

**The framing of wilderness, race, and criminality in the press coverage of illegal marijuana growth on California public lands**

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**ABSTRACT**

Linking race to crime is common in the media. The press has consistently connected Mexican and Latino immigrants with the illegal cultivation of cannabis on public lands. I reviewed many newspaper articles to understand these representations, which are framed in terms of historical narratives. The growers of these sites are often dehumanized and criminalized in the articles. This stems from a long history of framing minorities and immigrants as criminals and drug users. The press coverage of illegal marijuana growth on public lands also illustrates the areas around the sites as untouched wilderness. This evokes the American idea and frame of wilderness as a pristine and sacred place. Because the media represents the areas around the grow sites as pristine wilderness and the growers as criminal immigrants, the combination results in the idea that America's protected lands are under attack by people that have been otherized in the media. This creates a sense of emergency and fear in the reader. Evoking the frame of the immigrant as criminal with the destruction of nature could have serious social implications in the future in regards to discrimination against immigrants or immigration policy.

**KEYWORDS**

media, immigrant, frame, crime, nature

*“Illegal immigrants connected to Mexico's drug cartels are growing hundreds of millions of dollars worth of marijuana in the heart of one of America's national treasures, authorities say.”*

-- Dan Simon, CNN 2008

## INTRODUCTION

Illegal cannabis cultivation on public lands has increased greatly in the last three decades, especially in California. In November of 2008, the DEA announced that 5,249,881 marijuana plants had been seized in California so far that year, 3,641,328 (about 70%) of which had been grown on state and federal public lands (DEA, 2008). These numbers were an all time high, reflecting what appeared to be an ongoing trend. According to numerous press releases from representatives of the National Park Service, the US Forest Service, and the California Department of Fish and Game, these grow-sites are potentially harmful to surrounding ecosystems due to the use of pesticides and fertilizers in unregulated quantities, and other factors such as erosion.

Many newspaper articles portray Mexican drug cartels as the operators of these illegal sites, framing the issue largely in terms of race and criminality. There is a long history of linking race to crime, and this has fueled certain political movements in the past. From the portrayal of the Chinese as opiate-addicted tricksters in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hing, 1998), to the fear of Black and Hispanic marijuana-crazed lowlifes during the start of marijuana prohibition in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Miller, 2003), this pattern is not new for the United States.

In addition to this, there has also been a considerable shift in the way the western world views nature; today most Americans see nature as a place where people are not, and as a pristine and sacred place away from civilization. The articles I analyzed focus heavily on environmental damage due to the cultivation of marijuana, while illustrating the areas around the sites as wilderness. I argue that the articles covering this issue evoke the historical frames of linking criminality with race, as well as the frame of destruction of wilderness. The combination of these frames has resulted in a sense of fear and urgency in the articles. It is my goal to study what societal and historical factors have shaped the press' framing of this issue and their tendency to link race and drug criminality with the destruction of wilderness.

## METHODS

I analyzed the representation of illegal cannabis growth on California public lands in newspaper articles published between 2000 and 2010. I focused on the framing of this issue in terms of historical narratives of race and criminality and ideas of wilderness.

I used George Lakoff's frame analysis to study how these articles evoke certain frames. A frame is a set of connections and assumptions made up of different elements, scenarios, and boundaries. These assumptions and ideas are physically reinforced by neural connections in the brain, due to repeated exposure to the frame. Lakoff has four morals to illustrate framing:

1. Every word evokes a frame.
2. Words defined within a frame evoke the frame.
3. Negating a frame evokes the frame.
4. Evoking a frame reinforces that frame
5. I focused on two main historical frames within the articles: race and criminality, and the perception of wilderness, and I also analyzed how the combination of the two creates a new fear-based frame (Lakoff, 2005). To supplement Lakoff's ideas, I also analyzed the articles by noting patterns in the text such as validity of the data given, how the authors establish a sense of "good" and "bad" with their word choice, and how the articles cater to the viewpoints of the intended audience.

## HISTORY OF PRESS COVERAGE

In December of 1979 a newspaper article from The Washington Start reported a shortage in marijuana in the United States due to bad weather in Columbia, where an estimated 60% of the marijuana consumed in the U.S. originated at the time. Almost as an afterthought, the article also mentioned that domestic marijuana cultivation, especially in California, seemed to be a budding industry. A DEA spokesman was quoted as saying, "It's a mushrooming business,

especially in northern California... But it's hard to know whether it's going to keep growing. Our problem is that we're just starting to look at it, so we really can't quantify it yet" (An unusual set of circumstances, 1979). This seems to have been the tipping point for marijuana production in California, as less than a year later, another article described the state very differently, "A war against a billion-dollar marijuana industry has turned parts of California's lush farmland into a Vietnam-like battlefield," (A war, 1980).

