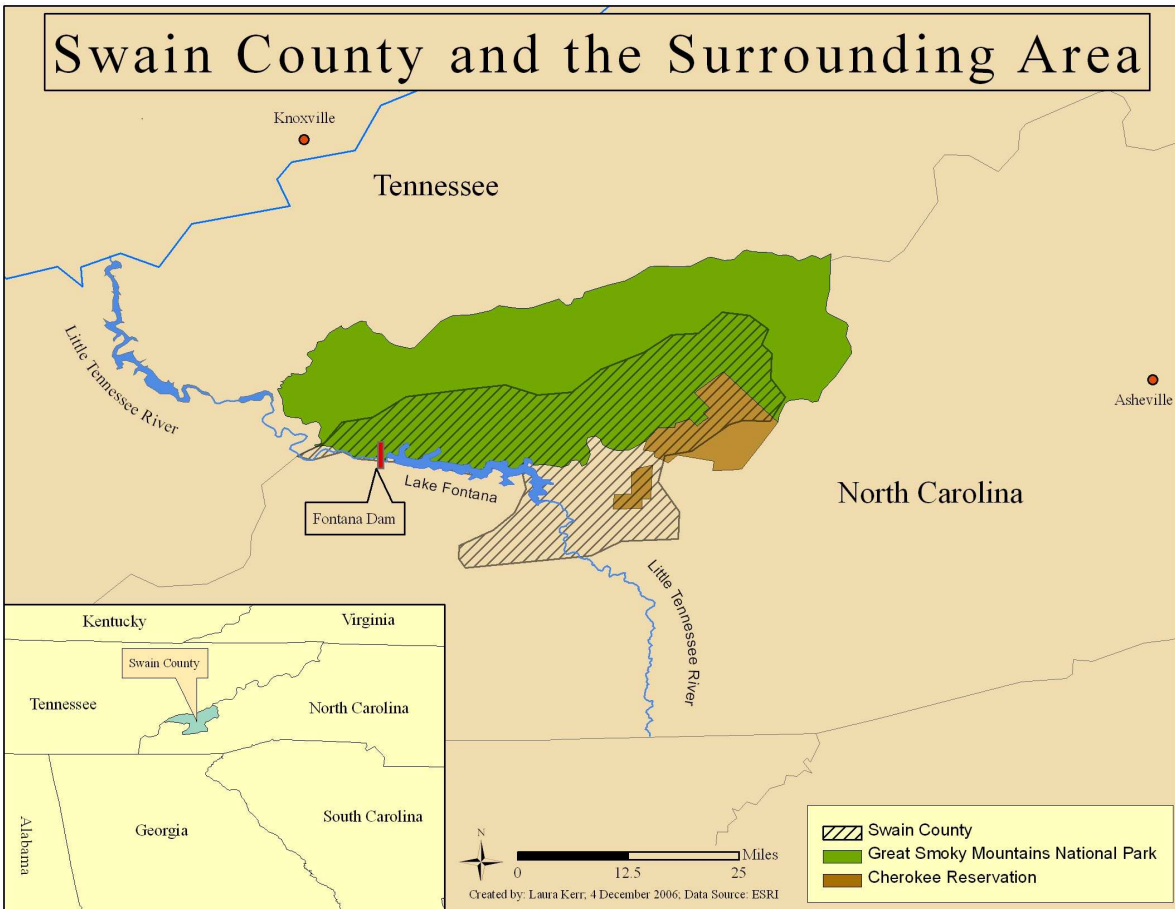


Figure 1: A map of Swain County, North Carolina

In order to fully understand the North Shore conflict, it is crucial to review the case study within a historical context. First, I examined historical documents about the communities displaced by Fontana dam including memoirs written by displaced community members. I reanalyzed reports written by the TVA to understand the organization's perspective of human displacement. Lastly, I analyzed the 1943 Agreement made between the Department of the Interior, Swain County, North Carolina and the residents of Swain County to understand how the current conflict relates to this document.

In order to achieve a better understanding of the current conflict, I employed a variety of methods. In 2006, the National Park Service held a public hearing regarding the North Shore Road in Bryson City, North Carolina (part of Swain County). The stated purpose of the hearing was “to give the public an opportunity to provide comments on the DEIS (Draft Environmental Impact Statement) prior to the selection of the Preferred Alternative” (National Park Service, URL). This meeting was a part of the decision process over the final outcome of the North Shore road. I attended this meeting to better understand the public discourse pertaining to the North Shore Road conflict.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 key informants. Of these informants, 7 were Swain County residents. Of these 7, 3 had relatives who were displaced by the Fontana dam. The other 3 key informants were National Park Service employees in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The two questions I asked all these informants were, “What do you think about the North Shore Road? Should it be built?” and “Why or why not?”

I analyzed the Environmental Impact Statement released by the National Park Service in November 2005. The purpose of said document is to relieve the National Park Service of any duty it still has regarding the 1943 Agreement. Therefore, the document is crucial to the outcome of the North Shore Road debate.

Literature Review

Dams and Human Displacement

Numerous scholars from a wide range of disciplines have studied human displacement as a result of large scale infrastructure projects, arguably one of the most

tragic consequences of large scale infrastructure projects. Most of this research has a Third World focus. The scholarship has come both from within the development community (Westcoat & White 2003; Goodland 1997) and from scholars, including political ecologists, whom take issue with how many large development agencies have handled this issue historically (Sneddon 2002; Roy 1999; Pileou 1998).

What makes this case study particularly unique is that it is one of few case studies of the long lasting effects of human displacement from a dam within the United States. In addition, the incorporation of the land around the reservoir behind the dam into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park makes this case study very distinct and complex. In the United States, one of the only comparable case studies is of the O'Shaughnessy dam in the Hetch Hectchy valley of Yosemite National Park. Constructed in the 1920s within the Park boundary, the O'Shaughnessy dam met great resistance at the time of its construction. Due to the inimitability of this case study, studying it within as an environmental conflict adds more depth and allows one to draw from a larger body of literature from which to examine this case study.

Environmental Conflict: Definitions and Practical Applications

The political ecology approach has proved very useful in shedding new light on environmental conflicts. In his comprehensive introduction to the subject, *Political Ecology*, Paul Robbins identifies environmental conflict, which attempts to explain who has access to certain resources and why, as one of the key theses of political ecology (Robbins, 2004). One particular type of conflict which political ecology attempts to address is the “ecologized” conflict. These are long-term conflicts which “highlight the

way pre-existing political differences become ‘ecological’ - in the sense that longstanding struggles over social and economic power are newly expressed or reframed as fights over the environment” (Robbins 2004, 176). Once these conflicts are “ecologized”, local actors find themselves in conflict with a new set of actors such as environmental groups, new residents or governmental agencies (Emel et al. 1992; Emel & Roberts 1995; McCarthy 2002). The North Shore Road case study I will present demonstrates how a conflict can become “ecologized” thus changing the nature of the conflict and making it even more difficult to resolve.

