

[Jurss on Grossman, 'Unlikely Alliances: Native Nations and White Communities Join to Defend Rural Lands'](#)

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Zoltán Grossman. *Unlikely Alliances: Native Nations and White Communities Join to Defend Rural Lands*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017. xxviii + 362 pages. ISBN 978-0-295-74152-9.

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Conditions for Meaningful Collaboration

Part academic study, part handbook for partnerships of resistance, Zoltán Grossman's comparative study, *Unlikely Alliances: Native Nations and White Communities Join to Defend Rural Lands*, analyzes the conditions necessary for alliances between Native and non-Native communities to succeed. Grossman's research is driven by several questions as he seeks to understand and explain collaborative efforts between rural white and Native American communities. *Unlikely Alliances* asks if collaborations are weaker or stronger when Native nations assert their sovereignty. At its heart the question asks whether tribal "particularist" issues tied to self-determination, environmental racism, and racism against American Indians need to be secondary concerns when seeking unity with non-Native allied groups concerned with more "universalist" issues like protecting the environment. Often these approaches are viewed as being in opposition. Grossman, however, refutes this line of reasoning by demonstrating not only that many universal campaigns begin as localized particularist concerns, but also that when campaigns are concerned with the local as well as the universal together, they can overcome each method's weaknesses. To achieve true unity in alliances, particularist concerns can make the majority culture aware of the social inequalities that need to be addressed so that both allies are equals, moving forward together. Grossman notes that to achieve unity, the majority needs to understand how recognizing and respecting difference can benefit universal values. Native/non-Native environmental alliances are an example of a movement that—consciously or not—has creatively negotiated the tensions between particularity and universality and attempted to interweave them by "identifying Native self-determination as a way to protect the land and water for everyone" (p. 13).

Unlikely Alliances argues that collaboration between Native Americans and non-Native environmentalists can foster productive partnerships if three elements are present in the relationship: a common sense of place, a common sense of purpose, and a common sense of understanding. While there does not necessarily need to be balance between all three, all are necessary for a strong, useful, and successful alliance.

Grossman's arguments largely rely on first-person interviews and contemporary news accounts of treaty rights protests, town hall meeting minutes, and letters to the editor. He contextualizes these primary sources with secondary literature on theories of race, colonization, Native American history,

and the history of the environmental movement. He explains that while scholars have documented issues of racism and colonialism, deconstructed institutions and structures of racism, and explained how places of exclusion operate, few have presented solutions to confront racism, built new just structures, and created inclusive spaces. This gap in the literature spurred his investigation into the alliances between rural whites and Native Americans, alliances that have gained increased media attention in recent years as they defend their homes against outside interests.

The book's structure is presented in four broad categories: fishing rights in the Pacific Northwest, military projects in Wisconsin and Nevada, mineral and oil extraction in the Great Plains and Pacific Northwest, and threats to the waters of northern Wisconsin. Part 1 begins with fisheries in the Pacific Northwest and a brief overview of the history of United States and tribal relations in the 1850s. The rise of commercialized salmon fishing placed increased pressure on the population and hampered the ability of local tribes like the Nisqually, Tulalip, and Puyallup to continue to harvest in their traditional fisheries. In the 1950s and 1960s a series of actions known as "fish-ins" brought media attention to the fight to protect tribal treaty rights. On behalf of seven Native nations, the federal government sued the state of Washington, resulting in the 1974 *Boldt* decision upholding the rights of tribes to harvest up to 50 percent of fish off-reservation and to regulate their own harvests. The swift reaction from nontribal fishers attacked both the tribes and the federal government as outsiders. To address these issues, co-management policies were presented as a method to help local tribes and commercial and sport fishing interests work to move forward. Grossman finds, however, that without local buy-in these top-down approaches created more problems than they solved.

Grossman's second chapter expands and echoes his theme by exploring the fight to remove and reduce the impact of hydro dams. The strongest alliances often began at the local level. The development of watershed councils helped facilitate this process by bringing together not only government but also nongovernmental organizations that wanted a voice in the deliberations. These localized grassroots organizations succeeded because they were able to create relationships based on a bottom-up model directly connecting tribal members with rural whites in alliance against outside groups.

Chapter 3, "Military Projects and Environment Racism," serves as a stand-alone chapter in part 2. The chapter focuses on lessons learned from less successful campaigns. Here Grossman takes on larger mainstream environmental groups that often maintain a "blind spot" in terms of racial and social justice in the environmental movement (p. 102.) The Nevada and Wisconsin case studies demonstrate the danger of seeking to align communities without recognizing the power of tribes or the community's social justice concerns. In both cases white allies failed to recognize and fight for tribal sovereignty and treaty rights, instead accepting partial victories that maintained the white community's privileged position. This fractured the Native and non-Native alliance. From these studies Grossman concludes that unity against an issue is not enough to sustain a movement long enough to succeed.