In response to the increased amount of illegal marijuana growth in the U.S., the Campaign Against Marijuana Planting, or CAMP, was created in 1983, focusing on both public and private lands. In 1996 with the passage of proposition 215, which legalized marijuana growth for medical purposes, CAMP shifted its focus away from private lands, and onto public lands. This shift in focus paired with increasing rates of marijuana being grown illegally resulted in an increasing amount of press coverage of the issue.

From 1980 to 2000 many articles discussed the growing issue of marijuana cultivation in California, as well as the long familiar problem of marijuana smuggling across the border. Around 2001, the press began to link marijuana cultivation in California with Mexico, "Mexico-based drug operations that once smuggled marijuana into the United States figured out in recent years that it's easier to simply grow the crop here, officials say," (When 8-year-old Matthew Hunt and father, 2001). This article was probably one of the first of its kind in the flood that followed over the next ten years.

## **HISTORY OF PUBLIC LANDS**

When Americans think of nature or wilderness, many probably picture areas like Yosemite or Yellowstone, and the beautiful mountains, lakes, valleys and rivers in these areas. They think of untouched, undeveloped and sublime land preserved in its natural state. People in the Western world have not always viewed nature in this way; just over 200 years ago the word wilderness was often used in reference to land described as untamed, deserted, disorderly, and a frightening, Godless, barren wasteland (Cronon, 1996). The perception of nature and wilderness is frame constantly in flux, and a few very influential people in the nation's recent history have

greatly shaped how Americans view and manage nature today.

Gifford Pinchot was a major advocate of conservationism, or “the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time” (Meyer, 1997). He was one of America's first professional foresters, and used his love of forestry to promote the sustainable usage of land within the Forest Service. Land within the National Forest Service is still managed with conservation as a priority (The Forest History Society). John Muir was a major proponent of preservationism, or protecting natural areas from being used for resources or development by humans. Muir's intense love and reverence for nature can be exemplified by his usage of religious imagery in this statement against damming Hetch Hetchy valley, “Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the hearts of man” (Merchant p. 394). After Hetch Hetchy was dammed Muir successfully fought for the creation of the National Park Service. The National Park Service marked a new, separate form of land management from the Forest System that specifically set aside certain areas with aesthetic value.

It was Muir's viewpoint of regarding nature as pristine, sublime, and almost holy, that influenced much of the way people in America, and especially California, view nature today. Muir represented nature as a place where humans have no influence, and as a place separate from society. Many Americans do not realize, however, that there are very different methods to land management, stemming from the basic ideas of conservation and preservation. While some areas are protected, Americans get a lot of lumber from the National Forests. Almost all of the newspaper articles I analyzed in my analysis make no reference to these differences in management styles, but rather illustrate nature as if all natural areas are pristine and protected. Evoking the frame of wilderness in the articles makes the illegal cannabis growth seem more atrocious because it is damaging something held to be sacred by America.

## **HISTORY OF RACE, IMMIGRATION, AND CRIMINALITY**

Immigrants in America have been viewed negatively for many years, which has been reflected in their representation in the media. They have been seen as a threat in terms of taking jobs and welfare, and are often associated with crime (Warner, 2005). The public's perception of

immigrants being connected with crime is especially high during times of heavy immigration (Hagan & Palloni, 1999). Often, the idea of immigrants as criminal is reinforced by their label. Many people, the media, and the government often refer to them not as “immigrants,” but as “illegal aliens.” This language serves not only to criminalize immigrants, but also to otherize or dehumanize them (Johnson, 1996). This is especially true for Mexican and Latino immigrants in California today. Bill Ong explains the representation of immigrants in terms of a four step pattern. The first two steps consist of problematizing and demonizing immigrants; in this stage the immigrant is seen as a problem for the country and is resented because of it. The last two steps consist of dehumanizing and criminalizing immigrants; this stage silences them, deprives them of human rights, and frames them as criminal (Hing, 1998). This pattern can be seen throughout the country's history, and can often be applied, not only to immigrants, but to minorities as well.

Thousands of people flocked to California during the Gold Rush and the construction of the transcontinental railroad in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many of these people were immigrants from other countries who left their homes for a chance at making a fortune, or simply finding work and starting a new life in America. By 1860 in California, Chinese immigrants comprised the largest percentage of those born outside of the country (Kanazawa, 2005). While immigrants from many different countries experienced an anti-immigrant sentiment from Americans, the Chinese were one of the groups hit the hardest. The Chinese were seen as cheap laborers, and many thought their presence would create competition for American workers. Perhaps as a result of this fear, an even more heartfelt grievance with the Chinese developed: their association with opium (Ahmad, 2000).