“Wilderness” and “Nature” : Viewing Landscapes as Social Constructs

At the root of these “ecologized” conflicts lie fundamental differences in how different actors view the landscape in question. There has been a great deal of scholarship in political ecology contributing to the understanding that landscapes are socially constructed, their importance determined by human systems of cultural knowledge . Specifically, scholars have applied this concept to come to a greater understanding of the concepts of “wilderness” and “nature” as social constructs (Cronon 1996; Fairhead and Leach 1994, 1995; Neumann 1997).

Identifying how different actors in conflicts perceive landscapes has proved to be particularly important in shedding new light on environmental conflicts that emerge between local people and other actors (which are frequently, but are certainly not limited to, governmental agencies and environmental groups) when the creation of conservation spaces in the Third World context (Neumann 1998; Peluso 1992, 1993; Logan & Moseley 2002). It has been suggested that case studies such as these are effective because

they approach environmental conflicts as “clashes of competing knowledge systems and constructs held among different social groups (Rikoon 2006, 201).

Possibility in the First World: Emerging Applications of Political Ecology

More recently, this approach has been applied in a First World context. Political ecologists have used these ideas to bring new light to struggles over public lands in the western United States (McCarthy 2002; Walker 2003). Application of these ideas in a first world context is newly emerging and very important because there is a need to “discover a Third World within the First World” (Schroeder et al. 2006, 165). In her case study of the Alleghany forest, Che demonstrates how a type of Third World has been created within the U.S. where landscapes have been ecologically transformed and economically marginalized and the local people bear the cost (Che 2006). The North Shore Road case study will demonstrate that this has proved to be true in the Southern Appalachian region.

While this perspective has illuminated the nuances of environmental conflicts, it has been used less frequently to resolve environmental conflicts (Rikoon 2006). Nonetheless, this is a very practical and integral use of such research. Therefore, this case study will incorporate ideas concerning environmental conflicts and landscapes as social constructs to recommend important steps that can be taken to resolve this conflict.

Historical Background

Subsistence in the Smoky Mountains

Deep in Southern Appalachia, the Little Tennessee River originates in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Northeast Georgia. It flows north into North Carolina and winds down into eastern Tennessee where it joins the Tennessee River in Lenoir City, Tennessee.



Figure 2: The Little Tennessee River Basin

The original inhabitants of the Little Tennessee valley were the Cherokee people. The Cherokee in this area avoided contact with the European settlers for an extended period of time due to the situational advantage of Smoky Mountains. However, in the late

1830s, a majority of the Cherokee were driven out by the European settlers on the infamous “Trail of Tears”.

When the Europeans began to settle in the Little Tennessee valley area, they lived in a very similar manner to the Cherokee before them, off the land. Due to the unique physical geography of this region, characterized by steep mountainous terrain and heavily wooded lands, people developed a very distinct form of subsistence living. Agriculture was characterized by small plots of corn, and various other vegetables. They raised sheep for wool clothing and grew small orchards. People took advantage of the abundant resources surrounding them, particularly the forests. They hunted game, gathered nuts and roots and let their livestock graze in wooded areas. They fished in the mountain creeks. To supplement their subsistence lifestyle, people raised hogs, hunted, fished and trapped for profit and also sold medicinal herbs and roots, which are plentiful in western North Carolina (Sullivan 26).

Industrial Development in the Valley

Complex environmental and social changes swept through all of Appalachia during industrialization primarily through the extractive industries of mining and timber. Small scale industrialization in the region brought the first major change in the landscape since the European settlers came to the region. The Little Tennessee valley reflected this change; small scale mining and timber operations began to dot the landscape. Residents welcomed the change that small scale industrialization brought (Oliver 1989). Nonetheless, small scale industrialization negatively impacted the “pre-industrial mountaineer individualism”, but stimulated a new sense of community within Hazel

Creek at the same time (Oliver 1989). Additionally, the introduction of small scale industrialization to the area had the important impact of bringing outside money to the area in the form of jobs on operations.

It was the involvement of the W.M. Ritter Lumber Company in the 1920's that first introduced this region to large scale industrialization. The Little Tennessee valley was home to some of the largest and most important lumber mills in western North Carolina (Webb 2004). The timber industry had a very negative effect on the area. While the raw materials were extracted and taken out of the area to be further processed, the local communities saw few benefits from the industrial development. In fact, the community only saw profits from the company through wage labor.

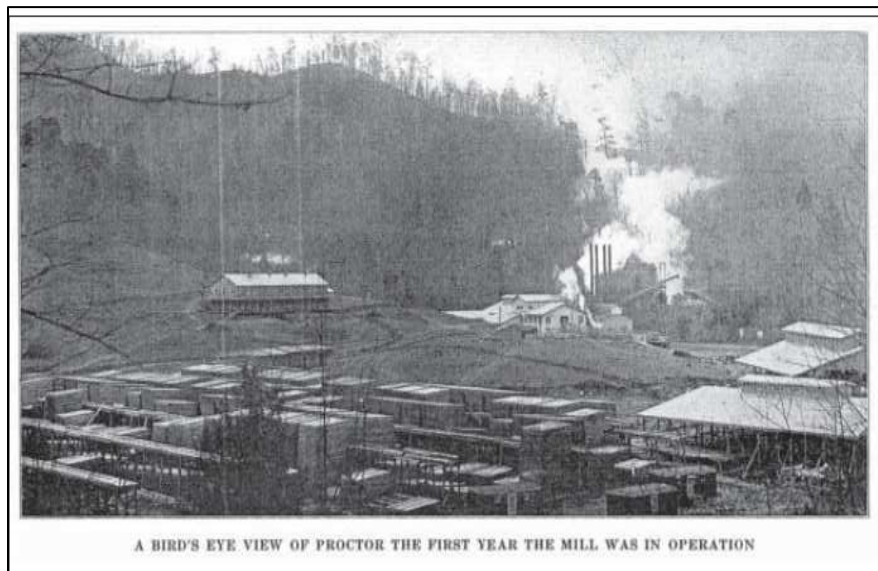


Figure 3: A mill in Proctor, North Carolina (Webb 2004)

This became devastating when after eight years of timber extraction, the area was deemed worthless by W.M. Ritter Lumber. In 1928, the Lumber Company left and resituated approximately 60 miles south to continue lumber extraction. Residents in the

area faced very difficult times as a result. There was hardly any industry left in which one could find wage employment.

After developing a partial dependency on the wage labor system, residents began to subsistence farm again (Sullivan 2000). However, the environmental effects associated with the clear cutting of a majority of the land near the communities made all aspects of living a subsistence lifestyle, from agriculture and raising livestock to hunting and fishing, very difficult. Needless to say, when the Great Depression began, the struggles of these communities were exacerbated.

The involvement of industrial development through extractive industry represents the first economic development in the area that promised to bring modernization and economic prosperity to the Little Tennessee River valley region. Yet, the local communities saw very few benefits while the negative effects were overwhelming.

An Experiment in Regional Development: TVA and the Fontana Project

The federal government was ready and willing to establish federal programs with the potential to bring the nation out of economic depression in the New Deal era of the 1930s. Of the several programs created, the Tennessee Valley Authority was “the most ambitious regional development project ever undertaken by the United States government” (Higgins 1995, 36). Created by an act of Congress in 1933, the TVA has been called a “brainchild” of Franklin Delano Roosevelt himself. The creation of the TVA reflected FDR’s commitment to regional planning.

