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The Struggle for Salmon Survival and Cultural Displacement Amid the Construction of Grand Coulee Dam: An Eco-Humanist Study of Blaine Harden's *A River Lost*

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***Abstract*—The research explores an eco-humanist analysis of the survival of salmon in the context of the Grand Coulee dam's construction which is depicted in Blaine Harden's *A River Lost*. It incorporates the eco-humanist theory to explore the environmental and moral implications of industrial initiates. Even though the dam is a success of human progress, it altered the natural flow of the Columbia River and reduced the salmon population. These ecological transformations had deeper consequences on the lives of Indigenous people. Salmon play a significant component in their culture and faith. The Eco-humanist theory examines the dominance of technological development and also environmental responsibility by focusing on how both are connected with each other. The ethical aspects question whether the economic benefits are worth destroying ecosystems, cultural history, and aboriginal folks. It examines the discourse on ecological responsibility and cultural resilience. Overall, the research stresses the harmony between the development of human advancement and ecological preservation.**

***Index Terms*—tribe, eco-humanism, survival, salmon, cultural resilience**

I. Introduction

In the 20th century, one of the most important technical achievements was the building of the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River. The dam supplies people in the Pacific Northwest with hydroelectric power, irrigation, and job opportunities. It is the signature of success and economic growth. "Grand Coulee Dam was the key to the development of power on the Columbia River — the greatest potential source of hydroelectric energy in the United States" (Bureau of Reclamation, 2023). It causes the failure in salmon migration, which remains one of the oddities that mark the most important ecological and cultural lifelines in that place. Blaine Harden's *A River Lost: The Life and Death of the Columbia* tells the effects and the changes in the Columbia River. The eco-humanist theory is used in this research to show how the people and the environment are intersected. Eco-humanism questions the anthropocentric ideas that are common in the face of industrialisation. It depicts the importance of respecting ecological processes which are dependent on each other and have moral responsibility. The research analyses *A River Lost* in this approach. The fate of the salmon and the displacement of the Indigenous people are the central theme of this study. It shows how the river and the ecosystems are associated. Native people along the Columbia River, like the Spokane, the Colville, and the Yakama consider salmon as a traditional symbol and the main source of food. Aboriginal peoples' ideas were not considered during the planning and execution of the project. Instead of focusing on Indigenous rights, the government worked on irrigation, electricity, and economic growth for settlers and industries. The fate of the Columbia River is not a regional problem, but a reflection of global patterns of environmental degradation. The research questions are,

- How does Harden depict the environmental consequences of the Grand Coulee Dam?

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- How does the disappearance of salmon collapse the ecosystems?
- How does the theory of eco-humanism contribute to the discussions on the displacement of aboriginal people?

II. Literature Review

Barbour (1940) examines the geographical setting of the Columbia River on the continent of North America which has the most capability to supply electricity beyond any other river. The river has the highest potential. It has a length of thousand two hundred miles, drains an area that is larger than 260,000 square miles and falls 610 miles along its lower course between the border of Canada and Tidewater. The desire to collect water and energy from the Grand Coulee Dam to use them for other purposes is the most essential part of the wider Columbia Basin Reclamation Project. According to the plans that have been made, it is anticipated that the irrigated region of a district has a population of around one-quarter of a million people. The research gives the overall information on the Columbia River.

Stroshane (1998) investigates the environmental and cultural implications of regulating the Columbia River. Harden depicts the underlying contradictions between environmental protection and economic expansion, through dramatic anecdotes. He talks with people such as farmers, Native Americans, dam builders, and environmentalists. The article shows the cost of progress from a personal and critical standpoint. Finally, it serves as a strong reminder of how human ambition transforms natural and cultural settings, frequently for the worse.

Ortolano and Cushing (2002) conducted a case study on the Grand Coulee Dam for the World Commission on Dams. According to the research, the project's benefits have disproportionately benefited irrigation interests and hydroelectric power users, while the Upper Columbia River's native people have tolerated the brunt of the costs. The article discusses the consequences of some factors, including stakeholders' lack of participation in decision-making, Native Americans and Canadian First Nations not receiving fair compensation for the loss of fisheries resources, stakeholders' differing perspectives on the costs and benefits of a project, and stakeholders' shifting views on the value of fish.

