

Tribal-Traditional Ecological Knowledge

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An Australian aborigine woman recently addressed a symposium of educators, historians, anthropologists and other native folks, she asked, “Do you know who you are? We know who we are – we are at-one with the land!”

Professor Bill Gammage, Australian historian spoke about fire, he said, “The colonists/settlements have always viewed fire as a threat, while the Aborigine sees fire as an ally. Fire is part of *Dreaming*.” He went to say, “When working the land use a scapula rather than a sword, burn early versus often.”

He spoke of fire rules: locate the resources, control the fuel; balance the species; maintain the fuel and thereby, ensure abundance. From his book, The Biggest State on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia comes the statement, “The Continent was not natural, the Aborigines made it that way!”

According to Dr. Rebecca Bliege Bird, anthropological researcher from Stanford University, “people effect all other species.” “To manage is a religious philosophy of dominion. An alternative is the Aborigine way of thinking - everything has an inter-relationship, a web of positive and negative species.”

The Martu of Western Australia were forced removed from the land, after thousands of years of living on the land, for twenty plus years from the 1960’s to the 1980’s. While they were absent from the land, the largest fire ever recorded burned through their land. After they returned and put fire back on the land, a more mature habitat fire regime was re-established and the wild fire size has been kept small.

Dr. Frank Lake, Karuk, United States Forest Service science researcher, Orleans, CA spoke of cultural resources from his own native cultural perspective, saying, “In his tribal culture, each child’s umbilical cord is placed in a special tree, one for each child. What happens to the tree happens to the child – therefore the child has a responsibility to take care of the land.”

Fire on the Land

The controversy regarding how much fire did the Indians put on the land is a heated topic amongst scientists’ of various disciplines. Ecological science studies do not include history of when the Native American was living on the land. Most science reports go back a hundred years ago when the “black plague of suppression” was being instituted. However, literary works exclaim, “Fire has always been here and is as important as precipitation and sunlight.”

They all fall short of coming out and saying, “when the Indian was living on the land. . . .” So let’s break it down, pre 1850 for California, the Indian was still living on the land. 1850 to 1910, the Indian was still out on the land, now as loggers, cattle ranchers, goat and shepherders, and of course gatherers.

Documentations such as the *Kinsman Diary* of 1873-1894 describe daily accounts of the local Mono Indians activity and their fires. It may be a simple “two or three smoke sightings” to “there goes those damn Indians again, with their gunny sacks, probably to put out the fire they started.” Or a local homesteader requesting the help of Indian cowboys and goat herders to put out a wildfire.

For one thing, the Indians knew which trails were best to use to get to the fire and control the fire. At the turn of the century 1900-1920’s, the United States Forest Service District Rangers were hiring the local natives and documenting the Indians and their inter-relationship with fire and the land. Between 1915-1925, Professor Gifford, UC Berkeley, not only recorded the history and the culture of North Fork Mono but also documented stories of the Mono as told by the Mono. Stories of water, fire, resources, philosophy, traditional practices and creation itself.

Then oppression came. Suppression Policy! The Euro-American settler and their philosophical beliefs, along with their fear of fire. In 1991, I did a second stint with the US Forest Service as an archaeologist. I was required to take a new recruit course. A one-day session that included a spiel about fire. The comment made was how fire, “is no good.” “There is not anything good about fire!” Wow! I sat there with my mouth open - unbelievable! So I went to the Forest Supervisor and said, “Now I know what the problem is, and where we need to start correcting it.”

Twenty years later, 2010-2012, as we move into the age of collaboration, the controversy of giving the Native American too much wisdom, too much credit, that traditional ecological knowledge is from a practitioner not from a scientist whose been to the best known universities. How can some dumb savage (the wild Indian) know more about the land than a biologist or ecologist who has studied and published material about what it is going to take to restore, regenerate, rejuvenate our forest and watersheds. You read their comments on Facebook, their statements in science reports, about the ecological knowledge Native Americans (who still practices their traditions and cultural livelihood), are relating to the historians, who have befriended the Native American, thus trying to belittle the historian’s literature. Some of these comments are coming from the same Universities where the historians and anthropologists and ethno-botanists are trying to do their part working diligently and collaboratively with the Native American traditionalist. It is not just certain scientists nor definitely is it all or even most of our biologists or ecologists.

There are still many of our agencies; state and federal forestry, national parks, state and federal fish and wildlife, for some that do not understand how the land was when settlers got to *what is California today*. In 2010, at Devil’s Post Pile Monument, park officials were talking about how the land should be returned to the “wild.” Back to when everything was wild! I asked them, “Do you mean when the Indian was wild, and living on the land?”

