

American Indian's Perseverance: Tribal Casinos' Effect On the Confederated Tribes of Grand  
Ronde

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American Indian Studies 230  
Indian Gaming and Casinos

December 11, 2013

**Summary:** This case study is a general study about the cultural, political, and economical struggle felt by most, if not all American Indian tribes and how some persevere through these struggling times, in large part due to the establishment of tribal casinos. Within the study, we go into detail about a particular tribe and casino of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Spirit Mountain Casino, and how they compare to most tribes in regards to how they have dealt with the general cultural, political, and economical struggles that most Native American tribes have faced throughout the years.

## **Background**

A crucial element of Native American culture lies within their history. Importantly, while this history consists of beautiful legends and spiritual wisdom, their history of oppression by the American government and the American people is equally as significant when attempting to understand their culture. Ever since the exploration of America in 1492 and the colonization of America in 1620, the Native Americans have been taken advantage of, pushed around, and inaccurately portrayed as savages, only because they were less advanced of a society. Throughout the next 400 years, American Indians have continued to struggle in their fight for sovereignty and equality. However, in recent decades, the Native Americans have pushed back against the colonizers and have slowly started to gain more and more independence in large part due to one particular industry; the gaming industry. Tribal casinos have brought forth many opportunities and advantages to the tribes that own these casinos and even non-tribal communities that surround these casinos, such as economic stability and a constant increase in sovereignty.

One particular tribe that these opportunities and advantages are clearly apparent is the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. The Grand Ronde tribes are located in Western Oregon and consist of over 60 tribes. Ever since the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde were established in the 1860's, they have built a tradition and culture based on pride and resilience in the face of turmoil. The Grande Ronde tribes were terminated in 1956, but after much protest against the government, the Restoration of Grand Ronde Act was signed in 1983 and the tribes of Grand Ronde gained back almost all of their land in exactly the same geographical area that they were once previously. Under this restoration act and the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA), the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde acquired additional rights and were able to build a

casino within their reservation boundaries, which was later named the Spirit Mountain Casino. Unlike some casinos, the Spirit Mountain Casino sufficiently represents the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde inside and out by way of association with logos and information about the tribes delivered throughout the casino floor and through social media sites, which confirms the proud tradition and culture of the Grand Ronde tribes.

Indian gaming has also created an outlet for many Native Americans and has given tribal members the ability to start a new life for themselves and their families, while also destroying negative stereotypes about American Indians and abolishing the inequality between tribal members and non-tribal members. American Indian casinos bring in hundreds of millions of dollars annually, which has contributed to increasingly stable tribal economies; directly relating to tribal members and their incomes as well, along with improved political power, sovereignty, and an overall feeling of hope by many tribes and their members. However, the success of tribal casinos was not built overnight. In fact, there is a hefty amount of work that goes into the process of just applying to build a casino, such as licensing, compacts, agreement upon tribal rights, and guidelines as to where the revenue from the casino is dispersed. Although tribes are thriving due to an enormous increase of income from casinos, the process of compromising compacts and licenses and tribal rights in order to build a casino is usually quite burdensome and challenging, along with the struggles of sovereignty and tampering of the states and federal government.

Most nations and communities find unity through culture and tradition, however, in most cases, the underlying backbone behind every nation is economic development and stability. This ideal holds much truth for many American Indian tribes trying to preserve their community through the establishment of casinos. Casinos are “cash cows”, usually receiving \$100 million+ annually in revenue. The effects that this increase in money is having on tribes and its inhabitants

are staggering to say the least. Throughout the last hundreds of years, Indian nations have struggled to gain sovereignty, struggled to develop and stabilize their economy, and some have even struggled to keep their own culture alive, but with the addition of casinos, American Indians' lives have been changed forever. The additional income from tribal casinos has enhanced most Native American's way of living, as well as enhancing actual tribal communities and the sovereignty of said communities.

### **Findings**

A current dilemma for Native American tribes in regards to tribal casinos has been its negative effect on tribal culture. In many cases, native tribes and even surrounding communities have observed that the increase in income due to the popularity of tribal casinos has caused tribes to overlook their own culture and focus more of their attention and time on the development and success of their own casinos instead of focusing their time on advancing and improving their own society. Angela Mullis and David Camper shed light on this conflict in their book, Indian Gaming: Who Wins?, by stating,

Indian gaming confuses an essential understanding of Indian communities because they are participating in an action they have never before performed and are practicing a custom that is not seen as 'traditional' and that generates unprecedented financial success. (Mullis & Kamper, 2006, p. x).

A conflict within tribes comes in the form of a choice; whether they go against "traditional customs" and increase their tribe's financial stability, or stay true to their culture and try to destroy the oppression, inequality, and stereotypes through hope and perseverance.