Sprague (2011) discusses how the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation have suffered significant financial losses as a result of the United States government's construction of the Grand Coulee Dam in the Columbia Basin. The federal government received no consent from the Colville Tribes to begin construction on the Dam in 1933. By 1942, the construction of the Grand Coulee Dam had been completed, flooding 21,000 acres. The majority of the flooded land was good hunting, farming, and fishing territory for the Colville Tribes. The research further demonstrates that appropriate compensation is based on the federal government's use of Indian lands for its interests, rather than the actual injury caused to Indians.

Eze (2017) examines environmental ethics which is the study of the moral link between humans and nature. It presents a philosophical viewpoint that is distinct in how it views the relationship between a person and the ecosystem as a whole. It examines traditional environmental ethics and how it has contributed to modern environmental ethics thus far. The research provides vital statistics to improve discussions on environmental ethics, particularly those involving environmental sustainability, rehabilitation, biodiversity, and environmental management.

Osgood and Queen (2023) examine the Grand Coulee hydroelectric dam generates twenty-one billion kilowatt hours of energy. During World War II, it was a significant source of electricity, producing one-third of all aluminium used in the war, which was critical in the production of the planes that helped win the war. On June 6, 1937, the dam set the record for the largest continuous pour of concrete in 24 hours, pouring 12,683 cubic yards. Grand Coulee Dam is an impressive marvel of engineering, but it has generated environmental concerns ever since it was erected.

The aforementioned literature review discussed the positive and negative sides of the construction of the Grand Coulee Dam. On the contrary, this research portrays the struggle for the survival of salmons and the cultural displacement of the native people using eco-humanist theory.

III. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research is ideal for researching literary works because it supports a deeper exploration of themes and theories. "It is described as an effective model that occurs in a natural setting and enables the researcher to develop a level of detail from high involvement in the actual experiences" (Mohajan, 2018). For textual analysis, this methodology identifies how Harden reports the environmental and socioeconomic consequences of the Grand Coulee Dam's construction. It is centered on eco-humanist concepts such as environmental ethics, the relationship between humans and nature, and the effects of anthropocentrism. The primary data of information is based on the book, *A River Lost*. Scholarly articles on eco-humanism and environmental history are also used as sources of information in the research. Issues like environmental harm, Native American displacement, and moral categorisations are analysed as a thematic approach. Using eco-humanist theory, this research explores the long-term effects of the Grand Coulee Dam and contributes to broader concerns about ecological equality and conservation.

IV. Results and Discussion

A. Eco-Humanism: A Theoretical Framework

> 'Eco-humanism', a term coined by Robert Tapp (2002), combines under its rubric two perspectives, the humanistic and the environmentalist one, which are inextricably linked by both accepting that the ecology of the environment is an essential human value and that environmental stability will become a crucial aspect of human survival. (Cohen, 2019, p. 16)

Eco-humanism is a framework that combines environmental awareness and its principles of ethics through literature. It has its roots in the philosophical discourse between environmental humanities and post-anthropocentric thought and rejects damaging contradictions such as man vs. nature, culture vs. wilderness, and human vs. animal. It shifts the focus of literary and cultural evaluation to sustainability, duty, and communal living by emphasising the interdependence of people and ecological systems. The perspective sees the environment not as a backdrop to human activity, but also as an integral aspect of history, culture, and identity. It raises questions about how ecosystems shape and develop legislation, memory, and identity. It is clearly stated,

