

The Twilight Saga and the Quileute Indian Tribe: Opportunity or Cultural Exploitation?

By
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ABSTRACT:

This case explores the impact of a blockbuster series of books and films, “The Twilight Saga,” on the Quileute Indian Tribe and the small town of Forks, Washington. The Quileute Indian Reservation and the town of Forks are the setting for the “Twilight” series. Twilight is a story of teenage love between Bella Swan, and a vampire, Edward Cullen. The character, Jacob Black, portrayed as a member of the Quileute Tribe and a werewolf, is also vying for Bella’s affection. Numerous fan clubs have organized around Club Jacob and Club Edward. The case raises questions about the impact of popular culture and the dynamics of community economic development. The case also raises the question about whether this is a story of opportunity or cultural exploitation?

In 2005 Stephenie Meyer, a stay-at-home mother of three, published the book *Twilight* which quickly became a blockbuster. The first book was quickly followed by three others: *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*. All would eventually be made into motion pictures. On her website, Meyer indicates that she came up with the idea in a dream in 2003. She chose Forks, Washington as the setting for *Twilight* “after Googling for the rainiest place in America and was pleased to find the Quileute nearby.” (Yim, July 5, 2009) Neither Forks nor the Quileute Tribe would ever be the same.

A sleepy logging community of 3175, Forks is known for its remote location, its struggling economy, and an annual rainfall of more than 120 inches. Located nearly 5 hours west of Seattle on the west end of the Olympic National Park, Forks is named after its location at the forks of the Calawah, Soleduck and Bogachiel Rivers. While the filming of the *Twilight* series moved to British Columbia (which offers film companies generous tax credits) after the first film, Forks remains a center for *Twilight* tourism. The town has been quick to promote itself. Friendly staff at the Visitors Center welcome tourists from across the world to pick up driving guides and put themselves on the maps on the wall that are dotted with pushpins from other visitors. Life size cardboard *Twilight*

¹ Barbara Leigh Smith is a Member of the Faculty at The Evergreen State College and co-director of the Native Cases Initiative. This case and teaching notes are copyright (2010) by The Evergreen State College and can be downloaded at <http://nativecases.evergreen.edu>. Please use appropriate attribution when using our cases. Thanks to Bill Peach, Executive Director of the Quileute Tribe, for reading and providing suggestions on an early draft of this case and for attending and presenting the Quileute perspective at our first class where this case was discussed.

figures of the major characters as well as Dr. Cullen’s white doctor’s coat and stethoscope are available for photo ops.

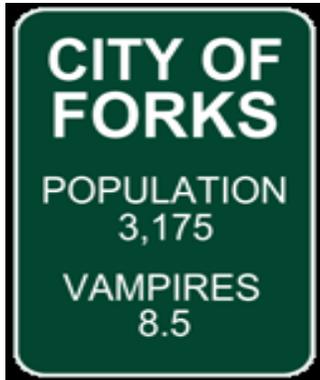
The website “A Travel Guide to Forks, Washington” contains information about traveling to Forks, lodging, *Twilight* locations, products, and tours. Tours include stops at actual and recreated sites such as the high school, the Swan and Cullen houses, the beach at La Push (on the Quileute Indian Reservation), and even a peek at Dr Cullen’s parking space at the local hospital. At the Chamber of Commerce “mail for the vampire Cullen family is being saved and ...props for exciting photos are treasured and shared” (Bingham, 2009).