Through extensive research, I have found that The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde are incredibly well portrayed and represented through the Spirit Mountain Casino and are very active on social media, in order to communicate to tribal members or others interested in their tribal culture and customs. Both the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and Spirit Mountain

Casino are very active on Twitter and Facebook, as they use these social media sites to advertise meetings, promotions, and any new information that arises from the casino or tribe. The Spirit Mountain Casino and Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde also have websites that are marvelously maintained and contain an extensive amount of information about promotions, events, history, and news, as well as links to each other's websites. In addition, the Spirit Mountain Casino website includes a detailed history of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde (shown in Figure 1.A), which shows that the casino is still trying to represent themselves through their native culture. In many cases, Native American tribes "lose their way", but the Grand Ronde tribes continue to stay true to the tradition and culture that they have built and maintained throughout the past century, while also boosting their income and sovereignty with the Spirit Mountain Casino. Finally, numerous casinos' logos have no relation to the logos or cultural ideas of their tribes, which can be interpreted as tribal casinos trying to disassociate themselves from tribal culture. However, the Spirit Mountain Casino logo (Figure 2.A) contains a mountain with a wolf jumping across, while the Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde's logo contains a mountain as well, with feathers hanging down (Figure 2.B). The wolf is sacred to the Grand Ronde tribes, and the main attraction in both logos is the mountains, so to the layperson, one would be able to observe that the Spirit Mountain Casino is embracing the cultural background of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and has not lost their sense of culture. The significant similarity in logos further confirms the enormous association that the casino and tribe share with each other.

Figure 1.A

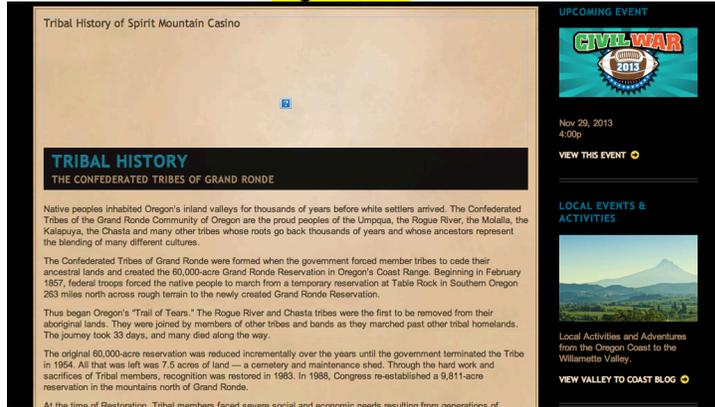


Figure 2.A



Figure 2.B

Another dilemma that every tribe has to endure is the legalities and policies put into place by the government for the tribes in order to establish and build a successful casino. The first objective in establishing a casino comes in the form of compacts, which occurs before planning the structure and management of that casino. Compacts are agreed upon in order to protect the rights of the government, tribes and states, as they basically state how the casino will be run. Each compact is specific to that certain tribe and state and all rules and regulations of that compact must be followed, or else the casino can be shut down due to illegal practice. Just like every other casino, the Spirit Mountain Casino has a document listing every rule and regulation

that has been agreed upon by the tribe, state and federal government. The specific “Grand Ronde Gaming Commission: Regulations” document actually contains more than 50 pages of different sections of regulation and rules from construction down to training and cheating protocol. These regulations are very specific and in many cases can significantly restrict the tribes and their ability to run their casino independently. Nevertheless, to appease the state, tribes adhere to these regulations and restrictions, in the hope of some gain in sovereignty. However, states usually tend to intervene and cause chaos for the tribes, which will be touched on in the “Rights of Tribes” section.

The next step in the process of establishing a casino is to acquire licensing. There are hundreds of licenses that need to be approved in order for a casino to operate smoothly and efficiently. Some examples of licenses in use at the Spirit Mountain Casino are employee licenses, liquor licenses, and licenses for each and every particular game on the casino floor. If one of these licenses are broken or expired, the federal government or state government can thereby shut down that particular operation by rule of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA). If a particular license is unavailable for use, the whole casino could falter and that could ruin their business completely. Overall, licenses are quite simple, but can go a long way in making the gaming industry honest and uncorrupt.