> Eco-humanism is the timeliest and most appropriate paradigm for addressing our educational task. It consists in combining the humanist commitment to human dignity, social justice, and democracy with the ecological commitment to climate stability, biological diversity, and sustainability of natural resources. It moreover calls for merging the humanist 'I and Thou' dialogical interpersonal relations (cherishing the humanity of every person as an end in itself) with the ecological consideration of nature not as a commodity to own and use egotistically but as a community to join harmoniously and respectfully. It requires us to learn how to live with others and not at the expense of others; stopping the exploitation of both humans and other species than human; enabling others—human beings and other living species—to sustain themselves at their best, in accordance with their nature and in harmony with the rest. (Aloni & Veugelers, 2023)

The research analyses environmental harm, cultural upheaval, and human introspection in the eco-humanist approach. The author provides a journalistic but highly thoughtful assessment of how the Columbia River has evolved as a result of dams, irrigation plans, and industrial ambition. He depicts the river not as an abstract environmental issue, but as a living, wounded being which is similar to the elimination of indigenous knowledge, communal memory, and ecological integrity. The text shows the place where people's lives are closely related to the river's new path, particularly the lives of farmers, tribal groups, engineers, and those who have been forced to relocate due to the construction of the dam. His writing highlights the contrasts of modern life: technological improvements that harm the environment, economic prosperity that conceals moral concessions, and human progress that, ironically, endangers future generations. From an eco-humanist perspective, *A River Lost* is not only a river story, but also a reflection on the costs of environmental destruction and the silenced voices of both humans and animals. The river represents the precarious relationship between humans and nature, where domination is frequently interpreted as rescue. The research highlights the responsibility of every individual, emphasising that the future of life on the earth depends on the protection and care that taken in the present. This is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Eco-Humanist Themes

No	Aspects	Concern
1.	Ecological commotion	Salmon suffered from migrating.
2.	Cultural displacement	Native people lost their ancestral place.
3.	Materialistic domination	Dam was praised as a success.
4.	Silencing Indigenous people	Limited tribal voice considered.

B. The Environmental Consequences of the Grand Coulee Dam

"Grand Coulee is the largest dam in the Columbia River Basin and one of the largest in the world" (Sonian, n. d). The construction of the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River has a wide range of harmful environmental magnitudes. It completely prevents salmon and steelhead fish from migrating, which is one of the most serious issues. Their typical breeding sites are in the upstream. Since there are no ladders or corridors, the fish are unable to reach the spawning ground. As a result of these changes, numerous fish species, particularly salmon, have disappeared from the upper Columbia River.

The loss of salmon also affects many creatures, including birds and bears that depend on fish as a primary source of food. Native American tribes who relied on salmon for food, trade, and traditional practices were also severely affected. Even while the dam-irrigated land is suitable for cultivation, it also introduces new challenges. Farm water that runs into rivers carries chemicals such as insecticides and fertilisers. These pollutants degrade the water quality and make it difficult for many species to survive. To quote,

> Some of the radioactive waste leaked into the river and some of it threatened to explode. Environmentalists, having closed down federal forests to save spotted owls, were suing to protect creatures ranging from woodpeckers to caribou. Farm families that lived downwind from Hanford suffered from tumours, harboured conspiracy theories, and sued a government that had secretly salted them with radiation. (Harden, 1997, p. 13)

Irrigation has led to soil salination, making gardening and farming more difficult over time. Another issue is that many native species have become extinct, while alien species have taken over their place. The change in biodiversity endangers the overall health of the river ecosystem and has brought harmful effects to the native people. In addition to salmon, they lost sacred fishing areas and aspects of their identity. The Grand Coulee Dam harms not only the environment but also culture and society. Although the dam produces power and water for agriculture, it has long-term negative effects on ecosystems and people. "People born and raised in the Pacific Northwest are often said to have some affinity for salmon. Public agencies often describe the fish as 'our most potent symbol of endurance and vigour'. But you grow up in the irrigation country, that is nonsense" (Harden, 1997, p. 18).