Americans began to see the Chinese presence as a threat to the country, and subsequently this perception translated into stereotypes placed on individuals. American doctors were distressed by Chinese opium use, and they deemed the drug harmful because of its effects of passivity, heightened sexual arousal and overall destruction of the individual and community (Ahmad, 2000). Dime novels and cartoons showed the Chinese as tricksters and sinners, and the opium den, shrouded in mystery, became a place where they engaged in their exotic practices, home to “...the evil oriental mastermind... who plots the destruction of Western civilization”

(Hoppenstand p. 283). Eventually, the Chinese were seen as such a threat to the country that legislation was passed allowing for their exclusion from America; the Page Act of 1875 allowed the exclusion of Chinese prostitutes, and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 allowed the suspension of Chinese immigration all together (Hing, 1998).

A few decades later Americans were worried about an emerging new drug. Marijuana usage in America was, from the beginning, associated with immigrants and minorities. The first recorded use of marijuana in the United States was reportedly by Mexicans in the early 1900s. The first law prohibiting marijuana was passed that same year, and it only applied to Mexicans (Herer pg 88). In the following years marijuana received more and more public attention, mainly as a result of Harry J. Anslinger, the head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (Herer p. 29). Anslinger devoted much of his career to marijuana prohibition and, along with newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst, successfully framed marijuana as a drug that made "darkies think they're as good as white men" (Guither, n.d.). Jazz music during this time was just starting to gain notoriety. White Americans saw this new genre as an African American, marijuana-induced, voodoo music movement that would force "even decent white women to tap their feet... and seek sexual relations with Negroes" (Herer p. 92). These racist and ignorant ideas about marijuana helped propagate its eventual prohibition, via the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937.

In the case of both the Chinese Exclusion Act and the prohibition of marijuana, linking race and immigration with criminality and drug use has been a powerful political and social tool. These frames of viewing immigrants as criminal create racist stereotypes that take years to deconstruct. Even today, many Latino immigrants are criminalized and dehumanized in the media, so it is especially important to be aware of these frames and how they may affect future political and social ideas and decisions. In the articles I analyzed the authors constantly evoke the frame of immigration tied to criminality, which continuously reinforces that frame.

## **ANALYSIS OF PRESS COVERAGE**

### **Nature as Pristine Wilderness**

The authors of the newspaper articles I analyzed often talk about the issue of illegal

cannabis growth in reference to its damage to nature. When writing about the areas around the grow sites the authors portray them as beautiful and pristine. I analyzed the ways in which the authors do this by taking note of certain patterns, and how these patterns evoke frames of wilderness. I found that the authors mention well-known national parks and protected areas that the reader would recognize and associate with wilderness. They use dramatic language to evoke imagery of a sublime and beautiful landscape. These patterns in the text help portray the areas surrounding the grow sites in a way that evokes and reinforces the American idea of wilderness.

Many of the articles mention well-known places that elicit an emotional response from the reader. Yosemite National Park has high rates of visitation throughout the year and the average American is probably familiar with it. Yosemite is famous for its beauty and protected to be preserved for future generations. One article from MSNBC talks about marijuana gardens in areas "Not far from Yosemite's waterfalls and in the middle of California's redwood forests," (Pedroncelli, 2010). While this statement might not be entirely false it serves to represent the areas around the grow sites in a way which may or may not be accurate. The author does not specify what type of land management is used in areas around specific grow sites, but rather leads the reader to believe that they are pristine and natural areas of beauty.

Many articles use dramatic language to describe the areas surrounding the grow sites as untouched and pristine. The beginning of an article from CNN illustrates this use of language, "Beyond the towering trees that have stood here for thousands of years..." (Simon, 2008). This half of a sentence sets the tone for the rest of the article. This language evokes an image of an old and beautiful forest that has been untrammelled by humans, when in reality the growing operations are probably not taking place inside or in close proximity to areas like this. The rest of the article does not mention whether the grow sites are on National Park land, National Forest land, or another type of public land, nor does it mention the differences between these different styles of land management.

The authors make it very clear that they believe the affected areas are threatened. Alex Breitler of *The Record* lists these negative environmental effects from marijuana grow sites, including "Irrigation tubes that snake for a mile or more over forested ridges. Pesticides that have drained into creeks and entered the food chain, sickening wildlife. Piles of trash and human



waste in the most rugged and bucolic drainages” (Breitler, 2007). The author lists pesticides, piles of trash, and human waste as risks to areas he describes with language like “forested ridges” and “bucolic drainages,” emphasizing the natural qualities of these areas. Breitler does not cite any specific cases in the article, but rather lists all of these risks at once, increasing the intensity of the perceived risk.