The Tennessee Valley encompasses the entire watershed of the Tennessee River. The innovative work of regional planning began in the Tennessee River basin because it

was identified as one of the most economically underdeveloped regions in the country. “The United States has been blessed with the ‘ratchet effect’: lagging regions become in time leading regions; absolute decline over long periods is virtually unknown, Appalachia being the partial exception” (Higgins 1995, 35). At the time TVA was created, the rural population was 76.8%, as opposed to the national level of 43.8%. In addition, the gross value of farm products per capita of farm population in the Tennessee Valley was \$154 as opposed to \$362 nationally. The standard of nutrition in quantity and quality was low. The education systems were considered some of the most inadequate in the country (Finer 1972). Despite the perceived economic marginality of the area, the government considered this area to have great untapped economic potential.

Though the largest force in the creation of the TVA was the push for more governmental planning, other factors played an important role. These included the local interest in navigability and flood control of the Tennessee and its major tributaries. There was a strong national interest in electric power development. Additionally, the mentality of necessity for human control of natural resources was pervasive at this time. Indeed in *The First Twenty Years- A Staff Report* released by the TVA, this rhetoric is apparent: “The story of the TVA begins with a river, a river languid in one season but wild and destructive in another” (Martin, 3). River control was a demonstration of man’s ability to dominate nature.

Under the authority of the TVA there were many projects including flood control, navigation, power generation and distribution, agricultural development and industrial development. In order for all these tasks to be accomplished, the river had to be “tamed”.

The first step of the TVA in “taming” the Tennessee River was to “control” all of the five major tributaries of the Tennessee River including the Little Tennessee River (others were the Cinch and Powell River system, the Holston River, the French Broad River and the Hiwassee River). This was achieved through the construction of a system of dams along the Tennessee River and its major tributaries, including the Little Tennessee River. The feasibility of these dams depends predominately on “their collective existence as many dams in one system, synchronized, and in tandem the most complete set in the world in such a river system” (Creese 1990, 214).

The Fontana Dam was the first dam built on the Little Tennessee River by the TVA. It was the most ambitious dam project ever planned by the TVA. It was planned to be 480 feet which made it, at the time, the largest dam ever built. The estimated cost of the dam was \$48,000,000 (though the final price tag reached \$70,420,688.48). Yet, the Fontana Project was quickly authorized and justified by Congress as part of the wartime emergency program during World War II. It is said that the dam met no serious opposition because it was part of the wartime effort.



Figure 4: The Rhetoric of the TVA (Tennessee Valley Authority 2000)

Also, the Fontana Dam project was one of the first of TVA's projects. It was built at the height of the era when economic development through large infrastructure programs was heralded and not questioned (Creese 1990). At the time, the TVA represented "a symbol of the positive, benevolent intervention of government for the general welfare" (Sullivan 2000, 66). This was not the case for local residents directly affected by the dam.

The Story of Displacement

The reservoir behind the dam, Fontana Lake, was designed to have a storage capacity of 1,443,000 acre-feet. This meant that about 10,000 acres of land within the Little Tennessee River valley would be underwater once the construction of the dam was completed and the gates of the dam closed. This river valley was home to many thriving

communities; the creation of the reservoir displaced 1,320 families. Of these 1,320 families, 600 of these had been residents before the construction of the Fontana Dam commenced (Webb 2004).



Figure 5: Fontana Reservoir flooded 44,000 acres of land (National Park Service 2006)

In addition, it flooded farm lands, railroad lines, and the area's primary east-west roadway, NC 288. The communities affected by the creation of Fontana Lake were not only those whose land was under water. Once the TVA completed Fontana Dam, 44,000 acres of land on the north shore of Fontana Lake became inaccessible due to the flooding of the majority of NC 288. This land was acquired by the TVA and then added to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The promise of economic development to this region had many costs associated with it. Displacement of local communities was one of the most consequential.

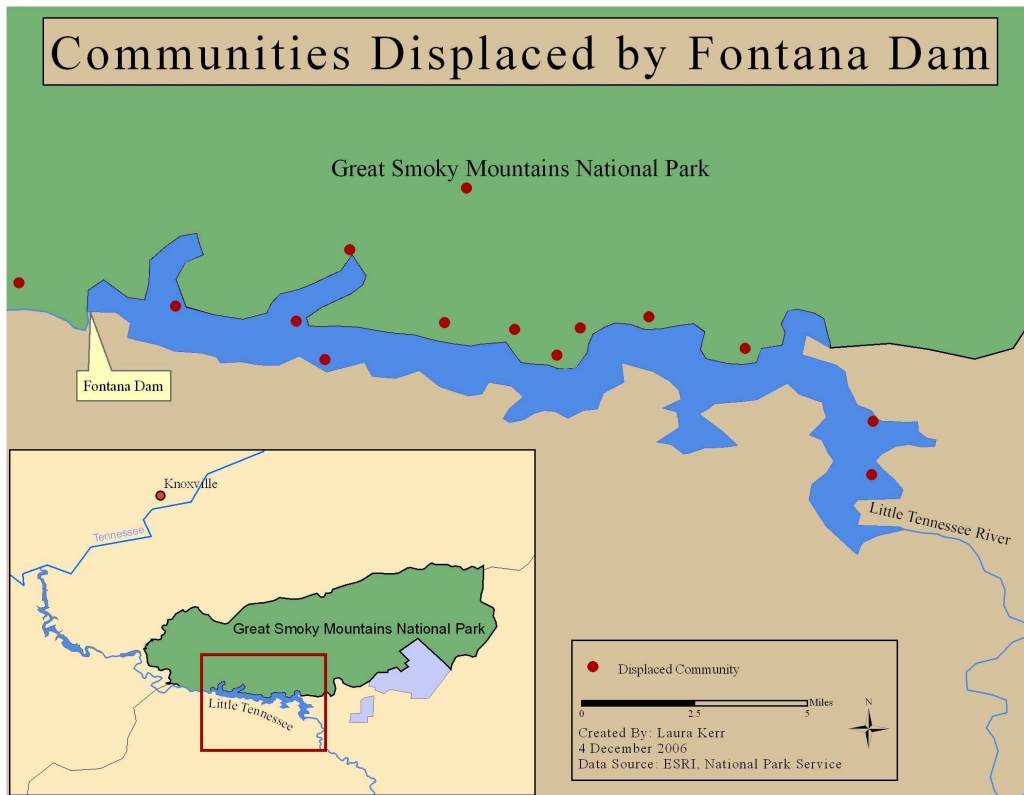


Figure 6: A Map of communities displaced by Fontana Dam

In order for the TVA to proceed with dam construction, the issue of relocation had to be addressed. The TVA recognized the gravity of the problem of relocation, “This is a serious problem, particularly to a population as stable as is found in many pocketed valleys in WNC. There are homes in Swain County where the same squirrel raffle has hung over the same mantelpiece since before the revolution” (Martin 1956, 44). The TVA recognized the existence of an ingrained history and culture in the Little Tennessee Valley. Nevertheless, the recognition of the embedded culture also reflects the view the TVA held of these people as “hardy, honest but also poor backwards, unimaginative and intensely opposed to change of any kind” (Wheeler & McDonald 1986, 46). It was this stereotypical viewpoint that enabled the TVA to justify family relocation.

