

*The Struggle for Sovereignty*  
A Cultural, Economic, and Political Analysis of the Nisqually Tribe

Mason Kaldwell Hellickson Bernard  
University of Washington  
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Summary: Since the implementation of the Red Wind Casino, the Nisqually Tribe of Olympia, Washington, have encountered cultural, economic, and political affects that both progress and impair the heritage, culture, and lifestyle of their tribal members.

## Background

Since the early 1830's, Native Americans have been trying to further emphasize the fact that they are of a sovereign nature. The heritage of the Tribal Natives dates back thousands of years before European colonization. Yet why do Natives still seek for sovereignty nearly 200 years after they established themselves as independent people? Today, tribes have found casinos as prosperous modes of income to finance various activities, events, funds, and groups within their own tribes. Specifically, the Nisqually Tribe of Olympia, Washington. A tribe that is located near the Southern Puget Sound of Washington State. The Nisqually people are entitled to ownership of the Red Wind Casino - also located in Olympia, Washington.

*The people of the river, the people of the grass.* The Nisqually tribe is a sovereign government of the original peoples of the Pacific Northwest, and one of the principal native societies around the Puget Sound. The tribes people vision their native lands as a sacred harmony where people can live interconnected with all things. Nisqually tradition dates back thousands of years ago. According to legend, the Squalli-absch (ancestors of the modern Nisqually Indian Tribe), came north from the Great Basin, crossed the Cascade Mountain Range and erected their first village in a basin now known as Skate Creek, just outside the Nisqually River Watershed's southern boundary. Later, a major village would be located near the Mashel River (Welcome to Nisqually). The Nisqually Reservation, as it has become known today, was established by the Medicine Creek Treaty of December 26, 1854. In just two short years, the Nisqually people managed to re-establish a greater portion of their land that stretched across both sides of the Nisqually River – an increase in nearly 3,500 acres (History Link.org). In winter of 1917, the U.S.

Army forcibly removed the Nisqually people from their homes without warning. The U.S. condemned 3,353 of sacred land in exchange for \$75, 840 in order to expand the Fort Lewis Base (Governors Office of Indian Affairs). Today, the tribal reservation stands strong at over 5,000 acres. With over 700 active members, the majority of whom live on or near the reservation. The tribe seeks environmental stewardship programs to protect and enhance the natural environment surrounding their community. Nisqually's vision is to "keep the native people and culture alive and strong so that they can contribute a better and future life, and make the world around us a better place to live." (Welcome to Nisqually).

Since the opening of the Casino in 1997, The Red Wind Casino has steadily supplied financial benefits to the Nisqually Tribe. Although Red Wind does not release their annual revenues, Red Wind General Manager Quinton Boshoff said the casino had its best year ever last year, generating double-digit growth in revenue and profit in 2011. To get there has meant an emphasis on customer service, helped by reducing staff turnover by fifty percent, and boosting the number of gaming machines to 975, he said (Reznet News). Although Nisqually economic conditions have improved, the tribe is unable to provide elders with a monthly check, though there is funding for education. There is funding for any member to enhance their educational desires. They offer assistance for tuition, books and some additional expenses. With this said, the Tribal Members who are in control of Nisqually's revenues are aware of the impact that their casino has on their own tribe. Even though some argue that casinos pose as a negative influence toward society, The Red Wind Casino provides several economic benefits to the surrounding community from being a major philanthropic output to the casino,

buying and selling of local goods/services, and providing hundreds of jobs to surrounding community members.

## **Findings**

As aforementioned above, The Red Wind Casino along with many other Washington State Casinos do not release their annual revenues. Even though these tribes do not disclose revenue figures, the state Gambling Commission, which provides data on gambling receipts, shows that estimated tribal casino net receipts statewide grew to \$1.74 billion in 2012 from \$1.57 billion in 2011 (The Olympian). It can be safely assumed that The Red Wind Casino also saw an increase in revenues from 2011 to 2012, allowing them to make charitable donations to the surrounding community.

The tribe contributes more than \$1 million each year from casino revenues to charitable and nonprofit organizations and local governments that extend the benefits of the operation into the surrounding communities, according to the statement (Nisqually Valley News). The corporation manager of economic development of the Nisqually Tribe, John Simmons, said, ““We’re proud of the casino’s success and we welcome the opportunity to keep growing, to keep generating income and to benefit our members.”” This statement alone reiterates the fact that The Red Wind Casino positions itself as a benevolent factor within the Nisqually community.

With 38 major Casinos across Washington State, The Red Wind Casino must find ways to diversify itself in order to remain competitive in the gambling market. To remain competitive, many Casinos nationwide are converting into resorts that also provide other means of entertainment and income. The Nisqually Tribe understands the importance of

this notion so they too have made plans to expand and remain competitive within Washington.