Downtown Forks



Bella’s Truck at the Visitor Center

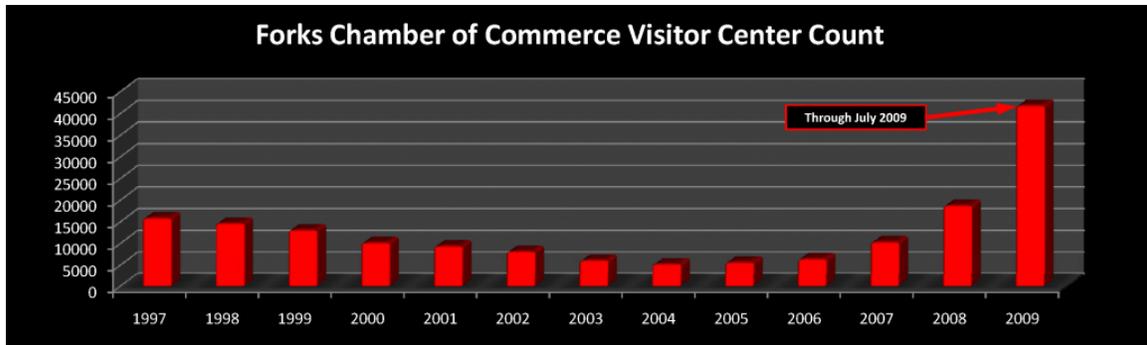


Souvenirs



Visitor Center

The visitor center has experienced explosive growth with 69,975 visitors in 2009 compared with 18,736 the year before (Visitor Center Statistics, 2010). Sales tax revenues and hotel-motel taxes received by the City of Forks also increased substantially. In a town with a struggling economy transitioning from being a major timber town, most residents appreciate the fame and business that *Twilight* has brought.



The buzz continues to grow. Chris Cook’s book *Twilight Territory: A Fan’s Guide to Forks and La Push* recounts the growth of the community response as Mike Gurling, the Visitor Center director, and others realized the potential for serving the growing number of *Twilight* visitors. Gurling and his wife Marcia drove around town and talked with local businesses about how they might respond with themed food items, maps, and other products (Cook, 2009, pp. 12-15). Stephenie Meyer Day is now celebrated annually with a major celebration. The official date is September 13—the date of Bella’s birthday—and one of the critical turning point dates in the novels. More than a thousand *Twilight* fans, mostly teenage girls and several hundred *Twilight*MOMS, journey to Forks for the celebration. During the celebration they can attend activities including Bella’s Ball, a look-alike contest, a *Twilight* trivia contest, and much more.

A number of stores devoted to *Twilight* are located at the center of town on Forks Avenue. The largest by far is “Dazzled by Twilight,” the town’s popular *Twilight*-only store, which also runs tours and has a smaller store in Port Angeles. Across the street is the Chinook Pharmacy which stocks *Twilight* products as well as handmade Native art by artists from the nearby Quileute, Hoh and Makah tribes and books on Native history and culture. On the other side of the street at the “Native to Twilight” store even more *Twilight* souvenirs and authentic Native artwork are available.





The Quileute Tribe and *Twilight*

The nearby Quileute Indian Reservation has also become an “unwitting tourist mecca” for *Twilight* fans. Attention to this remote community will probably only increase since Jacob, Bella’s Quileute friend, is a much more prominent figure in the later books and the final film which has not yet been released.



Harbor in the village of La Push on the Quileute Reservation

The one square mile Quileute Indian reservation is located on the Pacific Ocean. Fishing is the main occupation in this small community. Land disputes and shifting boundaries are continuing themes in Quileute history as a result of numerous unresolved survey errors and the rising waters from global warming. Surrounded on three sides by the Olympic National Park, the Tribe has been trying to secure additional higher ground to move to for many years. (See the case Ralston, “Is Your Tribal Land Secure,” for discussion of this issue).



Opinions vary on what the *Twilight* attention has wrought. In an article in the *New York Times*, “*Twilight* vamp franchise sucks the Quileute dry,” UCLA professor of American Indian Studies Angela Riley says,

To millions of “*Twilight*” fans, the Quileute are Indians whose (fictional) ancient treaty transforms young males of the tribe into vampire-fighting wolves. To the nearly 700 remaining Quileute Indians, “*Twilight*” is the reason they are suddenly drawing extraordinary attention from the outside — while they themselves remain largely excluded from the vampire serie’s vast commercial empire.

Just last month, MSN.com issued an apology to the Quileute for intruding on its territory while videotaping a “*Twilight*” virtual tour in September. MSN.com sought permission from the Chamber of Commerce in nearby Forks, Wash., but didn’t pay the same courtesy to the Quileute. The video team trespassed onto a reservation cemetery and taped Quileute graves, including those of esteemed tribal leaders. These images were then set to macabre music and, in November, posted on MSN.com. The tribe quickly persuaded MSN.com to remove the Quileute images. (Riley, Feb 7, 2010)

Noting that the *Twilight* commercialization that has produced t-shirts, cups and numerous other products carrying the Quileute name is perfectly legal, Riley argues that the issue isn’t simply about “whether outsiders are free to appropriate tribal cultural property. For the sake of fairness as much as law, indigenous peoples must play a significant role in decisions regarding their cultural property.” (Riley, Feb 7, 2010)

Chris Eyre, a Cheyenne and Arapaho filmmaker who directed the well known film *Smoke Signals*, is more sanguine. He says the key aspect of the *Twilight* series is that it “shows Native Americans in a contemporary light ...we want to see Native people in 2010. We’re tired of seeing Native people in 1860” (Valdes, 2010).