In the report “The Fontana Dam Project”, released by the TVA as a comprehensive document covering all facets of the dam construction process, the TVA explains the process of displacement which they refer to as “family relocation”. They explain that of the 163 families displaced from the Proctor area, all “were on the ragged edge of subsistence level, and some were on one form of relief or another” (United States Tennessee Valley Authority 1950, 486).

The TVA’s appraisal of land in the communities to be relocated rendered the land to be “almost worthless” (Sullivan 2000). Thus the TVA was able to pay the residents of towns in the Little Tennessee Valley one of the lowest prices for land in any reservoir ever acquired (United States Tennessee Valley Authority 1950). Families, who accepted the price of \$37.76 (on average) for their land, were paid that money and then were helped in the relocation process by a single relocation officer. In cases where families refused to resettle, the TVA resorted to legal measures. Those families had their land condemned and received no institutional support for resettlement.

Deeming the land of the communities in the Little Tennessee River valley “almost worthless” was not accurate; however, the land degradation that extractive industry had caused in the area could be blamed for this assigned land value. When deciding how much to pay for the land, land quality was heavily taken into account. Indeed, the lands that families were subsisting off of were degraded and not very productive. However, the TVA viewed this land degradation as a direct result of mismanagement of the land by the “impoverished” Appalachian families. In actuality, initial degradation of these lands was a direct result of the long involvement of extractive industry in the area. Clear cutting by the timber industry caused land degradation. Local subsistence systems exacerbated this

degradation but did not cause it (Sullivan 2000). This local phenomenon is consistent with the broader degradation and marginalization thesis, “otherwise environmentally innocuous local production systems undergo transition to overexploitation of natural resources on which they depend as a response to...increasing integration in regional...markets” (Robbins 2005, 14). The perception of these local communities as made up of impoverished persons causing environmental degradation to their land justified the low land prices paid to relocated families. Furthermore, it reinforced the duty of the TVA to bring development to this part of rural Appalachia.

Even if it meant moving people from their homes where they had lived for centuries, relocation was viewed as “a chance to capitalize on the new opportunities created by the Fontana Reservoir” (United States Tennessee Valley Authority 1950, 497). Relocated individuals did not see the economic opportunity that the TVA promised (Sullivan 2000). Most families displaced by the Fontana project in the Little Tennessee Valley felt poorly reimbursed for their land. No monetary amount could be placed on the loss of one’s home. A former resident of Hazel Creek declared, “My connection to the land was lost. My heritage was gone” (Sullivan 2000, 71).

Families of the Little Tennessee Valley dispersed into surrounding areas. Most families relocated to other areas within Swain County. Most of those who moved to Swain County faced unbelievable hardship due to the lack of job opportunities. Other families from the Little Tennessee Valley moved to Haywood County, about 30 miles North of Swain County, because there was a paper plant and a rubber plant providing employment (Sullivan 2000).

Yet again, the residents of the Little Tennessee Valley had been promised that economic development would be beneficial to them. The first time, extractive industry caused severe degradation of their land. This time, the Fontana development project, under the auspices of bringing development to these communities, had displaced numerous families from their land and left them to start new lives.

The 1943 Agreement

When the flooding of NC 288 occurred and 44,000 acres of land on the north shore of Fontana Lake became inaccessible, the residents of these communities mobilized. They came together and demanded that if they were displaced, they deserved access to their old homesteads. The government addressed this request by drafting an Agreement to appease the displaced residents. The acknowledgement of these people and their demands demonstrates how local residents were able to mobilize to achieve some amount of justice (Web 2004).

A Memorandum of Agreement was drafted on October 8, 1943 between the United States Department of the Interior, the TVA, Swain County and the state of North Carolina to address the issue of access to the 44,000 acres of land on the north shore of Fontana Lake rendered inaccessible by the creation the reservoir itself.

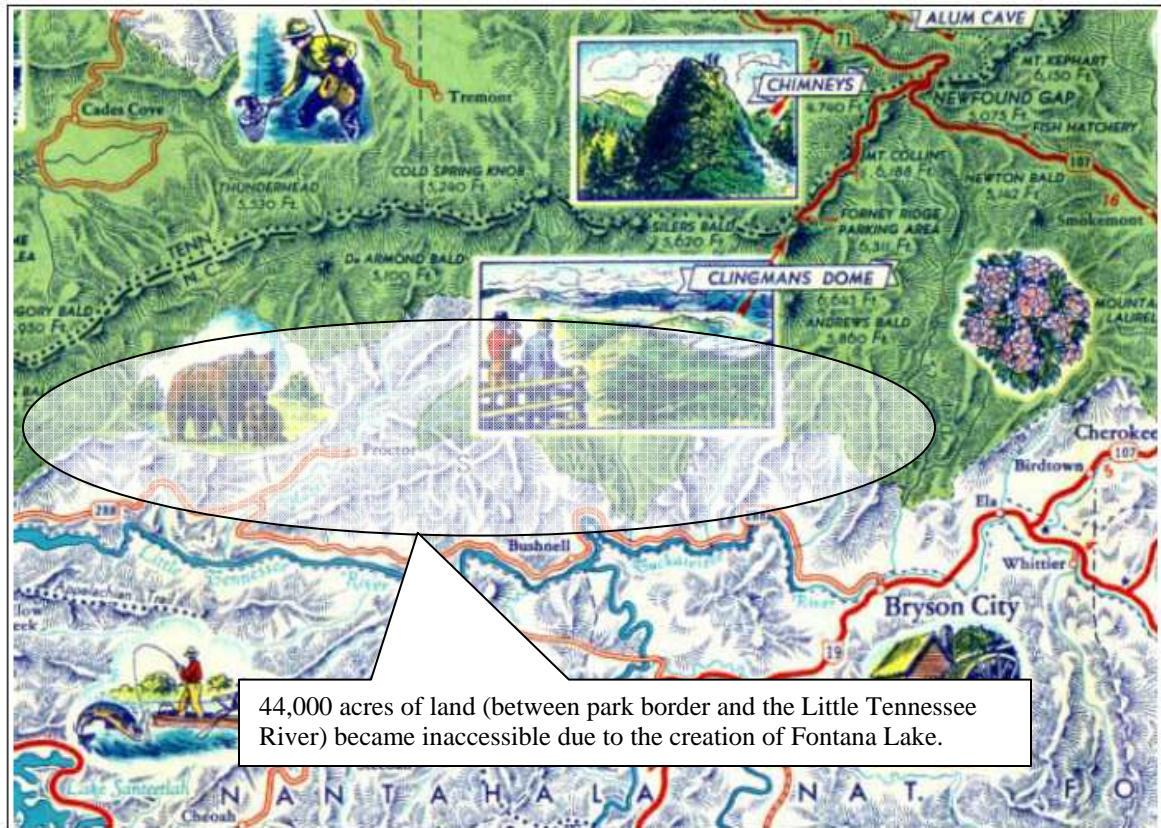


Figure 7: Historic Map shows the Little Tennessee valley where many communities existed (Webb 2004)

As part of the Agreement, this acreage was transferred from the TVA, who had seized the land for the construction of the dam, to the Department of the Interior. The Department of the Interior, the department which oversees the National Park Service, dissolved the land into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Furthermore, Swain County was relieved of the debt it had incurred as a result of the originally construction of Highway 288. The Agreement specified that, as funds became available, the National Park Service would construct a new road to replace NC 288. The proposed road would run through the Great Smoky Mountains National Park along the north shore of Lake Fontana from Bryson City to Fontana Dam (Memorandum of Agreement 1943).

