

Asian Americans in the Interior Columbia River Basin

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Preface

The following report was prepared by University scientists through cooperative agreement, project science staff, or contractors as part of the ongoing efforts of the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project, co-managed by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. It was prepared for the express purpose of compiling information, reviewing available literature, researching topics related to ecosystems within the Interior Columbia Basin, or exploring relationships among biophysical and economic/social resources.

This report has been reviewed by agency scientists as part of the ongoing ecosystem project. The report may be cited within the primary products produced by the project or it may have served its purposes by furthering our understanding of complex resource issues within the Basin. This report may become the basis for scientific journal articles or technical reports by the USDA Forest Service or USDI Bureau of Land Management. The attached report has not been through all the steps appropriate to final publishing as either a scientific journal article or a technical report.

Although relatively small numbers of Asian Americans and Asians live in the interior Columbia basin, their presence is both long term and more significant than that recorded in numbers.

Laborers from China brought in to work on railroad construction in the nineteenth century turned into gold miners working claims only made profitable by the low returns that the Chinese were willing to accept. Soon they were followed by Japanese who first settled in the Yakima Valley in 1891 and began farming by 1906 on leased lands on the Yakama Reservation where they were better able to lease large tracts of land. The Japanese numbered here about 1,000 by the 1930's (Nomura 1986-87: 100). Filipinos began to settle in the Yakima Valley following WWI working as migrant agricultural laborers and some began to become truck farmers, an occupation to which many flocked, in spite of anti immigrant legislation (Nomura, 1986-87; Nomura, 1993). These relatively small numbers of Asian Americans today have low visibility.

Japanese internment camps of WWII were located in the interior Columbia basin away from the strategic industrial centers of Portland and Seattle/ Tacoma. During the war, numbers were "recruited" to work in the labor short agricultural sector. Some of the internees remained in the area and some of them and their descendants still live there today.

More significant for public lands has been the recent migration from Southeast Asia. Since 1975 more than 950,000 have entered the United States (Freeman and Welaratna 1993). Over the past seven or eight years, several different nationalities of Southeast Asian immigrants have been increasingly noticeable on public lands; they harvest special forest products, some of which are highly seasonal, such as mushrooms, and others, such as beargrass which can be harvested any time that its habitat is snow free. Cambodians and Laotians, especially have produced for and organized the beargrass trade, a large portion of which is exported (Freed 1995). More publicity has been given to Southeast Asian participation in mushroom harvesting. As the price of mushrooms for chic restaurants and export to Japan and Europe accelerated over the past several years, examination of permits issued by national forests show increasing numbers of Cambodians and other southeast Asian immigrants including Lao, Hmong, Vietnamese and Thai coming mainly from Tacoma, Seattle, Olympia, and the Aberdeen area of the Washington coast, Portland and northern California. They have ranged throughout the Pacific Northwest using an organized

information exchange network in their search for mushrooms (Richards 1994). Considerable antagonism fed by competition for prime picking areas, clan rivalries and national differences both within and among the different Southeast Asian groups and between them and local residents who have depended on the mushroom harvest to supplement their incomes has arisen as the prices for mushrooms skyrocketed in 1993. There is also anecdotal evidence of friction developing between mushroom pickers and deer and elk hunters, both of whom are in the woods at the same time. A poorer mushroom harvest because of drought and lower prices paid to pickers in 1994 because of a larger matsutake harvest in South Korea discouraged some pickers.

Since a majority of the Southeast Asian immigrants came to the United States in the latter part of the 1970's, the aging of these people, their increasing familiarity with English, and their increasing integration into regular, full time jobs, the growth of a new generation of U.S. educated and English speaking children, and the low desirability of stoop labor suggests that their participation in the harvest of special forest products will not substantially increase and most likely will decrease in the longer run. Nevertheless, the discrimination faced by recent immigrants and the relative freedom offered by the picking of special forest products suggests that large numbers will still see this as a better alternative than welfare or a menial city job. Maintenance of tradition through large encampments of related individuals accompanied by some of the economic benefits acquired by harvesting of special forest practices may also slow any flow of Southeast Asian gatherers out of the forest. Recent evidence suggests that decreased housing costs in small resource dependent communities near where these products are extracted is attracting some of the Southeast Asian immigrants.

In addition to conflicts among harvesters of special forest products is concern for educating immigrant populations about the ways which public land agencies would like their lands to be treated and for manifestations of racist behavior by local Euro American residents. Cultural gaps in communication and different histories of land use make this process problematic. Establishing more liaisons with different user communities and encouraging the formation of alliances of people involved in the harvest of these products may help mitigate conflicts and help resolve some of the differences in the way public lands are treated. The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management need to bring as many people together as possible to discuss the issues of discrimination, rights, and sustainability in order to determine special forest product

management policy and to engage the resource users in the gathering of information about conditions of the land. By involving all parties as early as possible, land management agencies will be able develop policies that are held to by users.

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