To the non-Indian terms such as “wild, natural, wilderness,” become indicators that the landscape should not be touched, was not touch and therefore like a human who refuses to shave, get a hair cut or groom, these

concepts immediately mean no manicuring, no physical maintenance to enhance the landscape. In other words, leave and let live and it boils down to no cost to the governmental bodies in charge of our Monuments, Parks, Forests and Wilderness lands. But to the Native American, the immediate response to these concepts, is, you are talking about us, about our homeland, about our relationship not just to the land but with all the species web that exists on these lands including those that will come to visit or pass through.

In 1834, Bill Walker came through upper Yosemite and described how open it was to travel through the forest and land. He followed a trail that led him and his party from the eastern side to the bottom of the western slope of the Sierras. The trails were made by the Indians. John Fremont spoke of the beauty of the land and the Indian, in 1844. 1851, Jeff Mayfield described the golden beauty of the San Joaquin Valley in its richness of flowers, grasses and majestic oaks. In 1868 John Muir described the openness of the land and how it was like a “garden of Eden” for the Native American who lived out on the land.

Another controversial subject is cultural resource's. Not only the parks and forest folks but also some of my own Native people, will say, “We want our cultural resources protected!” I’ve heard it numerous times, at hydroelectric relicensing, at collaborations and at our water summit meetings. Management Plans are always stating how cultural resources will be protected. Protected! Ancestral sites, sacred sites, historical sites, etc., of course they will and are protected. Local, state and federal laws are enacted to protect archaeological sites. While there may be 10,000 sites, on the forest (5,000 recorded on the Sierra National Forest) that is only a handful of the types of cultural resources. The Mono, Miwok, Yokotoch and Paiute utilized over 200 resources culturally and some 100 different food and medicine resources.

Oh, yes, the HPMP’s (Historic Property Management Plan) protect the cultural resources too! Protects them because we as Native Americans cannot utilize them without a permit, an escort or a pass through the locked gates. The word cultural is in relevance to the meaning to ‘to cultivate.’ To

cultivate means to burn, harvest, prod, prune, transplant and any other means of sustaining the abundance of the resource for generations to come.

Tribal Ecological Knowledge is still quite misunderstood.

Tribal-traditional ecological knowledge is based on four factors: Philosophy, Practice, Spirituality, and Knowledge. Are you in the “know?” How do you know without scientific evidence or data? For the Native American, to know is not to believe it is so. There is no theory. There is no science report, no scientific study, and no scientific data. But then again, to be in-the-know, one is repeating hundreds if not thousands of years of information passed down many many generations.

When my mother said our people could see the stars in the mid-day light, I knew she meant what she said. I asked, “Where do we look?” She turned her head, pursed her lips and pointed upward into the bright blue sky. Years later, a friend of mine was using a powerful telescope to show children one of the stars in the daytime. He could not locate it and told the children that his Indian friend could see the stars and called me to adjust his telescope. I looked up into the sky and turned his telescope and looked into the eyeglass at the beautiful daytime star. There was never a question in my mind that I didn’t know where it was.

Why? Because, our knowledge is based on philosophy, a philosophy that says we are at-one with Mother Earth and Creator. Our philosophy dictates our practice. Our gathering philosophy is our ecological policy. Gather what you need, leave some for the next gatherer, leave some for the animals, leave for seed, leave some for the bush itself – no one wants to be left naked. It does not matter whether you are gathering acorns, berries, sticks or roots, the philosophy is taught, learned and understood by all because if you live off the land this is what is called sustainability.

Spirituality is not third in order, but is integrated throughout philosophy and practice. The Native American does not just pray for their food, they pray for the spirit of the animal they are going to kill. Pray that the animal will offer itself, which it does. They make offerings, give prayer, and sing songs when they come upon an ancient site, why, because

the “old ones” (Aborigine term not just for our ancestors but for those who have been here since time began) are still there listening. They can see you, hear you, and you need to be able to see them and hear them. We make offerings to clear our way, to clear our mind and to clear our heart. We talk to the rocks when we enter their domain, give thanks to the plants and trees for their offerings of sustenance and medicine. When you acknowledge the keepers of the land, spirits of the land, the elements, the forest and the “old ones” they will in turn communicate with you.

This puts you in-the-know. Knowledge is wisdom. When you are in the need to pray do not ask for what you want or think you need, you might just get what you ask for. Wisdom does not come from man it comes from Creator. When the naysayer says the Native American does not have the wisdom that historians bestow upon them, they are correct. We are given the wisdom with what we can deal with. Knowledge, therefore, is passed down from the “old ones,” from the ancestors, from our elders, from our practitioners and from our traditionalist.