The purpose of the road would be to allow displaced residents to access their old homesteads. In this Agreement, all parties seemed to accomplish their needs to some extent. TVA quickly acquired and then was able to get rid of the land needed for this development project. The government of Swain County was relieved of their debts and the National Park Service obtained a large tract of land for the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. The residents of the Little Tennessee Valley, however, were removed from their land. The promise of a road to access their old home sites, at least those which were not under water, was their only consolation prize. As the building of the road was continuously delayed, tensions rose.

The Current Conflict

The “Road to Nowhere”

The Agreement stated that a road to replace Highway 288 would be constructed once the war time emergency had subsided and funds became available. Construction was therefore postponed until 1948. Between 1948 and 1970, the National Park Service designed and constructed 7.2 miles of the North Shore Road. This included the construction of a 1,200 foot tunnel. The National Park Service halted the construction of the road in 1972 citing environmental concerns, construction costs and construction feasibility. By 1982, the National Park Service adopted a policy that it would not resume road construction due to environmental concerns and lack of funds. A general management plan called for the road not to be constructed but instead, for an alternative to be considered (NPS 2006). This remained the position of the National Park Service

until 2000. What has resulted is a 7.2 mile road that abruptly terminates at the end of a long, dark tunnel, hence adopting the name the “Road to Nowhere”.



Figure 8: The end of the North Shore Road (Webb 2004)

The Rebirth of the North Shore Road Debate

Perhaps if the National Park Service was not under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior, the Road to Nowhere battle would have ended when the Park Service decided that the continuation of construction was environmentally and economically infeasible. Due to the Congressional influence over the Department of the Interior budget, this debate has continued. The involvement of a key Congressional politician and his “pork barrel politics” in this debate has prolonged the battle over the completion of this road.

The Road to Nowhere campaign experienced a rebirth under Representative Charles Taylor (R-NC). Taylor is an advocate of building the North Shore Road. A former resident of the area, Taylor is said to have many friends in the area that support

the building of the road. Additionally, due to the magnitude of the issue in this district, it has been hypothesized that Taylor knew by running on a “Build the Road” platform, he would be able to continually secure his seat in the House (Johnson 2006).

In the late 1990s, Taylor assumed a powerful position on the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies in the U.S. House Committee on Appropriations. Membership on this committee allowed Taylor to budget \$16 million of Department of Transportation appropriations to resume construction of the North Shore Road in 2000. Since the North Shore Road is proposed to be built on federal property with federal money, an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) was required before construction could continue.

The Environmental Impact Study

The National Park Service and Federal Highway Administration-Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division completed the EIS in January of 2006. Environmental Impact Studies are required to provide a detailed environmental statement for “any proposed major action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment” on federal land (National Park Service 2006). They are considered a highly effective decision-making tool. The EIS for the North Shore corridor looks at the impacts of all the alternatives for this area of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The stated purpose of the study is to “discharge and satisfy any obligations on the part of the United States that presently exist as the result of the Memorandum of Agreement of October 8, 1943” (National Park Service 2006).

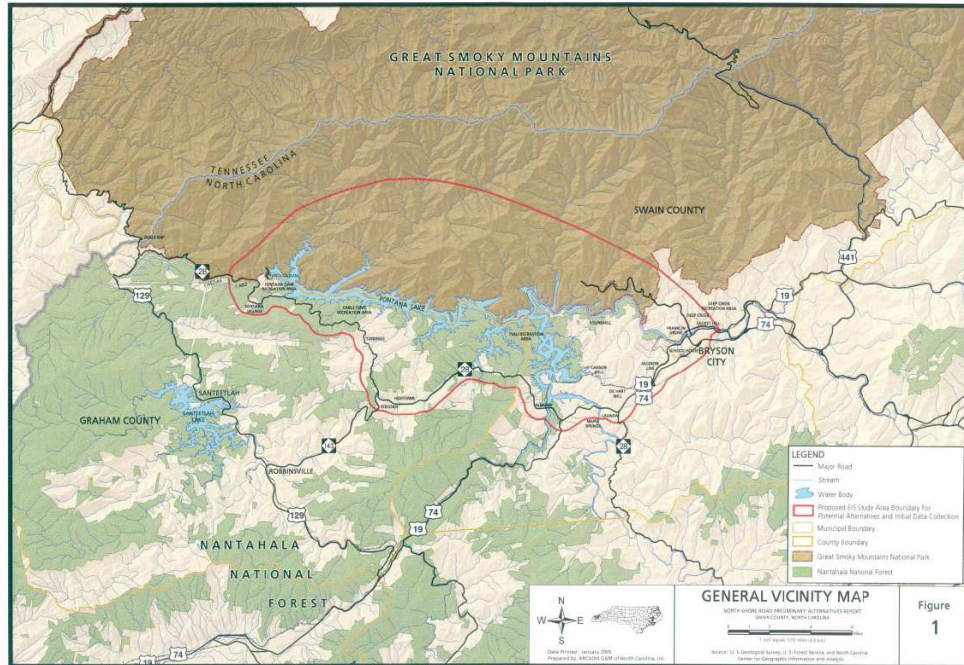


Figure 9: The study area of the Environmental Impact Study (National Park Service 2005)

The study investigated a full range of alternatives for the North Shore area, decided on five alternatives and estimated their costs. In February 2006, the DEIS (Draft Environmental Impact Study) was released for public viewing. In the document, the park examined and assigned price tags to each of the following alternatives: No action (\$0), Monetary Settlement of \$52 million to Swain County (the accumulated cost of the flooded Highway 288), Laurel Branch Picnic Area, Partial-Build of Principle Park Road and Full Build of Principle Park Road.