C. Salmon and the Commotion of Ecosystem

> The dam had severe negative consequences for the local Native American tribes whose traditional way of life revolved around salmon and the original shrub-steppe habitat of the area. Because it lacks a fish ladder, Grand Coulee Dam permanently blocks fish migration, removing over 1,100 mi (1,770 km) of natural spawning habitat. The presence of salmon is very important for keeping the ecological balance in river areas. (Ortolano & Cushing, 2000)

Salmon are called a keystone species because they are important for the survival of many other organisms in the ecosystem. When the fish are not able to go upstream to spawn any longer, it disrupts the ecological balance. To quote,

> What saves money, alas kills salmon. Mostly it kills them when they are young and trying to go to sea. An estimated nine of ten juvenile salmon that attempt to swim to the Pacific from Idaho do not make it. The percentage of migrating juvenile salmon that succeed in returning to Idaho as adults ranges from a high of 1.2 percent for steelhead to less than 0.01 percent for spring and summer Chinook. In 1992, just one adult Snake River sockeye survived the nine-hundred-mile trek back up the Columbia and Snake Rivers to spawn in Redfish Lake in central Idaho. He was named Lonesome Larry, and then-Idaho-governor Cecil Andrus, a devoted fisherman, had him stuffed, mounted, and displayed for visitors as a symbol of how "eight lumps of concrete" have ruined his state's heritage. (Harden, 1997, p. 25)

When the salmon population declines, there is less food for animals like bears, eagles, otters, and even ants. If these species are in danger of going extinct, it makes a domino effect that spreads to other species. Furthermore, salmon are in charge of moving nutrients from the sea to ecosystems that are located on land. As they die during the spawning process, their bodies release important chemicals like nitrogen and phosphorus into the water and land around them. Many of the trees, plants, and small animals that live in the river system get their food from these elements. Forests that are close to rivers grow more slowly without salmon, and watery life has fewer resources of its own when salmon are not around. Over time, this imbalance makes the ecosystem less diverse, the water quality worse, and the ecology more vulnerable to disease and climate change. If salmon go wiped out, the whole web of life cycle will experience commotion. The death of salmon is clearly explained in the words of the explorers, Lewis and Clarke,

> The number of dead salmon on the shores & floating in the river is incredible to say at this season [the Indians] have only to collect the fish Split them open and dry them on their Scaffolds… this river is remarkably clear and crowded with Salmon in many places, I observe in ascending great numbers of Salmon dead on the Shores, floating on the water and in the Bottoms which can be seen at the depth of 20 feet. (Harden, 1997, pp. 62-63)

D. The Failure of the Salmon Saving Scheme

When the Grand Coulee Dam was constructed without fish ladders, the government made numerous attempts to conserve salmon populations but, all of these efforts were ineffective with ethical standards. The goal was to catch salmon from downstream and then transport them by truck to the opposite side of the dam. On the other hand, this method prevented them from returning to their usual spawning areas and prevented them from migrating as they normally would have. The creation of artificial hatcheries was potentially a possibility; however, these hatcheries were never able to match the complexity, resilience, or genetic variation of wild salmon. These technological remedies were intended to satisfy environmental concerns, but it was a failure. They failed to cope with the connection between river systems and living things, which is a fundamental principle of eco-humanism. The concept of eco-humanism emphasizes the value of life and the ethical obligation of individuals to coexist peacefully with natural systems. The people who live at Grand Coulee are making an effort to rescue salmon, but they do not consider rivers and animals to be part of the ecosystem. The engineering achievements demonstrate a mechanistic perspective of the world, which eco-humanism directly opposes. This is because they prioritise industrial growth over ecological balance and do not consider the Aboriginal people. It demonstrates evidently that people's greed takes precedence over caring for the environment and getting along with other species. This is clearly explained as,

> To the most casual observer it is an increasing source of wonder that any adult salmon are able to reach the spawning grounds and, once reached, that enough of the small salmon are able to return to the sea to maintain a run of any size. As a matter of fact, the salmon runs into these streams are at present in an extreme state of depletion. Irrigation and water power developments are the two principal causes. Mining and domestic pollution are not yet important factors, but are potentially so. (Brennan, n. d)