A \$45 million expansion of the Nisqually Red Wind Casino will bring roughly 300 new jobs to the area and will continue to fuel a significant economic expansion that has occurred within the Nisqually Indian Tribe in the last year. Construction is set to begin on the casino expansion project next month and will be completed by December 2014. In all, 42,700 square feet of gaming space will be added to the current 95,000-square-foot structure. A remodeling of the parking structure will add 600 spots. The expanded space will include a smoke-free casino. Only about one percent of the approximate 400 employees at the casino are members of the Nisqually Tribe. Many of the tribe's 766 members are employed in tribal government positions; there are about 300 such positions. In all, the costly addition to the Red Wind Casino will be a constructive movement to better serve the financial, educational, and social aspects of the Nisqually community. To explain, greater revenues are to be expected by this new expansion. With greater revenues, the Nisqually community can expect to aid a greater number of its tribal members on an even larger scale.

The remodeled and expanded casino will carry on with a natural elements theme begun with the construction of the Tribal Center. That building's roof is curved to reflect the back of a fish and the flowing Nisqually River. The old tribal building behind it is being remodeled with a pitched roof, which is reflective of a mountain. The upgraded casino building will incorporate grass-like elements because the Nisqually Tribe's historic name, *Schally-Absch*, means people of the river and people of the grass country. The original casino, which was built in 1997, is the tribe's economic engine and revenues

from that business have allowed the tribe to expand its economic presence in the region. Although the current benevolent structure provides for the Nisqually people financially, it does not represent the rich heritage and culture of the tribe – something the renovated casino seeks to accomplish.

Four new tribal businesses have opened within the past year alone. The tribe has a new construction company called Nisqually Federal WHH Construction.

The tribe opened a seafood processing plant, called *She-nah-num Seafood*, in Tumwater about six months ago. Tribal fishermen sell their catch to the plant, which processes it and prepares it for retail sale. Then the seafood is purchased by casinos, buffets and fine-dining restaurants up and down the coast. The tribe has also opened two convenience stores, the Nisqually Market in Lakewood and the Nisqually Market Express in the Nisqually Valley near Interstate 5. Both of those have opened within the past year (Nisqually Valley News). Overall, the Red Wind Casino has successfully utilized local goods and services to benefit both the Casino and surrounding community. Fortunately, the Casino has been successfully applying these business practices to the extent that they are in a financial position to expand on a large scale.

The Nisqually Tribe does not receive economic benefits that directly support the elders of the tribe, but large sums of money directly affect education and development programs. To explain, High school graduation rates are improving for the tribe. Students are enrolled in the local school district, and the tribe provides tutors. Also, those who decide to go on to college are eligible to receive tuition. The tribe also contributes two percent of its table gambling receipts to support public services, such as 911 emergency services, and one percent of slot machine revenue to charities, said Jeff Warnke, a tribe

spokesman (Reznert News). In addition, The Red Wind Casino provides over 400 jobs to citizens within the Olympia community, forty of which are Nisqually Tribal members. Although these employment figures do not seem impressive, the Casino allows for external economic growth that cannot be measured. For instance, The Red Wind Casino is located on Yelm Highway. Just south of the Casino along this road is a community that resides in Yelm, Washington. Since 1997, the year the Casino first came about, Yelm has developed into a residential community with several neighborhoods, high schools, and general stores. All of which did not exist before the Casino was implemented.

Opinions vary amongst citizens around The Red Wind Casino as to whether or not their Casino provides a positive or negative impact to their society as a whole. As for the possible negative connotations that could come about from having a casino in your own community, they may include: crime and morale decline, sleaze and filth near the casino, internal corruption (money laundering, loan sharking, etc.), DUI related incidents, home robberies, gambling addiction, and drug use. Many of these negative aspects reside from gambling or illegal behavior that comes from the typical clientele of a casino. In addition, with alcohol being supplied at a Casino such as The Red Wind, a case could be made that more alcohol related incidents would occur – as if a bar was positioned within the community. To many, the existence of a casino is portrayed as a place of corruption, damaging the culture and heritage of native lands.

As for the positive connotations that might come from having a Casino near your community, they could possibly include: jobs for non-tribal members, charitable donations/projects, educational benefits, tax revenues to state governments, college

scholarships, increase in incremental business to local businesses, and a source of entertainment for the local community. These constructive motives are the reasons why Casinos are placed in undeveloped and even possibly economically struggling areas. As for the Red Wind Casino, it has proven to be a positive influence on society that provides both economic and ethical benefits to its own population.

After covering the positive and negative connotations that follow the existence of a casino, it is hard to imagine why a tribe would forgo their right to run a casino. With millions of dollars at stake to potentially benefit the economic and social aspects of their community, the Nisqually people decided to do just this in 1997 – open their own casino. As easy as this may sound, the tribe continuously encounters hindrances that strongly regulate the operations of the casino. To explain, Even though the Nisqually Tribe lives within the United States of America, they aren't given enough leeway as to what they can or cannot do because compacts and licensing strictly regulate the actions of their tribe and the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (“IGRA”) controls the operations of the Red Wind Casino.