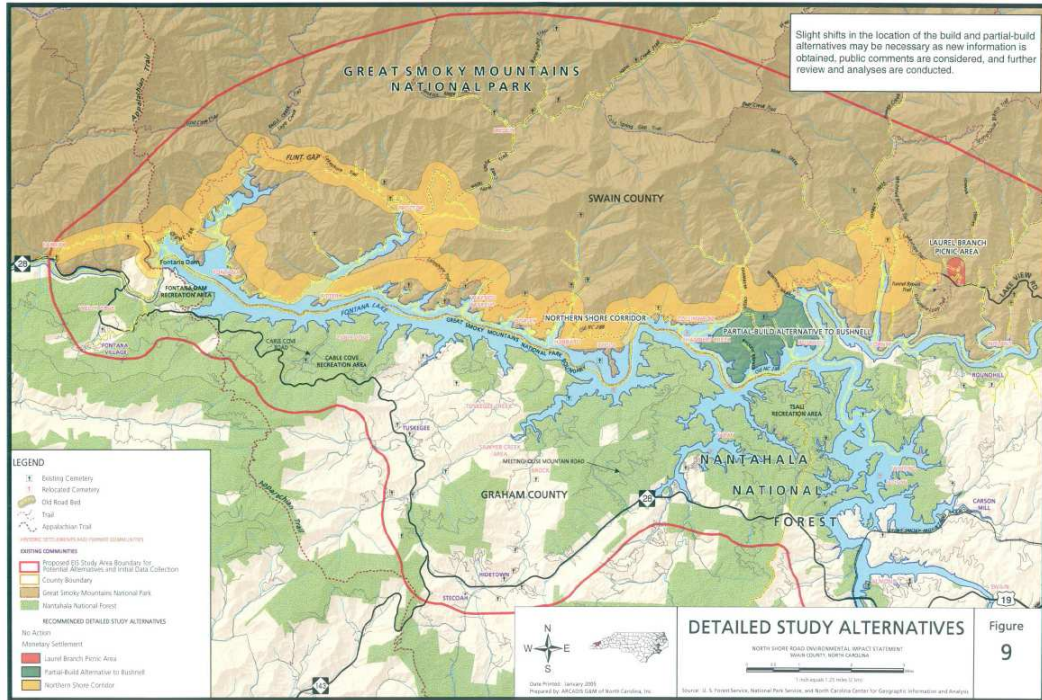


Figure 10: The alternatives proposed by the Environmental Impact Study (National Park Service 2005)

The table below shows the estimated cost of each build alternative.

	Laurel Branch ¹	Partial-Build Alternative to Bushnell ²	Northern Shore Corridor ⁴
Total Cost⁷ (2004 Dollars)	\$12,879,000	\$140,038,000	\$555,831,000
Total Cost (2006 Dollars)	\$13,663,000	\$148,566,000	\$589,681,000

Table 1: Cost of each alternative proposed by the EIS (National Park Service 2005)

In addition to providing estimates of the cost of each alternative, the EIS investigates the potential environmental consequences of each of the stated alternatives. In order to do so, the EIS examines the impacts of each alternative by giving rating on the impact to the human environment (traffic, community, economics, visitor experience, and

land use), the physical environment (topography, geology, soils, floodplains, air quality and soundscapes) and the natural environment (wetlands, lakes, rivers streams, aquatic ecology, vegetation and wildlife). The monetary settlement is determined to be the least environmentally destructive alternative from these ratings. Both the partial build and full build of the North Shore road are determined to have an average impact on the physical and natural environment (average in the sense that the roadway will negatively impact both the physical and natural environment, but no more than any roadway would) (National Park Service 2006).

According to National Park protocol, the purpose of the DEIS is to make a final recommendation on a course of action to take on the North Shore. However, the National Park Service failed to do so, stating that public input was necessary before an alternative could be recommended. The final EIS was due out in October, complete with a recommendation on the course of action to take. Yet, it has been delayed. The National Park Service has stated that internal staffing changes have caused the delay. Many people postulate the National Park Service did not release the EIS because they are worried that a decision not to Charles Taylor's liking would be dangerous. This is because as the chair of the Subcommittee of the Interior, Taylor has control over the Great Smoky Mountain National Park budget (Johnson 2006). As a result of this delay in a final decision over the North Shore Road, the controversy has remained intense.

Analysis of the North Shore Road Conflict

The North Shore Road Conflict: The Normative Framework

Since \$16 million was allocated by Congress for the North Shore road in 2000 and the EIS has commenced, the building of the North Shore Road has become a highly contested issue within the areas of western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee surrounding the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Though the debate is very complex and there exist a wide range of viewpoints surrounding the road, the debate has been framed as a two-sided debate between environmentalists and local residents. This became apparent in media portrayals of the conflict as well as at the public hearing about the North Shore Road held by the National Park Service in 2006.

The environmentalists involved in the debate believe that the road should not be built because it would cut through the largest tract of roadless wilderness in the eastern United States and thus “destroy the tranquility and solitude of the large area of the Smokies” (Snyder 2005). Additionally, environmentalists believe the road would disrupt wildlife and plant habitat and pollute the water and air. The EIS determined that construction of the North Shore Road would have minor impacts on wetlands, aquatic biodiversity, air quality and water quality. However, the EIS did determine that the road would have major impacts on wildlife, general scenic views, and trails in the area (including the Appalachian Trail). These environmentalists who are active in anti-road movement are predominately residents of the larger cities in the region, particularly Asheville and Knoxville. There are several organizations within these metropolitan areas that are actively working on anti-road campaigns. These are Southern Appalachian Forest

Coalition, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Sierra Club of the Southern Appalachians, Carolina Mountain Club, Southern Appalachian Biodiversity Project and Wild South.

Though the platform of the environmentalists' anti-road campaign is dominated by the effects that the road will have on the environment, there is additionally a perception of the other side of the debate that is fairly pervasive when discussing the road with anti-road people. The perception of the pro-road locals as "backwards, anti-environmental and rednecks" comes up fairly often. There is a perception that the local pro-road residents do not care about the harmful effects that the road could have on the environment and how important it is to preserve this wilderness area (Thomas 2006; Grossnickle 2003; Kennedy 2006).

The pro-road movement is comprised solely of local residents of Swain County³. These residents are both people whose relatives were displaced by the dam and people who have no direct ties to the North Shore area of Swain County. The pro-road actors believe that the road should be built for various reasons. Firstly, they argue that the 1943 Agreement must be upheld; "A promise is a promise". The government made us a promise" (Grant 2006). Residents of the displaced communities and their descendants argue the road must be built so they can visit old homesteads and cemeteries as was agreed in 1943.

³ It is necessary to clarify that not all local residents are part of the pro-road movement and there are local residents who anti-road and advocate for a cash settlement. And other residents have opinions divergent from both these viewpoints.



Figure 11: Old cemetery of the North Shore, now part of the Smoky Mountains National Park (Webb 2004)

Additionally, they believe that a road will bring economic development to Swain County because it will make Bryson City a new gateway (which will bring in more tourists and thus, economic revenue) into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Currently, the two primary gateways into the National Park are Gatlinburg, Tennessee and Cherokee, North Carolina. Both of these towns are significantly more well off than Bryson City and the surrounding areas of Swain County (United States Census 2000). The pro-road residents mobilized and started an organization “Build the Road!” in the late 1980s to further their cause.