With knowledge comes responsibility. Responsibility to use your gifts share your knowledge and to keep the tradition alive! So as an elder Aborigine said, “healthy country, healthy people.” What he was saying is when we take care of the land the land will take care of us. Sir Charles of England made a similar statement, “You must first restore Nature’s economy before restoring the economy of humankind.” A powerful statement given the world leaders think in economic terms.

Speaking of responsibility, the white fellows of the world have the responsibility of being in charge of fire. While the white man on a whole is afraid of fire, they have produced the atom bomb and played with fire long enough to create fire strong enough to send a rocket with man to the moon. However, in the native or indigenous cultures you’ll find that these folks have already been to the moon. The moon visitors did not bring anything back with them, material or data that was new to the native people.

Our philosophical teaching tells us, the white man is in charge of fire, the black man is in charge of water, the red man is in charge of the land, and the yellow man is in charge of the wind. This is part of the four directions, but it does not mean the elements are only left to each race, in

fact they are all integrated, however, under responsibility, each should know their charge.

What are global warming, climate change, drought and dust bowls? These are terminologies, for humankind out of sync. They are not at-one with their own spirits let alone the spirits of the land. Today, forest experts, scientists and ecological experts are saying, “let’s let the land go back to when it was “wild,” when it was “natural.” Funny though, funny statement, in-lieu of the fact that Indigenous People of the America’s, have been here on the land for some 15,000 years.

The ability to communicate ecologically is not just a native or indigenous relationship but extends to all people, let alone at least to those who open themselves up to the spirituality. At best I possess fifty percent of the power or capacity to communicate in the spiritual world that my ancestors had. For the past five years (2008 – 2012) I have closed the State of California Indian Days with a blessing and a weather prediction. Every year I was accurate in my foretelling of the coming year’s weather. Why? Because I communicate with the elements, the trees, plants, animals, with Creator and Mother Earth. Not once, but all year long. On September 19th 2012 sitting under the Aspens while on a meadow restoration collaboration field trip, the wind told me we were going to have an earlier winter and it was going to be cold. In October, we had our first snowstorm and five storms later all before Solstice, we were at 140% snow pack in the Central Sierra. I am only the conduit through which wisdom is passed along.

To finalize this TEK, I leave you with this story. A story full of power, knowledge and the capacity to communicate with the spirits of the land by our ancestors and old ones. This story was told to me, by my father.

My father started making baskets at the age of seven. He was raised by his aunts and grandma’s He did not speak fluent Mono but had a high level of understanding. He ended up being honored by the National Endowment of the Arts as the first California Master Basket Weaver. My mother was raised by her grandparents, and left school in the eighth grade. She spoke several languages and many dialects. Her grandparents were born in the late 1830’s. She was an owl woman, a great horned owl walked

along the trail with her when she was five years old. Her grandmother was a shape shifter; she would hold ceremonies turning herself into a bear while dancing on a large rock.

So the story goes . . . One day my father saw a rattlesnake out in the front yard. He went to get a shovel to kill it. My mother asked him what he was doing with the shovel. He replied, to kill a snake. She asked him to wait. She walked out of the house and went up to the snake. My father said it seemed like a long time that the two of them looked in each other's eyes moving their heads back and forth. Finally my mother stood up and said, "Captain Waspie is coming. This is her snake. Don't harm it or kill it. She will be here soon and wants to go across the river to see someone. Get ready to drive us." Dad got ready and soon Captain Waspie came up the trail. She lived three miles up on the ridge. Dad drove them over to the Auberry Rancheria to see Mrs. Reily. When they got there, my mom told dad to wait outside, they wouldn't be too long. He did as he was told. The three ladies went into the house and toward the back room. A while later they emerged. My mom instructed my dad to get into the car and drive them home, back across the San Joaquin River. Dad said he asked what they did and my mom told him to hush. Don't ask! We lived about four miles up from the river. Just before they reached the gate, Captain Waspie started talking very loud in Mono. It surprised my dad he turned and said, "What?" He looked at my mom and asked her what the old lady was saying. "Shhh" is all my mom said. The she told him, she's talking to her snakes. She's telling them to start going home on the trail. "Her snakes?" Dad asked. Mom replied, yes, she has two of them, they go everywhere with her. Dad said he hurried to open and close the gate. He drove extra fast down the road to the house, which was a half a mile away. As soon as he got in the yard he hurried over toward the trail to see both rattlesnakes on the move. One was already heading down the trail while the other one waited at the trailhead for his master. As the old lady passed by he felt a cold chill. In our culture we do not look people in the eye because old ones like this one can do things to you, so he kept his head down as he watched the three of them go home.

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