# Last Eden: The Development of a Regional Culture of Eco Spirituality in the Pacific Northwest

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**Abstract/Description:**

The culture of the Pacific Northwest is formed by and around its natural environment. Cultural descriptions of the region usually highlight its spectacular scenery, its rich natural resources, and the connection that many residents feel with the land. Often, this connection takes on a spiritual quality, prompting some to identify a culture of nature religion in the region: a culture in which participants consider the natural world sacred, ordering their lives around its protection and conceptualizing their own welfare as inextricably tied to that of the environment. This thesis attempts to chronicle the development of such a culture of eco-spirituality from European exploration to present, locating today's reality firmly in a historical context. I argue that the region's history as a last frontier, dependence on natural resource extraction, and relative lack of institutional religious presence paved the way for a fusion of environmentalist activism and New Age spirituality in the 1980s. As spiritual concern infused environmentalism with ideological power, political battles intensified, publicity increased, and a new culture of eco-spirituality emerged to stamp itself indelibly on the face of the environment.
The Pacific Northwest has a large but limited natural resource base, leading to an economy that is not highly diversified. The area's abundant precipitation and temperate climate support dense, coniferous forests, which are the basis of the region's dominance in the production of lumber, plywood, particleboard, pulp, and paper. Mountainous terrain and high levels of precipitation have provided this region with an enormous hydroelectric potential, focused on a system of dams and power-generating plants located on the Columbia and Snake rivers. The mountainous terrain means that little land is available for agriculture, and the region has traditionally relied on natural resources for its economy. The Pacific Northwest has frequently served as a case study to examine the rise of religious 'nones' and the decline of mainline Protestantism. Religious life in the region, however, also reflects the history of religious and nonprofit organization established by religiously motivated communities and the emerging forms of organized religious life. This dynamic context requires a scholarly approach that considers the structure, challenges, and connections across existing and emerging forms of religious life.

This paper outlines a framework to examine the adaptive work that informs the field of environmental studies. Drawing upon several surveys of environmental groups and the mass public in the Pacific Northwest, we test these four hypotheses and find that the Douglas-Wildavsky "cultural theory," although not without its limitations, appears to provide the more satisfactory account of environmental preferences. Export citation Request permission. 1995. "Common Goals, Divided Communities: A Survey of Attitudes about Economic Change and Natural Resources in the Hells Canyon Region." Department of Politics, Whitman College, Walla Walla, WA. Typescript.