

Probing the Relationship Between Native Americans and Ecology

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“More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one” -Lynn White, Jr

For many years, ecologists have been trying to get people to think of the world in ecological terms—that is, seeing the interconnectedness of the natural world and by doing it through purely empirical research. More specifically, to see humans not as rulers of the earth but as fellow citizens with all life forms and to see the biosphere as a continually conserved natural order of nutrients cycling through both living and non-living parts of the environment. This interconnectedness is evident in genome analysis, as every living organism shares vastly similar genes. All of this information would never have to be taught to a typical Native American, however. Their entire method of living is inherently ecological because, to them, everything in the natural world was interrelated and shared the same life. Their lifestyles as well as their religion only served to emphasize this relationship between man and his environment.

Modern ecologists have only recently started to appreciate Native Americans’ ecological practices and have developed what is called Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) that employs more traditional methods of assessing the human relationship to the environment (Berkes 2000). It offers a means to improve not only research, but resource management and environmental impact assessment as well. These include knowledge of ecological principles, such as succession and interrelatedness of all components of the environment; use of ecological indicators; sustainably harvesting resources; effective systems of knowledge acquisition and transfer; respectful and interactive attitudes and philosophies; close identification with ancestral lands; and beliefs that recognize the power and spirituality of nature.

There is an abundance of evidence to show that in traditional hunting cultures the hunting of game animals takes place within the context of respect for

animals and that hunting itself is understood to be a sacred occupation. A large number of rituals and rules concerning the treatment of animals attest to the fact that in many hunting cultures, hunting is as much a religious pursuit as a practical one. Purification in sweat lodges is done both before and after the hunt to ensure ritual purity as well as gaining rules and regulations for the hunt. Central to the idea that hunting is a sacred occupation is the idea that animals, like human beings, are conscious, social, powerful spiritual beings who must be approached in respectful ways. Disrespecting these animals results in an unsuccessful hunt as well as poor report with the sacred.

The relationship between the Natives and their environment cannot, however, be overstated. There were many instances of their misuse of the land, overhunting game and overpopulating of their own tribes. “Some Indian pronouncements sound as if the whole universe, particularly the natural environment, is sacred. This is not so...Conservationists have mistakenly assumed that Indians are ecologists because the supposedly care for all of nature. In fact, there are many proofs of the devastation of nature by Indians” (Hultkrantz 24). There is, of course, some truth in this. Natives also lived in a time before empirical research, so calling them “ecological” is somewhat myopic. However, the Natives did, in fact, pay more attention to their environment much more than any other known culture of the time because nature, to them, stood for a representation of the sacred.

There are two main types of Native American religions—hunting cultures and agricultural societies. Both included numerous ceremonies and rituals with their way of life and showed respect for everything they killed for sustenance. Animals had to be treated properly because they could represent spirits, as well as plants which could give evidence

of the supernatural and the land which could reveal God. "If we describe a Native American as a conservationist, we do not mean that he calculates sustainable yield into the distant future... but rather that he does not waste or 'despoil, exhaust or extinguish,' and [he] leaves the environment and resources like animal populations in a usable state for succeeding generations" (Krech 26).

If an area lacks sufficient game, hunters will leave the area long enough to allow game populations to develop. Care of hunted animals is also important because Natives believe that animal spirits inspected campsites after they had left to see if animal remains were disposed of properly. These animal spirits could be easily upset if proper precautions were not made and would leave the area permanently. In general, Native Americans attempted to some extent to treat everyplace as if it were sacred. "He constantly relates the presence of absence of animals and the ease with which they are found and killed to beliefs about animal masters, the spirits that control the different game species" (Kinsley 10).

A key theme in Native American religion is the understanding of hunting as a reciprocal relationship between the hunter and the hunted. They also think of game animals as those that give themselves to the hunter for sustenance. Thinking about a successful hunt as primarily the receiving of a gift puts the emphasis, not on the actions and skill of the hunter, but on the violation of the animal who is killed. To give thanks for such a favor, the hunter in return reciprocates by observing a series of ritual gestures that communicate his respect and gratitude to the animal. The act of hunting itself involves a reciprocal obligation for hunters to provide the conditions in which animals can grow and survive on the earth. They also believe that humans and animals are in communication with each other on a more or less friendly basis under normal conditions. Communication breaks down when humans fail to respect the animals by neglecting to observe hunting etiquette or rituals of reciprocity.

The transition from animistic religions (i.e., Native American and Pagan religions) to modern religions such as Christianity has had a profound ecological effect. Lynn White, Jr., arguably the father of the modern ecological movement, puts it best: "Popular religion in antiquity was animistic.

Every stream, every tree, every mountain contained a guardian spirit who had to be carefully propitiated before one put a mill in a stream, or cut the tree, or mined the mountain" (White 1205). When Christianity became the dominant religion of the western world, the religions in which spirits permeated the world were lost and forgotten. This had the effect of demystifying nature, removing nature gods and left the land devoid of spirit or importance. From then on, the world was seen as something that man could take advantage of and exploit to fit his own needs. From then on, nature was simply regarded as the backdrop on which humanity carried out its will.

The period after colonialization and especially the 20th century has been a time of drastically increased industrialism and exponential population growth that has left parts of the environment in drastic need of help. The rise of humanity as the dominant species on the planet has been coined the 6th major extinction event after climate changes and meteorite impacts that altered the entire planets condition. Converting to a Native American style of life is an ideological dream but it is one that would never work. The world's population has long since past its carrying capacity for the environment to sustain. We now rely on technology and agricultural improvements to sustain the six billion people that are alive today. Ecologists know that change is an inevitability and can, in some cases, improve the environment as a whole, but given the current circumstances, humanity must make drastic changes in order to persist upon this planet. Lastly, the most fundamental difference, generally speaking, between Native American and European cultures is the fact that the Natives viewed every form of life as having an intrinsic value, not simply instrumental.

References

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