With \$23.4 Million in estimated annual revenue (Nisqually Red Wind Casino Corp Profile), the Red Wind Casino has established themselves as a moderately sized casino. Their revenues come from Class I, II, and III game types, in majority 70% of their revenue is comprised of Class III gaming made up of twenty-three different game types (Tribal- State Compacts for Class III Gaming). However, State and Federal governments set restrictions to these large sources of income – obstructing the notion of a “sovereign nation”. For instance, in the *Tribal-State Compact for Class III Gaming*, the compact declares that, “The policy of the state, as set forth in Chapter 9.46 RCW, is to allow

limited and highly regulated casino gaming for non-profit organizations, and to restrain persons from seeking profit from professional gambling activities.” This statement alone shows the assertion made by the Washington State government to regulate the actions of the Red Wind Casino. Even though state governments are notorious for their confining actions toward these casinos, federal governments have had a positive impact. To explain, in *Seminole Tribe v. Butterworth*, a 1981 Supreme Court Case It allowed the Seminole Tribe of Florida to conduct a gaming enterprise in Florida (Wikimedia Foundation), and was a major U.S. court case protecting Indian gaming, and helped pave the way for Indian gaming, although it brought up the issue of implicit divestiture a judicial issue concerning the rights of indigenous sovereignty within the United States federal trust. Here began the legal war of Indian gaming with a win for the Seminoles.

Another conflict Natives face under the scrutiny of anglos is that they do not responsibly finance their own casinos. Critics might assume that all profits of a tribal casino go directly to its owners, not the tribe itself. In reality, Nisqually’s investments are not only providing jobs and training opportunities for tribal members, they are also providing economic benefits throughout the region as tribal enterprises buy goods and services locally from private businesses. For instance, the Stone Ground Bakery is a local business that began in the 1990’s, at around the same time that the casino opened. Stound Ground Bakery’s clientele are frequent travelers along highway 510 (Proctor Farmers’ Market Vendor) traveling to and from the Red Wind Casino. As a small business that works solely out of Yelm, Washington, it can be assured that their revenues would decline if the casino were to be shut down. It is instances like this that make the Red

Wind Casino an altruistic facility that serves to benefit the surrounding native community.

The Nisqually Tribe also donates more than \$1 million from casino revenue to benefit community charitable and non-profit organizations, and local governments (Thurston Talk). The Red Wind Casino is managed by the tribe's Medicine Creek Enterprise Corporation, which is chaired by John Simmons. "We're proud of the Casino's success and we welcome the opportunity to keep growing, to keep generating revenue to benefit our members," Simmons said (Nisqually Red Wind Casino Corp). The original Red Wind Casino, opened in 1997, has grown to 95,000 square feet of space and features three restaurants, 975 video lottery terminals and a wide assortment of table games. Success stories like that of the Red Wind Casino are what made the U.S. government intervene in the 1980's. Thus, shortly after the IGRA was released in 1988, a 43-page list of compacts was issued to the Red Wind Casino to ensure safe practices, operations, and gambling within their casino. IGRA provides for the negotiation of compacts between States and Tribes to govern the conduct of Class III gaming. Indian tribes have rights under IGRA to regulate gaming activities on Indian lands if the gaming activity is not specifically prohibited by Federal law and is conducted within a state which does not, as a matter of criminal law and public policy, prohibit such gaming activity. The overarching policy of the Act is to provide a framework for the operation of gaming by Indian tribes as a means of promoting Tribal economic development, self sufficiency, and strong Tribal governments, as well as providing a basis for the regulation of gaming by an Indian tribe adequate to shield it from organized crime and other corrupting influences. The Act also serves to ensure fair and honest gaming within native

communities by both operators and players. The Tribal-State Compact of Class III Gaming between the Nisqually Tribe and the Washington State Government does not limit the Nisqually people as much as other compacts nationwide. For instance, revenues are not exclusively controlled by Washington State. Within the compact, heavy regulations are made toward licensing and certification requirements on gaming operations, gaming employees, manufacturers, suppliers, and financiers (Tribal-State Compact for Class III Gaming).

### **Conclusion**

All in all, the Red Wind Casino is under the same supremacy that most tribal casinos face in that they are confined to the limits and guidelines set by the United States government. Fortunately, the Red Wind Casino stands as a positive infrastructure near the Washington State Capital that promotes economic growth and strong culture for its tribe. Even though some argue today that the Red Wind Casino portrays the culture of the tribe poorly, with the new \$45 million renovation that is to be completed in December 2014, the casino will swiftly portray the rich tradition and culture of the Nisqually. Yet state governments look to find ways to shut down these prosperous locales. State Governments see the thriving operations that go on within the casino and they feel that they should be acquiring some of the profits of the casino's. Overall, these casinos would be capable of producing an even greater output of lucrative development if it weren't for the limitations that the United States places on these "sovereign nations". As for the Nisqually, they are partially limited through their state-tribal compacts yet they contribute millions of dollars in revenue to their tribe and local community. Near the end of my research I attempted to contact Nisqually tribal leaders in an attempt to attain primary research. Unfortunately, I

received no response from Simmons Pauline, a Human Resources Officer for the Nisqually tribe. Nevertheless I am sure the research done on the small tribe of the Nisqually given here is sufficient enough to gain a greater understanding of this historic coastal tribe of Washington State and the Red Wind Casino.



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