Part 3 approaches the question of building a common understanding between allies by exploring resource extraction in the Northern Plains. Shared connections to land are significant for the strength of alliances between non-Natives and Natives. Grossman notes, however, that there are multiple layers within this relationship. Though white ranchers do not possess the same cosmological roots to the land, many ranchers can trace their genealogy back a hundred or even two hundred

years. Ranchers with deep family roots are able to recognize more easily the depth of connection to land that Indigenous people hold. Yet Grossman points out while non-Natives may understand a “sense of place,” the connection is still special for Natives whose ties to the landscape are spiritual, familial, and sociopolitical. Both groups view outsiders, such as resource extraction industries, as common enemies that damage the land and threaten precious waters with their industrial practices. These threats pose a danger to both the spiritual and ancestral connections Native Americans have to land and to white ranchers’ livelihoods and family ties to the land. Grossman concludes that the alliance between ranchers and Native Americans on the Northern Plains succeeded in many places because of the bonds of a common sense of place and shared understanding of the importance of the land.

The book’s final section considers the waters of northern Wisconsin first through the lens of fishing rights and then through fights against mining interests. Grossman finds that, perhaps counterintuitively, the most successive alliances against mining interests sprang from the most contentious relationships between tribes and local communities during Wisconsin’s fish wars. During the 1980s and 1990s Ojibwe bands from Lac du Flambeau and Mole Lake took more aggressive stances in defending their fishing rights as opposed to those in Lac Courte Oreilles, who sought a more restrained and working relationship with the Wisconsin state government. While tensions were reduced in the counties surrounding Lac Courte Oreilles, other tensions were amplified between the Ojibwe bands.

Additionally, the question of insiders versus outsiders comes to the forefront. At first, non-Natives viewed Natives who tried to fish off-reservation as outsiders while Natives viewed any non-Natives as outsiders in general. Eventually the concept of who was an outsider shifted, as non-Native anti-treaty protestors, some with connection to outsider far-right groups, increasingly targeted local community Native leaders. Perceptions of who was an outsider shifted very rapidly when a new threat of outside mining interests “strengthened a territorial place identity over a racial social identity” (p. 228). In the early 1990s mining corporations sought to expand their operations in northern Wisconsin, threatening both the treaty rights of tribes and the economic livelihood and recreation of non-Native residents. Chapter 7 explains that it was in places like Mole Lake, where some of the harshest rhetoric and reaction to assertions of treaty rights occurred, that alliances between Native and non-Natives were the strongest. He attributes this to non-Natives recognizing the legal and financial power tribes had to battle against mining interests.

Unlikely Alliances concludes by reiterating the three keys to alliance-building between Native and non-Native allies. Without a shared sense of place, purpose, or understanding, collaboration efforts wither. When all of the elements combine, the relationships that spring forth are healthier and stronger. White environmental allies who do not subvert Native authority strengthen the alliance because they understand that by defending tribal self-determination they are also helping to strengthen the cause of justice. Common enemies can reveal to Native activists and non-Native environmentalists their shared values.

The book finds a delicate balance between providing enough details in individual cases while not losing sight of more generalized arguments. It’s a balance that mostly succeeds though at times readers may wish for even more background on particular events. *Unlikely Alliances* will benefit Native leaders, though it may more strongly serve non-Native allies seeking to build equitable

connections and foster long-term benefits for local communities and alliances. Grossman attempts to lead by example with his preface. The majority of Grossman's book does not directly confront the role of scholars in such alliances, but the preface serves as a positive example of scholars seeking to work with rather than extract from Indigenous communities. Grossman begins with an introduction explaining his own background and identity as a descendent of immigrants. He claims no sacred knowledge and instead offers his conclusions in order to strengthen ties between communities.

A further mark of his strong scholarship is not only the knowledge it conveys to readers, but also the conversations it evokes. Grossman's research is a launching point for more conversation. His case studies indicate several ways to change outsiders into insiders. These examples generate further questions, including where and how urban American Indians and urban environmental groups can best bridge their actions to potential rural allies. Many of the alliances Grossman examines came about prior to the rise in social media. Do such digital communities offer extended opportunities for alliance, or do person-to-person connections continue to reign supreme?

Unlikely Alliances lays out a thoughtful argument that encourages further discussion and examination. Grossman concludes by reminiscing about hearing John Trudell speak in 1980 to the differences between Native and non-Native communities but also how Trudell "recognized the power inherent in all human beings to connect with the Earth and shape reality" (p. 290). Perhaps alliances between people who recognize a power connection to the Earth are not so unlikely.

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