"The part of salmon-saving scheme that infuriates barge pilots and deckhands is called the 'drawdown'" (Harden, 1997, p. 26). Earlier dams were built on the Snake River and Columbia River, the amount of period it took for the water

to flow from Idaho to the ocean was around two days. As a result of the drawdown, the reservoirs would be unplugged for many months during the spring migrations of salmon. The young salmon, which are particularly susceptible, are transported to the ocean, where they are protected from turbines, predator fish, and the potentially fatal effects of slow-moving, warm water. Because of this, many irrigation systems on the Snake and in the middle of the Columbia were dry, which necessitated expensive modifications. For that, it cost tens of millions of dollars. It was the argument of environmentalists and fish biologists that the drawdown is the sole opportunity to save the salmon resource. Jonathan Schleuter, executive vice-president of the Portland-based Pacific Northwest Gain and Feed Association told Harden, "Salmon are why we live in the North-west. They are an environmental bellwether of our quality of life" (Harden, 1997, p. 26). On the other side, the irrigators were unhappy with it. The people who utilise the river did not directly claim to stop the drawdown. They indirectly objected to the drawdown that there was no scientific evidence proving that it helps the fish. Greg Majeski explained his neo-Darwinian theory of endangered species,

> Nobody wants to give up anything. I don't want to give up my job. The farmers don't want to give up the water. Consumers don't want to give up cheap electricity. I ain't ever seen a dinosaur, but I don't miss them. Who says it is not evolution killing these salmon? Who cares anyway? (Harden, 1997, p. 27)

E. Cultural and Aboriginal Displacement

> Before Grand Coulee Dam was completed in 1941, the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation cantered their lives around Columbia River salmon. The Colvilles were one of the last Indian groups in the United States whose lives, as of the 1930s, had not been fundamentally changed by whites. An anthropologist estimated that before the dam was built each tribal member ate one and a quarter pounds of salmon a day. (Harden, 1993)

The tribes of the Upper Columbia River particularly the Colville and Spokane marked the beginning of profound cultural displacement. "The town of Inchelium, Washington, home to around 250 Colville Indians, was submerged and later relocated" (Pullman, 2015). These people had relied on the salmon of the Columbia River for thousands of years, which are considered not only as a source of food but also as a foundation for their spiritual, cultural, and community lives. "The most sacred ceremonies of Colville religious life, along with the most intensive seasons of work and feasting, revolved around the summer salmon harvest. The heart of the catch was the summer Chinook, the biggest and the finest of Columbia River salmon" (Harden, 1997, p. 106). Harden interviewed Louie, the last person of Colville, who said,

> We starved. We drank. My daughter-in-law's son committed suicide. He blowed his brains out about three or four years ago with a rifle. I know two or three who committed suicide. He said the federal government sends him food every month. From a shelf he grabbed a can of United States Department of Agriculture food aid labelled PINK SALMON. This how you replaced our salmon. (Harden, 1997, p. 101)

Salmon played a significant role in myths about its origins, seasonal celebrations, and social organisation. The dam, on the other hand, resulted in the loss of access to ancestral fishing grounds and the extinction of entire salmon populations upstream. The deterioration of the environment directly gave rise to cultural displacement. It is clearly explained as,

> Cultural displacement refers to the phenomenon where individuals or groups experience a disruption of their cultural identity, often due to external factors such as migration, colonization, globalization, or social changes. This can lead to a loss of cultural heritage, identity, and community cohesion as people navigate new environments that may not support or recognize their original cultural practices and beliefs. (Cultural Displacement, 2025)

Tribal voices were marginalised in policy decisions, even though several requests and objections were made. There were some limited kinds of federal compensation, such as monetary payments or relocation programs; nevertheless, no attempt could compensate for the loss of place-based identity, traditions, and ecological stewardship. It is described as,

> There were no options for the people of the Spokane Tribe and no options for the salmon, which were blocked by the dam. The federal government is required to maintain a trust responsibility with tribes. Tribal leaders were told they'd receive reasonable compensation for their losses. The Tribe was paid just $4,700. (Dave, 2016)

"In addition to Kettle Falls, the best hunting, farming, and root-gathering land disappeared. So did the most tribal burial grounds" (Harden, 1997, p. 107). It not only causes damage to the environment, but it also constitutes a break of ethical standards from an eco-humanist point of view. Eco-humanism encourages people to recognise the interconnectedness of nature and culture, as well as to appreciate the inherent worth of non-human life and the knowledge systems that are anchored in ecologies. Rather than perceiving the river and its biological forms as co-inhabitants in a shared web of life, the dam saw them as hurdles to economic utility, which resulted in the expulsion of the tribes.