But the concern has some grounding. Many argue that Indians have been stereotyped in the media and literature for years, and there continues to be appropriation of their culture, history and art by the larger society(See, for example, P. Deloria, 1998, 2004; Mihesuah, 2004; Rollins and O’Connor, 1999; Buscombe, 2010; V. Deloria 1992; 2005) Furthermore, werewolves are anathema to many tribes. The *Twilight Saga*, they might

argue, raises questions about this portrayal of Native Americans especially in the absence of other images. Given the history of how Native Americans have been treated, we need to ask what other images of contemporary Native Americans are out there, and what role do Native Americans have in this?

There is also debate about the impact of tourism on traditional cultures. While some argue that tourism can help fund and support cultural revival, others contend that tourism more often disrupts traditional cultures. Furthermore, with the exception of casinos, tourism usually produces very minimal economic benefits, with most of the real profit leaving the communities. (Nagel, 1997, pp. 51-53)

Some observers are also raising other questions about the series, asking whether Bella's rush to marry a vampire is a good role model for teenage girls? A vigorous debate about the appropriateness of the books has ensued among communications experts and some Christian organizations. But does pop culture really adversely influence young people? While some are concerned, others contend that adults are being overly protective, saying that teenagers clearly understand the difference between reality and fantasy and are not naive and easily influenced (Puente 2010). Christine Seifert, a communications professor at Westminster College in Salt Lake City, has studied *Twilight* message boards and fan sites and says the saga is strongly Mormon in tone and is pro-abstinence. Meanwhile, Stephenie Meyer, a Mormon herself, is quoted as saying she never intended the characters to be seen as role models. (Puente, 2010)

Engaging the Opportunity

News reports indicate that the members of the Quileute tribe have mixed feelings about their newfound notoriety. After a long period of privately discussing the issues related to *Twilight* but not making any public statements on the *Twilight* phenomena, the Tribe announced in June 2009 that they had hired Jackie Jacobs of JTalentgroup, a Native-owned entertainment agency specializing in public relations, as Tribal Publicist to manage all the *Twilight* attention. Tribal chairwoman Carol Hatch is quoted as saying that it was important to partner with a Native-based organization that understands and identifies with their core values of respecting their land and protecting their culture but is also welcoming people who want to learn. (Quileute Tribe Press Release June 1, 2009)

In the press release announcing her appointment, Jacobs said,

I am honored to work with the Quileute Nation and look forward to assisting them with sharing their cultural identity and heritage with the world. The *Twilight* Saga has put them in the International spotlight and afforded them the opportunity to share their own stories, dances, food and other traditions passed down from generation to generation. (Quileute Tribe Press Release, June 1, 2009)

Jacobs subsequently announced that a New Mexico based, cable network, ReelzChannel had been granted access to film a 30 minute documentary, "The *Twilight* Weekly: Spotlight," on the Reservation. Access was apparently granted because of the media's

willingness to address tribal concerns and work within restrictions set by the Tribe (Herrmann, Nov 6, 2009). The 30 minute video, now available on the Tribe's website, provides an excellent introduction to the Quileute tribe and the ways which they are responding to the *Twilight* craze.

While many aspects of Meyer's description of Quileute culture are fictitious² (for example, the Quileute origin legend does have them descended from wolves, but not werewolves), some tribal members are embracing the opportunity the "Twilight Saga" has provided to tell their story (Dickerson, *Peninsula Daily News*, 11/30/2009). As you enter the small ocean side community of La Push, a Jacob's Java espresso stand is on your right. *Twilight* related information has been made available to the public on the Tribe's website which also includes clear statements about appropriate etiquette.

The Quileute Tribe's Executive Director, Bill Peach, says that the important thing is that the Tribe maintain its dignity in dealing with the Twilight phenomena and share its culture in a respectful way. From a business point of view, he says, it is important to not overestimate the short term impact and under-estimate the long term. The Tribe, he contends has a different view of time as it considers these issues. (Peach, class presentation, December 4, 2010) He hopes visitors will come away from their visit to La Push with a deep appreciation of nature and the beauty of the area. "The value of a \$5 Twilight mug pales in comparison to the value of coming to appreciate this spectacular landscape," says Peach also noting that "more than two thirds of our visitors to the Tribe's Oceanside Resort are repeat customers. We hope that number will increase."

