

The Essence of the Wild: Native American Perspectives and Practices

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The essence of wilderness is not in arguments over post-modern definitions, but in its value as a place of origin. Post-modernists might argue that the Native American perspective is a purely cultural construction. I would argue that the Native American perspective grows out of the multiple and watershed specific practical experience with real natural processes. As a well-spring of life, wildlands are sacred benchmarks. Thinking about wilderness as life itself spins the continuing thread. Crowfoot, of the Blackfoot Indian Nation, spoke in 1890 as he lay dying and near starvation after watching the wholesale slaughter of the buffalo on Indian Lands ceded to the Canadian government:

What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

Cultural understandings encourage a balancing relationship between humans and nature. It is the first reason why indigenous involvement is critical to future and existing initiatives to sustain wilderness ecosystems. Tribes maintain a significant knowledge base relevant to sustainable practices within their cultures. Native Americans hold a significant landbase of somewhere around 5% of the United States. In addition, many Tribes retain treaty rights that place them squarely in the management-decision process for millions of additional acres of public lands. Specialized agreements and government-to-government relations increase influence on public lands. They also have sovereign authority to regulate and craft new, adaptive models of sustainable wildland designations. Tribal interest in wildland practices extends not only to biological life, but the life of stories, the places for renewal and vision quest, the centers of the earth and places of emergence for many American Indian Tribes. This contrasts with the con-

cepts of the European colonists who viewed the vast wildlands and their American Indian inhabitants as savages.

There are four major points of understanding that define the Native American perspective on wildlands. First, a deep connection to wildlands is embedded in philosophy and spirit. These are the places of the origin of life and its sustenance. The institutions and ethics of managing people are the source of both impacts and sustainable practice. This differs from the concept of pristine wilderness. Luther Standing Bear makes a direct comment: "We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills and the winding streams with tangled growth as "wild." Only to the White-man was nature a "wilderness. . . ." Second, tribes possess a long body of critical knowledge about their bioregional practice areas. Culture and language carry the narratives that define ecological benchmarks within complex cycles. On the Klamath National Forest in California, traditional basket-makers taught crews to burn at lower temperatures and in selected plots to encourage the growth of specific materials like hazel bush. Third, in order to understand the practice, it is necessary first to understand the objectives of Native American practices. Physical scientists map ancient fire scars from indigenous prescribed burning regimes, their marks left like fingerprints of the cycle of forest history. Fourth, tying the practical exercise of culturally based governance to environmental relations completes the circle. Traditional knowledge of the landscape forms a basis for better land based decision-making. The Hopi Tribal Delegation from the Southwest understood that in 1929 when they told the U.S. Government, "we the traditional leaders want you . . . to know that we will stand firmly upon our own traditional and religious grounds. . . . We have met all other rich and powerful nations . . . all of whom have used force in trying to wipe out our existence in our own home. We want to come to our own destiny in our own way."

The Native American conceptualization of a land ethic encompasses the notion of cultural and natural heartland. It depends on recognizing differences. The mix of values specific to a particular piece of land leads

to specialized strategies. In the Southwest, the Sacred Blue Lake was returned to Taos Pueblo in 1996 through the implementation of Congressional legislation. A stewardship regime of full tribal control is in place in order to protect sensitive uses associated with its cultural history as the site of religious ceremonies. It remains under a closure order for all other uses. This type of regime is likely to occur only when a tribe has powerful reasons to stake heavy increments of its resources for long term preservation objectives.

The Lummi Tribe, in the state of Washington, developed a model of collaborative governance. The tribe is regaining a piece of old growth land at Arlecho Creek through support from conservation groups, a corporate donor, and Crown Pacific. The acquisition bolsters multiple values by protecting old growth forest, healing resources in many native plants, and a tribal fish hatchery. Conservation groups negotiated a specialized easement to allow for some recreational use and assure that the agreed-on values are sustained.

In the Southwest, the San Carlos Apache Tribal Council opted not to impose wilderness designations with boundaries on their reservation lands. The method of choice in this case was institutional design to assure that the appropriate values were applied to the right places. The Natural Resource Committee and the Recreation and Wildlife Commission make policy for tribal departments. The Elders Councils lays out the philosophy that plants and animals are gifts from the Creator and not managed resources. Under their guidance, logging at high, steep locations and cutting healthy oak trees is restrained. An active five year program to reintroduce prescribed burning into pine forests, woodlands, chaparral and grass communities is in place. The San Carlos Apache strategy rests on a tradition of governance based on multiple interlocking structures that direct implementation by a professionally trained staff of tribal members.

Because reservation lands are often in better condition than surrounding lands, it may happen that undue pressure for preservation efforts is focused on them. In this

context is should be remembered that these lands are homelands and the only longterm working laboratories for sustainable living. The collaboration necessary to sustain wildland ecosystems in the future depends on the inclusion of the full ethical, legal and cultural understandings and their expression through community institutions. Only when the human experience is put back in nature will it be possible to create collaborative strategies that work in action.

This article is a shortened reformulation of a piece by the same author to be published later this year in the Proceedings of the World Wilderness Conference (published by the USDA Forest Service and the Wilderness Society).

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