The most prevalent problem that arises with tribal casinos is the controversy over rights of the tribes and how states and federal government often intervene when they feel if necessary. Before the IGRA was formed, leadership by American Indians trying to operate and regulate the casinos was lacking. The Native Americans needed help running and regulating their new business, and when the IGRA was approved, its main purpose was to provide a legislative basis for the operation/regulation of Indian gaming, protect gaming as a means of generating revenue

for the tribes, encourage economic development of these tribes, and protect the enterprises from negative influences (Reference.com, 2009, p.2). As a result of the IGRA Native Americans gained some leadership and set regulations outlined by the federal government, but also gave up some sovereignty and independence in the process. Inouye furthers this statement in an interview by saying, “A deal was made wherein Indians set aside some of their sovereignty in return for what Congress and the tribes thought would be a ‘rational scheme of management of gaming activities on Indian lands’” (Mullis & Kamper, 2006, p.25) In this quote, Inouye stresses the fact that, instead of fighting to gain for sovereignty from the federal government and the states; it was best to try and appease the federal government, hoping that they would guide them through this business venture. However, some of the most substantial problems derive from intervention from the state. One example of state intervention has to do with a tribal-state compact for Class III gaming. Under the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, tribes are able to run and govern Class I and Class II operation independently, but Class III gaming, which includes high-stakes poker, slot machines, and lotteries, has to be agreed upon by the state and tribe in a compact. The problem was described by Chief Inouye, “...at this point in time states were avoiding compacting with tribes by asserting Eleventh Amendment immunity---they used the amendment to argue that the federal government cannot tell the states what to do” (Mullis & Kamper, 2006, p.25). A well-known fact by many tribal members and even non-tribal members is that state governments were not fond of tribal gaming and thought that casinos brought unwanted, organized crime to their states and were taking away from the state’s potential income. Because of this, some states, including Oregon were heavily affected by state intervention under Public Law 280. Public Law 280 affected six states, including Oregon, and its basic objective “was a transfer of legal authority (jurisdiction) from the federal government to state governments which significantly

changed the division of legal authority among tribal, federal, and state governments” (Gardner & Melton, 2004, p.1). The Indian Nations, who were significantly affected by Public Law 280, had to deal with immensely increased state authority and state control over a broad range of reservation activities without any tribal consent. Furthermore, Indian Nations lost control over many criminal and civil matters within their territory due to the policies of the federal and state governments. The transfer of jurisdiction to state control caused a huge decrease in sovereignty for Oregon tribes, such as the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and all other states that the Act affected.

After establishing and operating a successful tribal casino, tribes’ use of revenues has had an enormous impact on those tribes and their tribal members. For example, casinos have “opened the door” for many job opportunities for tribal members. The rise in employment for tribal members has led to less poverty for families within the tribes and also more money is available to be spent on other tribal businesses, further advancing and stabilizing tribal businesses their economy. According to Michael Killeen, the Spirit Mountain Casino owned and operated by the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, “...hired 1,200 people... 46 percent had been out of work, 35 percent had been on welfare, and 42 percent lacked health insurance” (Mullis & Kamper, 2006, p.102). The shocking statistics brought forth in this statement further highlights the need for the extra jobs within the tribal community. Due to the lack of job opportunities in countless amounts of tribes around the United States, tribal members are living in poverty and struggling to provide for their own families. Nevertheless, casinos have brought thousands of jobs to surrounding tribes and communities, which could possibly help most, if not all, tribal members and families fulfill more promising and enriched lives. In addition, the added income from the casino is also directed into tribal educational and healthcare systems. A combination of a lack of

resources and lack of teaching experience has led to very poor educational systems in many Native American tribes, such as The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. Before establishing the Spirit Mountain Casino, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde were relatively poor and the graduation and employment rate after American Indian schooling was diminishing exponentially. However, when the Spirit Mountain Casino was established and became profitable, a sizeable sum of money was re-invested into Grand Ronde educational systems, which led to a hefty increase in graduates and students interested in pursuing “higher-level” learning, as well as the amount of tribal members receiving jobs after schooling. Also, money from the Spirit Mountain Casino was placed into the healthcare systems, allowing for a much greater percentage of tribal members able to acquire health care. All in all, the overwhelming effects that casinos have on tribal members play an enormous role in enhancing the lives of many tribal members and how they live their day-to-day lives.

It is well known that many tribal casinos earn massive amounts of money, but one dilemma that all successful tribes with tribal casinos must undergo is the question of where to disperse these revenues. Under the IGRA, some of their money is required to be sent to the federal government and some of the money is required to be sent to tribal welfare policies, such as their educational and healthcare systems, but there still remains a colossal surplus of money available for tribe’s to use however they wish. This is where diversifying one’s assets is vital. Diversifying assets is formally defined as “a technique that reduces risk by allocating investments among various financial instruments, industries and other categories” (Investopedia Staff, 2011, p.1) and can be summed up by one phrase, “Don’t put all of your eggs in one basket”. The fact is that money from casinos is essential to have and has played a massive role in increasing the welfare of tribal members. Nevertheless, tribal casinos are volatile. If one thing

