

Scenic Landscapes and Conservation Easements: Common Interest in Private Lands in San Juan County, WA.

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My research on conservation easements in San Juan County raises questions regarding the role of collective concerns in private land management. Proponents frequently posit easements (legally binding agreements between a private landowner and an agency intended to restrict future developments and preserve 'natural' qualities) as a 'community' tool, though there is nothing in their writing that need reflect any sort of collective endeavor. Nonetheless, as a response to accelerated development in the county, many residents laud easements as a powerful tool in preserving the Islands as they are. My project reveals the blurred lines between public and private, state and market spheres. Private property, in spite of its strong associations with liberty and independence in the United States, is very much a product of federal protections and public policy. I suggest that easements, although based in the foundations of private land, also hold the potential to become a tool of collective conservation. I hope to explore the extent to which (if at all) collective concerns are and can be inserted into private land management, particularly conservation easements.

Conservation easements also pose an interesting challenge to contemporary ecological models that stress dynamism and chaos rather than balance and stasis. These non-equilibrium models suggest that is perhaps 'unnatural' for landscapes to remain static over time. Thus, easements are not just about saving the 'natural,' but strive instead to preserve a version of the present. Agricultural easements, for example, purport farming to be the most suitable land use, though such easements are not necessarily receptive to earlier Coast Salish Indian management practices. Are the San Juans a rural agricultural community, a tourist destination, or a place of Coast Salish Indian heritage? My research on San Juan County will challenge assumptions about the supposedly "apolitical" (Brewer 2003) nature of conservation easements, showing how easements are in fact a political process over defining a place. I hope to insert historical information and collective needs into the process of easement creation.