On top of mentioning well known natural areas, and representing the land around the grow sites as untouched and beautiful, the authors also really emphasize that this land is America, and that it is “our” land that is directly threatened by cannabis growth. Authors from CNN, *The Record*, *The Press Democrat*, and *The San Francisco Chronicle* refer to the grow sites as “... in the heart of one of America's national treasures” (Simon 2008), “...our national parks” (Breitler, 2007), “...our public lands” (Anderson, 2009), “...the nation's most prized natural and cultural resources” (Coile, 2005), respectively. This portrayed sense of ownership and nationality adds to the idea that the reader's country is under attack.

By illustrating the areas around the grow sites as wilderness and then expressing that these areas are threatened, the authors of these articles create a sense of emergency. They express the growth as an atrocity, as something that is threatening America's natural lands.

### **Social Status, Race and Criminality**

When describing the growers in these illegal operations many of the authors use language that dehumanizes the workers, making them seem as if they are in a completely different category from the reader. The articles often quote people on the reader's side. This gives a voice and a face to law enforcement officers and others fighting the growth, making it easier for the reader to identify with that side of the issue. The articles hardly ever quote growers, or even list their names, thus portraying them as subhuman.

The authors dehumanize the growers by showing them as immoral. Often times the growers are represented as violent criminals who will shoot innocent hikers and law enforcement agents. They are also shown as money-obsessed drug producers, who will do anything to protect their crops, “Park service officials said the drug cartels took extreme measures to protect their plants, which can be worth \$4,000 each. Growers have been known to set up booby traps with

shotguns. Guards armed with knives and military-style weapons have chased away hikers at gunpoint. In 2002, a visitor to Sequoia was briefly detained by a drug grower, who threatened to harm him if he told authorities the pot farm's secret location" (Coile, 2005). This quote from the San Francisco Chronicle shows growers as brutal, ruthless, and extremely dangerous.

Another way the articles represent the growers as subhuman is by equating them with animals. Tom Durkin of The Colfax Record quotes a sergeant and a detective describing some of the growers they have been looking for, "'They run like deer,' ... 'They're not easy to catch,' ... Besides, the suspects were low-value captures. 'They won't talk,'" (Durkin, 2009). Comparing the growers to deer and calling them "low-value captures" helps take away any sort of personal identity or value the individual growers have. It makes it more difficult for the reader to relate to the growers at all, thus perpetuating the duality of "them" and "us."

Even the labels ascribed to the growers serve to further separate them into a different category from the reader. The articles nearly always refer to the growers as illegal Mexican immigrants, even though it is highly unlikely that the growers are all of Mexican decent, or illegal immigrants. In addition to this, the articles also link these people with Mexican drug cartels even though they rarely state whether or not they know for sure if the cartels are behind the growing. Following are titles from various articles: "Mexican Druglords Grow Pot in Calif. Parks" (LaJeunesse, 2003), "Mexican drug smugglers tied to California fire" (Gorman, 2009), "Mexican marijuana cartels sully US forests, parks" (Cone, 2008), "Mexican crime families run most of state's pot farms" (Geniella, 2006). All of these titles place the growers in a very specific niche – illegal Mexican immigrants tied to drug cartels.

Dehumanizing and otherizing certain groups of people can be a powerful social and political tool. The Chinese Exclusion Act and the Marihuana Tax Act are examples of how this framing of immigrants and minorities can be used to legitimize the passage of certain legislation.

### **Combination of two frames**

When the media coverage of this issue evokes these two historical frames together the result is that immigrants are not only associated with drug use and criminality, but also with the destruction of nature. This combination of the two frames is unique in situating Mexicans so

blatantly as a direct threat to nature. This new connection creates a major sense of fear and urgency in the articles. This reflects the idea that the press may use “problem frames” to represent issues, which promote “a discourse of fear that may be defined as the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of the effective environment” (Altheide, 1997). This style of fear-based writing is apparent in this quote from CNN, “...an intense drug war is being waged. Illegal immigrants connected to Mexico's drug cartels are growing hundreds of millions of dollars worth of marijuana in the heart of one of America's national treasures, authorities say” (Simon, 2008). This article and many others create a real sense of emergency by talking about this issue as if is a war, and also making the reader feel threatened by the operations.