Furthermore, the construction of the dam reflected a mechanistic worldview that attempted to dominate nature. This ideology ignored the biological cycles of the river. The eradication of salmon causes disruptions in ecosystems, which also leads to the destruction of a way of life that has developed in correlation with the environment. The tribal people were no longer able to maintain the practice of rituals, songs, and stories that were associated with salmon migrations. Even in modern times, the anguish caused by this severance is still being experienced by tribal groups. They struggle to reclaim their cultural legacy, restore their ecosystem, and re-establish their sovereignty, and natural resources. When viewed in this manner, the Grand Coulee Dam is not only a monument to the aspirations of the industrial sector, but it is

also a symbol of environmental disparity. To quote,

> I saw quite a change in the Indians when I came back. I would say that alcohol got hold of 60 percent of them. Without fishing, they had no interest in what they were doing. Families were breaking apart. Everybody was becoming what I call a reservation Indian. (Harden, 1997, p. 113)

Eco-humanism advocates for restoration not only as a remedy but also as a healing of relationships between people and the river, between the past and the present, and between culture and ecology. It encourages to care for the multiple losses and to pursue a meaningful renovation. To quote,

> When the dam was finished and the upstream Columbia became a 150-mile-long lake, Kettle Falls disappeared, along with all the salmon. On the reservations, rates of suicides, drug addiction, divorce, and death by house fire soared to levels that stunned the anthropologists who had lived with the Colvilles before the building of the dam. Ray wrote that the Grand Coulee Dam was built with the ruthless disregard for Indians as human beings, creating a dammed-up river that dammed the culture it had nourished. (Harden, 1997, p. 106)

When human progress is pursued without ethical respect for the earth, it spoils the culture and the whole ecological web. Therefore, the research serves as a cautionary attempt.

V. Conclusion

Thus the research uses eco-humanist theory to examine *A River Lost* which demonstrates how the Grand Coulee Dam has numerous implications. The destruction of salmon populations represents what happens to the environment when industrial progress takes precedence over ecological balance. Native people suffered the greatest cultural and economic losses. They faced not only economic challenges but also spiritual and cultural isolation. Harden's report demonstrates the importance of having environmental regulations that include the well-being of both humans and the environment. The study also highlights the issues with technology solutions such as fish hatcheries, which fail to address the root causes of the environment's corrosion. Eco-humanism advocates for long-term ecological restoration, with a focus on habitat protection, water flow management, and Indigenous-led conservation activities as effective strategies to improve the environment. It highlights the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman existence, as well as the moral obligation to maintain natural ecosystems. Restoring salmon habitats, and emphasising ecological robustness lead to a more equitable and sustainable future. Finally, the research serves as responsiveness that true technological progress should consider both human well-being and environmental protection.

The research is primarily based on a book *A River Lost*. It is packed with tales and historical details, which does not provide a great deal of information regarding the perspectives of ecological science scientifically. Harden, as a reporter, is more concerned with the political and personal repercussions of the dam. Another thing, the research does not go into detail with real ecological data on the fall of salmon or first-hand accounts from members of the tribe, both of which could help substantiate the assertions of loss and resilience.

To fill in these gaps, future studies could draw on a broader range of sources, including Indigenous-authored texts, oral histories, ecological field investigations, and reports about tribes. Comparing diverse narratives, including those offered by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, allows for a more detailed understanding of river ethics and cultural displacement. Incorporating ecological ideologies into new research could also enrich the framework, resulting in a more reasonable and restorative approach to environmental justice.

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