

Reservation Geography: The Worst of America?

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College Essay

Introduction

It took Columbus centuries, but eventually he did find something in America; something that he probably would not have wanted to. This is the story of the Indian Reservations that dot the American landscape. The harsh geography of Indian reservations in America is a tragedy that has persisted for centuries. Wasted lands, unsuitable for any kind of human use, have become the home of many indigenous populations in the United States. The lands that have been allocated for Indian reservations in the United States are frequently not agriculturally suitable and often contain harsh environmental conditions, making them unable to provide a stable source of income or resources for the native populations that they house. Unfortunately, these locations now serve as a tragic reminder of past injustices against Native Americans in America. This essay aims to delve into the historical significance behind Indian reservations in America; address issues such as physical location; investigate common economic challenges exacerbating social inequalities; scrutinize important cultural practices threatened by ecological degradation while offering viable solutions. The geography of Indian reservations in America is characterized by harsh and unusable land, and this geography has been largely utilized to further native subjugation.

Indian Reservations in Colonial America

Littered across numerous landscapes of America lie Native American Reservations – their presence is felt from their roots reaching up to Northern states such as Northeast all down South to Southeast regions as well as various areas within both Western and Midwestern parts too.¹ These reservations come in many different sizes including small; Mashantucket Pequot cc

¹ Laura Ahlqvist and Bryn Barabas Potter, “‘Just a Souvenir?’ Entangled Identities within an Early 20th Century American Indian Basket Collection,” *Journal of Material Culture*, 2023, 13591835221149684.

whilst Navajo Nation Reservations boast itself so vast by spanning over a humongous majority of more than 27 thousand squared miles aforementioned earlier but this time not limited to just three states (Arizona- Utah- & New Mexico). In the West, popular reservations include those of the Navajo and Sioux in Arizona, Wyoming, and Nebraska, the Chemehuevi Reservation in California, and the Colville Indian Reservation in Washington State.² In the Midwest, Native American reservations range from the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation in Kansas to the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi in Michigan. In the Northeast, the Shinnecock Indian Reservation is one of the most well-known, located in Southampton, New York. In the Southeast, the Poarch Band of Creek Indians is located in Atmore, Alabama.³

No matter the size or location of any given Native American reservation community they are united by a complex past pervaded with turmoil and pain. From historical conflicts to forced relocation at the hands of outsiders - all such communities share a legacy that demands acknowledgment and respect. Though difficult to imagine in today's world, many Native Americans were forcibly moved from their ancestral homelands to make way for white settlement.⁴ The native tribes that remain on reservations today have been able to rebuild and reclaim some of their traditional lands. Nevertheless, reservations remain a lasting reminder of the displacement and mistreatment of the original Native Americans of this land. The Native American reservation system is a complex one, spanning the entire United States. Despite their diversity and the different histories behind them, reservations often share key elements of oppression and disenfranchisement.⁵ The remnants of this dark history can be seen in the

² Ahlqvist and Potter.

³ Ahlqvist and Potter.

⁴ Ned Blackhawk, *The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of US History* (Yale University Press, 2023).

⁵ Blackhawk.

geographical concentration of reservations throughout the United States. Though all reservations serve a unique purpose, they are a stark reminder of the mistreatment and injustices suffered by Native Americans and their descendants throughout our nation's history.

Terrain and Physical Features

The terrain and physical features of Indian reservations vary depending on the region, but generally consist of rough and isolated terrain. In the northern parts of the United States, reservations encompass thick forests and grassland areas. In the northwest, rugged mountains form the backdrop of many tribes.⁶ The Rocky Mountains spread across much of the western United States, forming a challenging topography in many reservations, including both steep inclines and thick forests. In the south and southwest, deserts are a common feature, as evidenced by the expansive Navajo Nation. For instance, the mighty Sonoran Desert spanning across vast areas of Arizona and New Mexico is among the largest deserts in North America.⁷ Mountains, canyons, and canyons also provide a unique physical challenge to many Indian reservations.

A variety of landforms and features are found within Indian reservations. Plains, plateaus, rivers, lakes, and swamps form part of the terrain. Rainforests exist in parts of the country while high deserts occupy the southwest.⁸ Reservations of the Great Plains are especially prone to harsh weather conditions, with hot summers and cold winters. In addition, many reservations are located in remote areas, which can create a feeling of isolation for their inhabitants. Physical geography plays an essential role in dictating the lifestyles of indigenous communities.

⁶ Belete Debebe et al., "Analysis of Forest Cover Change and Its Drivers in Biodiversity Hotspot Areas of the Semien Mountains National Park, Northwest Ethiopia," *Sustainability* 15, no. 4 (2023): 3001.

⁷ Julea A. Shaw et al., "Seasonal Rainfall, Shrub Cover and Soil Properties Drive Production of Winter Annuals in the Northern Sonoran Desert," *Ecosystems*, 2023, 1–17.

⁸ Ganga Nakarmi et al., "Landscape Characterization and Assessment of a Proposed Appalachian Geopark Project in West Virginia, United States," *Geoheritage* 15, no. 2 (2023): 72.