A lot of the sense of urgency and fear in these articles comes from the authors' language choice. Many of the authors, or people quoted in the articles, use military language, which serves to represent the issue of illegal cannabis growth as a battle or a war. Glenda Anderson of *The Press Democrat* quotes Ron Pugh, a law enforcement special agent, “Pugh said it's not the cultivation of marijuana in itself that upsets him. 'This is a systematic occupation of armed foreign nationals conducting criminal activities on our public lands for profit. They're creating resource damage and creating a huge public risk,' he said” (Anderson, 2009). This quote really evokes a sense of emergency. Other articles I read typically refer to growers as “illegal immigrants,” but this article goes a step further by calling them “armed foreign nationals”; now these people are not only situated as criminals, but almost as terrorists invading America.

Many articles use dehumanization to place the growers in a different category from the reader, creating a duality between “us” the reader, and “them” the growers. When the authors connect the growers with the destruction of nature the overall tone of the article seems to suggest that “our” lands and people are directly under threat by “them.” While there are very few cases of hikers actually being injured by growers, many articles project the growers' perceived threat onto normal people as well as nature. Tom Adair of the *San Francisco Examiner* begins his article by saying that Mexican drug cartels are placing the tranquility of the forest under direct threat. Adair then continues on to explain how hikers in “the most natural gym in the world” need to be wary of a “new type of danger lurking over that next hill or valley” where “heavily

armed criminals present a real danger to hikers” (Adair, 2010). Situating these people as a threat to the reader reinforces this new, fear-based, combination of historical frames.

Another contributor to the fear and urgency for the reader is the lack of data. This quote, also from *The Press Democrat*, gives an interesting and detailed description of grow site characteristics, “When they leave, or are chased off by the law, left behind are mini-landfills, toxic pools of water, animal carcasses and miles of drip irrigation pipe,” (Anderson, 2009). In the context of the article, however, it is not mentioned whether or not these characteristics are typical of grow sites, or how many grow sites actually exist – information which would give the reader a greater sense of the scale of the problem. The actual details in the excerpt are also, in fact, not very detailed, because the article does not give any sort of quantitative data: how big these mini-landfills are, what kind of toxins are in these “toxic pools of water,” or how many animals carcasses are typically found. This lack of quantitative data makes it nearly impossible for the reader to access unbiased, objective information about this issue. This article in particular illustrates all grow sites as grotesque wastelands trashed by the people who grow the plants, which may or may not be accurate. While this seems like a harmless exaggeration, it still adds to the fear experienced by the reader.

## **CONCLUSION**

The main limitation of this study was that there is little analysis of the press coverage of this issue, let alone analysis of combining frames of criminal immigrants with the destruction of wilderness. This combination of frames, situating the criminal immigrant as a direct threat to American land, seems to be fairly new. It is therefore difficult to tell what kind of affect this style of press coverage could have on the public, but by examining how frames have been used in the past it is clear that it could be used to further social or political policies.

In California today, outside of the coverage of illegal cannabis growth, there is a common occurrence of linking immigrants with criminality in the media. Latinos and especially Mexican immigrants are most commonly the victims of this. Government reports, perpetuating this link, show Hispanic immigrants as having high imprisonment rates when often their imprisonment is due to criminal policies specific only to immigrants (Hagan & Palloni, 1999). By examining

past trends of linking minorities and immigrants with criminality it is clear that this linkage can be used to support certain political agendas, especially in the case of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1872 and the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937.

In my analysis of articles covering illegal cannabis on public lands I found that the authors often evoke the frame of the immigrant as criminal with the destruction of wilderness. They pose the illegal growth as an atrocity, as something that is damaging America's most sacred and pristine areas of natural beauty. With their use of military language, lack of real data, and by otherizing the growers, the authors seem to be saying that the growers are making a direct attack on America's public lands. They emphasize this sense of attack by assuring that even innocent hikers and campers are at risk from these "armed foreign nationals" (Anderson, 2009).

Evoking the frame of the criminal immigrant with the destruction of wilderness is unique in that it places immigrants, already perceived as criminal, as a direct threat to American lands and people. This combination of the two frames, if reinforced enough, could become a new frame of its own. This new link, paired with the fear framing used by the press, could have serious implications for immigrants in the future. This style of coverage could not only perpetuate the framing of the immigrant as criminal, but could also intensify it by situating the frame in the new context of wilderness destruction. Since the authors cater to the average American's love of nature by evoking frames of wilderness, they seem to be suggesting that something needs to be done to address this issue. For immigrants in America, increased dehumanization in the media could threaten how they are perceived and treated in many social and legal situations. It also has the potential to create and promote racist stereotypes, similar to those used by politicians in the past, and could subsequently affect the public opinion on immigration policy in the future.

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