goes wrong inside of the casino or if an exogenous factor causes consumers' demand for a particular casino to decrease, that casino could lose money, become unprofitable and ultimately have to shut down operations, so it is imperative for tribes to spread out their assets in diverse "categories". For instance, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde are diversifying their assets inside and out of the tribe. For one, the Grand Ronde tribes have recently invested around \$10 million dollars into an environmentally friendly plastic technology company called "microGREEN" (PR Newswire, 2013, p.1). The Grand Ronde tribes are truly diversifying their assets by investing such a considerable sum of money into a company that has no affiliation with Native American culture. Also, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde are investing money into their own tribal members by setting aside \$60,000 to help aid housing costs for tribal members pursuing higher-level educational programs. The key motive behind these investments by the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde is to hopefully make a profit in returns, and that is the true meaning behind diversifying assets and maximizing possible profitable opportunities.

Tribal members are not the only beneficiaries from casino profits, for tribal communities prosper as well. A popular use of surplus casino revenues is to build sustainable communities, in order to advance and improve communities as a whole, which will directly improve life for tribal members within these communities as well. To provide an example, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde have used some of their casino revenue to open up classes and interviews, looking for instructors to relay messages from professionals to surrounding communities about developing sustainable housing practices, sustainable community infrastructure, strategic partnerships, cultural revitalization & sustainability, crime prevention policies, and fundraising & grant opportunities (Native News Network, 2013, p.1). An improvement in all of these communal practices together could result in a huge advancement in sustainability of tribal

communities, which could again directly enhance the lives of tribal members within the communities.

Casinos have paved the way for American Indians to succeed and live a more enriched life, but tribal casinos have also had an immense effect on surrounding communities and the civilians within those communities. A frequent issue that occurs in large part due to casinos is gambling addiction. There is no way to prove that casinos cause gambling addiction, but there is a direct correlation between gambling addiction and number of casinos. With more casinos, more people have the option to gamble, which has the potential for increases in the number of gambling addicts. Moreover, the increase in gambling addicts could potentially cause harm to the families of the gambling addict because the disposable income of these families are now being spent on gaming instead of being spent on the necessities and saving for the future. Also, the malevolent effects of gambling addiction are generally represented through a decrease in time spent with their families and an increase in alcohol consumption, which carries the possibility of tearing families apart even further. In order to counteract gambling addiction, certain casinos, such as the Spirit Mountain Casino offers gambling addiction classes in the hope to cut this addiction. In addition, casinos are affecting non-tribal communities negatively and positively. On the positive side, as stated previously, casinos have opened up many job opportunities for tribal and non-tribal members. As a result, the employment rate in surrounding communities escalates, which can create greater income and possibly a more stable economy and life for families. However, on the negative side, there is a direct correlation between number of casinos and organized crime rate. One of the main reasons why state governments interfere or even reject casino projects is the worry over an increase in organized crime, which also very well affects surrounding non-tribal communities. Organized crime should always be of concern, but it is an

exogenous factor, in which casinos have no control over. Nevertheless, non-tribal communities surrounding casinos are always at risk of organized crime and that is one of the largest problems casinos pose on non-tribal communities.

### **Conclusion**

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde are extremely proud of their history, tradition, and culture, and this is shown all throughout their casino, the Spirit Mountain Casino. The Grand Ronde tribes don't just talk about their past and present culture through stories; they celebrate their past and present culture. Even the information offered within the casinos and tribes contains proud connotation, using the words "sovereignty" and "independence" multiple times (Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, 2013, p.1). Many native tribes have lost some form of their culture because of casinos, but some tribes, such as the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde have found a middle way between the two, conciding together and working in harmony.

Tribal casinos have also done wonders for the people living on reservations, for it has improved tribal economies, political power, and battle for sovereignty. However, the American Indians always seem to run into problems with state and federal government when trying to gain total sovereignty. The battle for sovereignty and against oppression continues on for American Indian tribes, but tribal casinos are a step in the right direction for Native Americans..

Through my findings, it is apparent that casinos have a drastic effect on tribal communities and its members, along with non-tribal communities and its members. Aside from the problems that casinos potentially cause directly and indirectly, casinos have played a vital role in developing and stabilizing tribal economies and societies as a whole. Due to the economic development, tribal communities and tribal members are presented with more opportunities to improve and enrich their lives and the lives of every generation "down the line". Overall, tribal

casinos are filled with pros and cons dealing with cultural, political, and economical issues. The success of Native American tribes depends on how they deal with each and every one of these issues. The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde have endured all of the same issues that most tribes endure, for they have persevered against termination, oppression, stereotypes, and tampering by governments. Throughout this perseverance, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde have improved the lives of tribal members, lives of surrounding community members, and their tribe as a whole with the addition of the Spirit Mountain Casino, while also continuing to fight the battle for equality and complete sovereignty.

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