Apart from geographical obstacles, the human-made infrastructure of Indian reservations is often a significant hindrance. The poor physical infrastructure—including limited access to education, health care, and economic opportunity—enjoyed by these communities renders them vulnerable to further exploitation.⁹ Moreover, the reservations are often isolated from larger metropolitan areas, creating a further disconnect. In some cases, physical features such as borders, rivers, and railway tracks divide reservations from larger metropolitan areas, creating a further sense of isolation and exclusion from the outside world.

Climate and Environmental Conditions

The climate and environmental conditions of Indian reservations across the United States can vary immensely from one region to another. Reservations often lie in remote areas, isolated from major cities and other tertiary or urban centers. This can lead to more extreme temperatures, both in summer and winter. During the cold months, temperatures often dip below zero degrees, and many areas experience blizzard-like conditions.¹⁰ On the other hand, summers can get incredibly hot, with temperatures reaching dangerously high levels. In addition to extreme temperatures, there can be significant differences in precipitation levels across Indian reservations. Depending on the region, they might experience long dry spells, or short periods of heavy rainfall. This affects the land's usability for crop farming, and many of the tribes rely on the production of local crops for their sustenance. Low-precipitation areas often have poorer agricultural yields, and this can lead to food shortages amongst the Native Americans living on

⁹ John Beyer, "Native American Communities Continue to Face Barriers to Opportunity That Stifle Economic Mobility," *Indigenous Policy Journal* 33, no. 1 (2022).

¹⁰ Paul F. Hessburg et al., "Climate and Wildfire Adaptation of Inland Northwest US Forests," *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 20, no. 1 (2022): 40–48.

the reservations.¹¹ The climate and environmental conditions on Indian reservations can also greatly impact the indigenous wildlife in the area. In some cases, the changes in weather and environment can result in certain species of animals migrating away, or completely disappearing from the area. This can have a severe impact on the environment, and the unique ecosystem found on many of these reservations.

Natural Resources and Land

A fundamental aspect of societal development is highly dependent on the accessibility and utilization of natural resources and land. Having an ample range of natural resources enables several advantages, but facing scarcity often presents several risks. Predominantly, US reservations in certain areas face limited access to essential resources that contradict the national perspective.¹² This shortage is evident concerning both land usage as well as convenient interface with natural reserves.

The availability of natural resources on some American reservations is scarce. This is due to their often remote and isolated locations. This limits the ability to have a very diverse range of resources, such as minerals, energy sources, and even water. For example, many reservations are severely lacking in natural resources like timber, oil, minerals, and even water.¹³ This in turn limits the economic development potential of such communities, as the limited resources can only be used on a small scale.

¹¹ Dylan R. Hedden-Nicely, "Climate Change and the Future of Western US Water Governance," *Nature Climate Change* 12, no. 2 (2022): 108–10.

¹² John-Andrew McNeish, "Indigenous Peoples: Extraction and Extractivism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Indigenous Development* (Routledge, 2022), 237–45.

¹³ Ann M. Carlos, Donna L. Feir, and Angela Redish, "Indigenous Nations and the Development of the US Economy: Land, Resources, and Dispossession," *The Journal of Economic History* 82, no. 2 (2022): 516–55.

In addition to the scarcity of natural resources, some reservations also experience limited land use. This is due to the fact that, while reservations have land that is owned by indigenous tribes, much of this land is not open to public use or held in trust by the federal government.¹⁴ This reduces the potential for tribes to take advantage of agricultural activities on reservation land. As a result, the ability to produce food on a larger scale is limited, and any economic opportunities associated with food production are also limited.

Challenges and Consequences

It is an unfortunate legacy of the U.S. government's long-running effort to remove Native Americans from their ancestral lands in order to make way for white settlement. This process, known as Indian Removal, resulted in the relocation of hundreds of thousands of Native Americans to apprehensive reservations, often located on land deemed unfit for agricultural development on the basis of physical characteristics and perceived socioeconomic utility.¹⁵ This decision has had far-reaching effects on the health, well-being, and overall quality of life of Native American communities across the country.

The primary challenge posed by reservation geography is the fact that the land itself is often harsh, inhospitable, and isolating. Despite the repeated failure of Congress to fulfill their obligations under the provisions of numerous treaties, reservation land remains semi-arid in many regions, making farming almost impossible on a large scale.¹⁶ In addition, the expansive nature of most reservations means that housing, infrastructure, and services are sparse, leaving many confined to so-called rural poverty. For years now it has been demonstrated that tragedy

¹⁴ Carlos, Feir, and Redish.

¹⁵ M. Todd Henderson, "What Rights Do Indians Have to Land? Tee-Hit-Ton Indians v. United States (1955)," in *Native Americans and the Supreme Court* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), 18–42.