Figure 12: A Sign of Protest placed at the entrance of the North Shore road (Webb 2004)

Reframing the Debate: A “Ecologized” Conflict

This debate has been most frequently understood as a conflict between outsider environmentalists and the anti-environmental, pro-road locals. By reframing this narrative, a more complex and nuanced understanding of this conflict can be reached. Placing this conflict within a historical context reveals how this conflict has become “ecologized”. The North Shore road conflict originally was a conflict over human displacement from the North Shore of the Little Tennessee valley from the Fontana dam project. The people displaced by the flooding of Highway 288 demanded that a road be built so they could access their old homesteads. The conflict emerged immediately when road construction was continually delayed. However, once the land in conflict became a part of the Great Smoky Mountains Park, the conflict became “ecologized”, it emerged as an environmental issue. When conflicts become ecological, “long time residents find themselves at odds with environmental groups” (Robbins 2006, 180). In this case, residents of Swain County have found themselves having to fight for the North Shore Road against large, powerful environmental groups. The pro-road stance taken by many long-time residents of Swain County is now framed as anti-environmental.

Differing Constructions of a Contested Landscape

What lies at the heart of this “ecologized” conflict are radically different perceptions of this contested landscape. The environmentalists, who oppose the building of the North Shore Road, view the North Shore of Fontana Lake as a “wilderness”. These are mostly outsiders who live in the cities. When they come to the Great Smoky

Mountains National Park, they come to “get back to nature”. In a public hearing about the North Shore Road, this sentiment was expressed numerous times, “Why anyone would want to destroy this beautiful wilderness area is beyond me”, “I believe that the construction of the road will change forever the atmosphere of the park. It will no longer be a peaceful wilderness”⁴. They see it as the largest tract of roadless land in the eastern United States as well as home to much ecological diversity. Implied in the perception of the land as wilderness is the view that the landscape should be free of humans and remnants of humans particularly roads (Cronon 1996). Any impacts to the North Shore corridor are considered harmful and detrimental to the landscape. Therefore, the EIS was perceived as demonstrating how environmentally harmful the North Shore road will be.

For the local residents of Swain County, the EIS demonstrates that the road will not have negative impacts worse than those associated with the construction of any road and therefore, the EIS supports their viewpoint that the road should be built. The local residents of Swain County have radically different constructions of the North Shore of Fontana Lake that generally fall into two categories. Those who are decedents of people displaced by Fontana Dam see this landscape as having immense historical value. It is where their ancestors were born, lived and died. The land is not a wilderness; it was their home, or their relatives’ homes. “We need access to home places and cemeteries. I am too old to hike to these places; does that mean I am not allowed to see them?”⁵

The “Build the Road Movement” in Swain County is overwhelmingly dominated by local residents who have no relatives who were displaced by Fontana Dam. “The

⁴ These quotes were comments made at the public hearing on the North Shore Road held in Bryson City, Swain County, North Carolina on March 13, 2006. Any one moved to speak at these hearings was given the opportunity. These comments can be accessed at <http://www.northshoreroad.info/publicinvolvement.htm>.

⁵ Ibid.

majority of the people insisting on a road today are too far removed from the original, personal involvement to be credible”⁶. However, this landscape still holds a high value for these local residents. The North Shore of Fontana Lake is a symbolic landscape for the residents of Swain County. It represents the marginalization they have felt historically and still feel today. It also is a physical manifestation of the extended frustrations felt by the residents of Swain County towards the federal government. In order to understand the value placed on this landscape by these residents, it is imperative to understand the economic outlook of Swain County currently.

Since the mid-1800s, widespread poverty has resulted in Southern Appalachia being considered one of the most economically marginal areas in the United States. Over time this has brought in “wide-sweeping programs of resource extraction...and ‘anti-poverty’ efforts of state and federal governments” (Anglin 2002, 565). This is demonstrated by outsider involvement in Swain County. Over time, economic development has been promised by a variety of actors. Firstly, resource extraction promised economic prosperity but brought “nothing but more poverty and devastation to us” (Oliver 1989, 10). Then, the promise of economic development was made by the federal government through a variety of methods. Initially, the TVA’s Fontana Project promised to bring widespread development to Swain County (US Tennessee Valley Authority 1950). Then, the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was heralded as a great opportunity for Swain County to prosper through the creation of this conservation space.

Nonetheless, to this day, Swain County is one of the most economically disadvantage counties in North Carolina. This is demonstrated by the high percentage of

⁶ Ibid.

persons and families living under the poverty level in comparison to the whole state and national averages (US Census 2000). Still today the region has experienced very limited population growth in comparison to North Carolina as a whole. Swain County has only grown 15% as compared to 21% population growth for North Carolina over the same time period (US Census 2000). Local residents are left feeling like “participants in a fractious history of...exploitation” (Anglin 2002, 565). Residents of Swain County are left wondering why all these projects promised economic development and failed. Left feeling frustrated and disempowered, residents of Swain County look to place blame, and have done so; “The government has wronged us. Over and over. They make promises and they don’t keep none” (Grant 2006). The federal government has become the institution on which blame is placed for the widespread poverty in the region.

In addition to the fact that most failed development projects in the region were related to the federal government, federal land ownership in the area has been another factor in the placing of blame on the government. Over 80% of land in Swain County is federally owned. This includes the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Nantahala National Forest and the Cherokee Indian Reservation. Many residents of Swain County believe that most of this land has been unfairly taken from them. “Swain County has lost over half our land. We’ve lost over half our job force, our tax base, because of this National Park. It’s time that the National Park fulfills the agreement and builds a road”⁷. This land loss has been blamed for increasing poverty in the county because it has taken away taxable land from Swain County (Grant 2006). As a result of these factors, a general distrust of the federal government has emerged in Swain County.

⁷ Ibid

The Symbolic Nature of the North Shore Road

The North Shore Road is a physical object over which the local residents' frustrations with the federal government can be manifested. The road has become a symbol of the governments' misdoings and a symbol of political and economic power to the people of Swain County. The federal government promised the displaced families of the North Shore a road and similarly, the government promised economic development to the people of Swain County. Yet, the government has not successfully followed through on either of these promises in the opinion of local residents. The "Build the Road!" movement is an effort by some residents to address this by actively fighting against this marginalization and attempting to reclaim political power through mobilization over the North Shore road. This sentiment is reflected in the comments made by members of the movement at the public hearing on the North Shore Road in March, 2006; "It's time the government lived up to its word and stopped treating us like second-class citizens"⁸.

Many residents want to see the road built because it will be a physical symbol which represents the government repaying the local people for the injustice they have felt. "You've heard the expression...mountains are forever. That's true. Roads are forever too...The road will be here forever. We need that road. Swain County needs that road"⁹. This demonstrates how the pro-road movement is not inherently anti-environmental. While residents do oppose the environmentalists' standpoint, it is not because they are not concerned about the environment but rather because it blocks the "Build the Road!" movement from striving for economic development on their own terms.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Conclusion: A Road to Resolution?

In the November 2006 elections, Charles Taylor lost his seat in Congress to Heath Schuler (D-NC). Unlike Taylor, who supported the road, Schuler is an advocate of the monetary settlement in lieu of building the road. “Given the current economic challenges facing the completion of the road, I feel a cash settlement with Swain County is the most realistic and best solution” (Johnson 2006). Without an advocate for the pro-road movement in Congress, the road will presumably never be built.