"At the ... Resort, business is booming and the tribe is opening a cabin decorated in a wolf theme, a shout out to Jacob and the Quileutes's own origin story, which begins with a transformation from wolves to people." (Valdes, 2010) While visitors won't find many commercial *Twilight* products, beautiful handmade traditional cowichin wool hats with "Jacob" and "Twilight" stitched on them by Quileute artist Ann Penn-Charles (Miss Ann) and her mother are available at the Oceanside Resort store and the Tribe's Lonesome Creek Store which has a bulletin board where you can leave notes for *Twilight* characters. A quick read of the notes shows that Jacob clearly rules here!

² In his critical essay on the Twilight series Jensen states that while Meyer conducted some limited research to authenticate her Quileute characters, they are more a product of her imagination and of "romantic and patronizing western stereotypes of the 'noble savage' than a faithful attempt to represent Quileute culture." (Jensen, 2010, p. 92)



Lonesome Creek Store

The Tribe also hosts weekly drum circles where visitors can come and learn more about Quileute history. In November 2009, members of the Tribal Council and their guests traveled to Hollywood for the premier of the second film of “The Twilight Saga: New Moon” and tribal chair Carol Hatch was invited to walk the red carpet. (Martin, 3/7/10) As one observer notes, “instead of focusing on the liberties Stephenie Meyer took in making up a fictional culture for a tribe and naming it Quileute, the Quileute have focused on getting more of their youth to dance, to know their songs, and practice the culture (Briggs, 2010).

There have also been some surprising unanticipated spin-offs according to Bill Peach, Executive Director the Tribe. Collaboration between the Tribe and Forks has increased. Tribal youth are gaining some new perspectives from visitors from Germany and elsewhere and the Quileute Tribe itself is becoming known. Everyone was surprised and pleased when a substantial check arrived one day from a charity event on a cruise ship focusing on *Twilight*. Most visitors are respectful and understand community needs when they are explained to them. Nonetheless, having more than 300 visitors descend on a small community of about 300 people at one time is a bit overwhelming! (Peach class presentation, Evergreen State College, December 4, 2010)

In August, 2010, the Seattle Art Museum opened an exhibit on Quileute culture called “Behind the Scenes: The Real Story of the Quileute Wolves.” News reports covering the opening indicate that

...while some members of the tribe have taken their Hollywood persona mostly in good-humored stride, some elders at Quileute are not amused. At their urging, the tribal council passed a resolution authorizing Barbara Brotherton, curator of Native American art at SAM (Seattle Art Museum), to work with the tribe to create the exhibit, to show the world a bit of the real Quileute culture. (Mapes, August 11, 2010)

The exhibit includes 30 objects, many from the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian. The Quileute suffered a major cultural loss in 1888 when a major fire destroyed their village and many cultural objects. In the early 20th century famed New York Native art collector Gustav Heye worked to assemble a major

collection of remaining artifacts and eventually placed these at the Smithsonian. Most of the artifacts in the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) exhibit had never been exhibited or seen by living Quileute so the exhibit represents a very important event to the Tribe. Among other things, the exhibit includes precious children's drawings about their culture (Briggs, 2010). Educational resources and a timeline describing major events in the Tribe's 12,000 year history are also included. *Twilight* has found itself to be an event worthy of noting on the historical timeline. Later that year the Burke Museum at the University of Washington produced a major website called "Truth vs Twilight" that provides considerable information and resources. (See https://www.burkemuseum.org/static/truth_vs_twilight/)

Meanwhile, other tribes are also embracing the *Twilight* opportunity. In the summer of 2010 the nearby Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe sponsored an *Eclipse* Weekend at their recently opened casino as the new film in the *Twilight* series made its debut. Visitors were invited to enter a contest to win a 1953 red Chevy *Twilight* truck replica with Washington VAMPIRE plates. The Quileute, in the meantime, are collaborating with the Burke Museum recently launched a website "Truth versus Twilight" (BurkeMuseum.org/static/truth_vs_twilight) with the real Quileute story to counter misconceptions from the films.

Is the Twilight story an example of cultural appropriation or opportunity? Can the Tribe manage this situation as an opportunity congruent with their cultural values? How would they do this?

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