¹⁶ Henderson.

continues for any number of Native Americans residing within reservation boundaries; they face huge barriers regarding quality medical care and educational opportunities - this leaving those individuals doubly disadvantaged compared with others amongst their Indigenous peers living elsewhere in America.¹⁷

These issues are endemic, persisting despite acknowledgement by government authorities - national reports indicating how extreme these geographical factors have impacted negatively upon those living within such spaces. The National Council on Indian Education reported last year there exist some increasingly prevalent difficulties when it comes to poverty measures affecting these vulnerable communities where barely any appropriate housing or job opportunity can be found.¹⁸

Throughout well-meaning efforts executed through decades against poverty levels jointly deepened within reservation space compared against other groups distinct cultural blockades further exacerbate the challenging conditions. Natives are struggling with access restrictions to basic essential resources such as transport, healthcare and job opportunities.

The legacy of the U.S. government's Indian Removal policy has had a devastating effect on the Native American communities that inhabit reservations today. They face considerable challenges in dealing with harsh, isolated geography, limited access to resources, and insufficient infrastructure. The physical and economic well-being alongside the mental fortitude of Native American populations have undergone considerable degradation as a consequence of distinct circumstances. The adverse effects are demonstrated by a preponderance of instances where poverty reigns supreme while unemployment rates soar high; coupled with persistent public

¹⁷ Henderson.

¹⁸ Daniel J. Mahoney, *De Gaulle: Statesmanship, Grandeur, and Modern Democracy* (Routledge, 2018).

housing issues in native lands.¹⁹ It falls therefore within the purview of the federal administration to design enlightened policies which provide unfailing access for resources expected to spur self-reliance while conserving their indigenous cultures.

Counter Arguments

The American colonists and White Community had a range of counter arguments to the various issues raised by Indian reservations. One of the most common justifications was the idea of "manifest destiny," which argued that it was destiny for Euro-Americans to expand westward and remove Native American tribes.²⁰ The concept of manifest destiny, and how it justified treating Native Americans as second-class citizens, took away any moral responsibility the American colonists or the White Community had to the tribes and their cultures.

It has been suggested by some that because Native American societies did not develop agriculture or economic opportunities extensively on their lands; they had no rightful ownership over them. In addition to this argument, assertions made about the perceived inferiority of Indigenous spirituality compared to European beliefs provide further reasoning behind an abdication towards upholding tribal cultures or traditions.²¹ Lastly, skeptical opinions surrounding relationships between Natives and Colonizers led proponents towards creating reservations so as preserve population sizes and regulate any associated cultural elements.

In contrast, other arguments focused on the economic potential of the reservations. The development of natural resources on the reservations was touted as a key incentive for American

¹⁹ Mahoney.

²⁰ Joseph P. Gone, "Researching with American Indian and Alaska Native Communities: Pursuing Partnerships for Psychological Inquiry in Service to Indigenous Futurity," *H., Cooper, M., Coutanche, LM, McMullen, AT, Panter, D., Rindskopf, K. Sher, (Eds.), APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology. Research Designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, Neuropsychological, and Biological 2* (2022).

²¹ Gone.

colonization, since it was argued that it would allow for large-scale economic exploitation. Furthermore, the removal of the Native Americans would supposedly ease the pressure on game resources in the areas, leading to larger scale hunting and trapping. Finally, the selling of Indian land was used as an excuse to gain economic advantage rather than a preemptive measure to contain their culture or religious practices.

Rebuttal

In rebuttal to the arguments made by the American colonists and White Community, it is clear that while economic development played a role, the targeting of Native Americans as a whole was psychological warfare, meant to discredit and segregate the tribes and their cultures. Native Americans never asked for economic or agricultural development, but instead of being listened to and given a voice, they were instead systematically removed from their homes. In addition to this objectionable rationale for westward expansionism known as manifest destiny; it is crucial to understand its inherent falsehood. Undoubtedly there was no credible proof supporting such an idea; but instead used as an alibi to rationalize expropriation and expulsion tactics against Native Americans - predominantly commanded by financial interests. Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that many tactics were utilized in disempowering Native American cultures besides uprooting them from their land under the guise of socio-economic progress. These methods included imposing Christianity upon them or outlawing specific native ceremonies. These actions reflect deeply held prejudice against the tribes and a clear desire to control and restrict their cultures rather than affirm or protect them.

Native Americans have a rich and diverse history of thriving cultures and resilient communities, and the arguments made by the American colonists and the White Community did more to discredit the tribes and their practices than to promote any real economic gain. The

creation of reservation geography has always been more about power and control than it has been about potential economic assets. This power structure must be disrupted, if true progress is to be achieved.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that reservation geography represents some of the worst aspects of America. Native Americans suffered displacement, mistreatment, and discrimination due to the U.S. government's Indian Removal policy, and this legacy of mistreatment persists today. From harsh and unsuitable terrain to limited access to resources and infrastructure, reservations now face severe challenges—all of which have led to poverty, unemployment, and a lack of basic needs, such as clean water and electricity. These consequences have had a tremendous impact on the physical, mental, and economic health of these communities. It is thus clear that the legacy of Indian Removal has had a devastating effect on the Native American communities it affected. It is the responsibility of the federal government to create fairer policies that make adequate resources available to Native American communities, thereby encouraging self-sufficiency and cultural preservation. Reservations are a reminder of the trauma inflicted on the original Indigenous peoples of this land, and their geography is a painful reminder of the worst of America's past.



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