The North Shore road will, in all probability, not be constructed due to the estimated cost of building such a road and the loss of a powerful advocate in Congress. Nevertheless, revealing the motivations behind the pro-road movement still has vast implications in the resolution of this conflict. Environmental conflict research “among the wide range of approaches in political ecology, has made the greatest practical impact” because by illuminating the “distributive justice outcomes of environmental and economic change” it becomes increasingly difficult for decision-makers to ignore the effects of resolution policies (Robbins 2004, 181). By shedding a new light on the North Shore road controversy, it becomes clear that this decision to build (or not to build) a road is not simply a question of what is best for the natural environment.

The North Shore road holds great significance to the people of Swain County. The motivations behind the “Build the Road!” movement reveal that, at its root, this conflict is, for local residents, a power struggle. Locals have mobilized in an attempt to gain political and economic power over this landscape, which they have not historically possessed. Employing a political ecology perspective and understanding the pro-road movement as a manifestation of the marginalization that local residents have experienced

historically, and continue to experience today, is imperative. By employing this perspective, it becomes difficult for Congress and the National Park Service to completely discount the pro-road movement when making their decision about the fate of the North Shore area. In the future, even if the road is not built, this discussion shows the importance of guaranteeing monetary settlements to the people of Swain County; cash settlements which the residents of the county can control and as a county decide how to best use, as opposed to being told how it should be spent.

The lessons learned from this case study have broad implications to the study of political ecology, specifically environmental conflict research in the first world. This case study shows how employing the ideas from political ecology, while in the past have been limited to study of solely the Third World, are imperative in a First World context. The political ecology lens can be used to shed new light on environmental conflict in the First World and, perhaps more importantly, aid in finding just solutions to environmental conflicts.

Bibliography

- Anglin, Mary. 2002. "Lessons from Appalachia in the 20th Century: Poverty, Power and the Grassroots". *American Anthropologist*. 104(2). 565-582.
- Che, Deborah. 2006. "Developing Ecotourism in First World, Resource-Dependent Areas." *Geoforum*. 37: 212-226.
- Creese, Walter. 1990. *TVA's Public Planning: The Vision, the Reality*. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Cronon, William. 1996. "The Trouble with Nature or, Getting Back to the Wrong Wilderness." *Environmental History*. 1(1): 7-28.
- Eller, Ronald. 1982. *Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press.
- Emel, J., R. Roberts and D. Sauri. 1992. "Ideology, Property and Groundwater resources- An Exploration of Relations." *Political Geography*. 11 (1): 37-54.
- Emel, J., R. Roberts. 1995. "Institutional Form and its Effects on Environmental Change: The Case of Groundwater in the Southern Highlands Plains". *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 85(4): 664-83.
- Grant, Raleigh. 2006. Personal Communication. July 15, 2006.
- Grossnickle, Heather. 2003. Personal Communication. March 19, 2003.
- Helms, Jesse. "Swain County Settlement Act of 1992". October 7, 1992. Retrieved November 15, 2006 from the Library of Congress: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?r102:1:/temp/~r102T32NiA.S17438-S17448>.
- Fairhead, J. M. Leach. 1994. "Contested Forests: Modern Conservation and Historical Land Use in Guinea's Ziam Reserve". *African Affairs*. 93: 481-512.
- Fairhead, J. M. Leach. 1995. "False Forest Histories, Complicit Social Analysis- Rethinking Some West African Environmental Narratives". *World Development*. 23(6): 1023-1035.
- Finer, Herman. 1972. *The TVA: Lessons for International Application*. New York: Da Capo Press.

- Goodland, R. 1997. "Environmental Sustainability in the Hydro Industry" in *Large Dams*. Washington D.C. World Bank.
- Higgins, Benjamin. 1995. "The American Frontier and the TVA". *Society*. March/April 95. 32(3). 34-42.
- Johnson, Becky. 2006. "Up in the Air: Taylor-Schuler Race Could Finally Settle Controversy" in the Smoky Mountain News. Vol. 8. Issue 21. 4-5.
- Kennedy, Cathy. 2006. Personal Communication. May 29, 2006.
- Logan, B.I. and W.G. Moseley. "The Political Ecology of Poverty Alleviation in Zimbabwe's Communal Area Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE)". *Geoforum*. 33(1): 1-14.
- Martin, Roscoe. 1956. *TVA: The First Twenty Years- A Staff Report*. Tennessee: The University of Alabama Press and the University of Tennessee Press.
- "Memorandum of Agreement of July 30, 1943". 1943. Retrieved on November 27 from <http://www.northshoreroad.info/memorandumofagreement.pdf>.
- McCarthy, James. 2002. "First World Political Ecology: Lessons from the Wise Use Movement". *Environment and Planning*. 34: 1281-1302.
- National Park Service. 2006. "The North Shore Road: Environmental Impact Statement". Retrieved on November 19, 2006 from <http://www.northshoreroad.info>.
- Neumann, R.P. 1997. "Primitive Ideas: Protected Area Buffer Zones and the Politics of Land in Africa". *Development and Change*. 28: 559-582.
- Oliver, Duane. 1989. *Hazel Creek from then til Now*. Merryville, Tennessee: Duane Oliver.
- Peluso, N. 1993. "Coercing Conservation? The Politics of State Resource Control". *Global Environmental Change*. 3(2): 199-217.
- Pileou, E.C. 1998. *Fresh Water*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rikoon, J.S. 2006. "Wild Horses and the Political Ecology of Nature Restoration in the Missouri Ozarks". *Geoforum*. 37: 200-211.
- Roy, A. 1999. "The Greater Common Good". *Frontline*. 16(11). June 4.
- Robbins, Paul. 2004. *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

- Thomas, Scott. 2006. Personal Communication. Conducted July 20, 2006.
- United States Census Bureau. (2000). "Census 2000 Demographic Profile Highlights: Swain County". Retrieved December 1, 2006 from <http://factfinder.census.gov>.
- United States Tennessee Valley Authority. 1950. "The Fontana Project: A Report".
- Sneddon, C. 2002. "Water Conflicts and River Basins: the Contradictions of Comanagement and Scale in Northeast Thailand." *Society and Natural Resources*. 15(8): 725-741.
- Schroeder, R. et al. "Political Ecology in North America: Discovering the Third World Within". *Geoforum*. 37: 163-168.
- Snyder, Ted. 2005. "Handout from The North Shore Road Workshops". Accessed on December 5, 2006 from Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition: http://www.safc.org/campaigns/north_shore_road_points.php.
- Sullivan, Julia. 2000. "Resource Extraction with Human Consequence: The Hazel Creek Story". A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.
- Walker, P. 2003. "Reconsidering 'Regional' Political EcologiesL Toward a Political Ecology of the American West". *Progress in Human Geography*. 27 (1): 7-24.
- Web, Paul. (2004). "Cultural Resources Existing Conditions Report, North Shore Road Environmental Impact Statement, Swain and Graham Counties, North Carolina-Final Report." Retrieved November 28, 2006 from <http://www.northshoreroad.info/crecrreport.htm>.
- Westcoat, J.L. and G.F. White. 2003. *Water for Life: Water Management and Environmental Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wheeler, William and Michael McDonald. 1986. *TVA and the Tellico Dam 1936-1979: A Bureaucratic Crisis in Post-Industrial America*. Knoxville, TN: The University of Alabama Press and the University of Tennessee Press.