Ties That Bind: Native American Beliefs as a Foundation for Environmental Consciousness

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In this article we examine the specific contributions Native American thought can make to the ongoing search for a Western ecological consciousness. We begin with a review of the influence of Native American beliefs on the different branches of the modern environmental movement and some initial comparisons of Western and Native American ways of seeing. We then review Native American thought on the natural world, highlighting beliefs in the need for reciprocity and balance, the world as a living being, and relationships with animals. We conclude that Native American ideas are important, can prove inspirational in the search for a modern environmental consciousness, and affirm the arguments of both deep ecologists and ecofeminists.

> So this land of the great plains is claimed by the Lakota as their very own. We are of the soil and the soil is of us. We love the birds and beasts that grew with us on this soil. They drank the same water as we did and breathed the same air. We are all one in nature. Believing so, there was in our hearts a great peace and a welling kindness for all living, growing things.
>
> —Luther Standing Bear

> If you've seen one redwood tree, you've seen them all.
>
> —Ronald Reagan[1]

INTRODUCTION

The environmental movement stands at a crucial juncture. No longer the haughty child of the seventies, the movement has achieved a maturity which allows it to be a serious, important, and sophisticated participant in local, state, national, and international policy discussions. No politician can put together a campaign for office, or remain in office for long, without attending to some, if not many, environmental issues. Since Earth Day in 1970, the environmental movement has gone from being a crusade on the fringe to a set of activities at the very center of political and social life—and for some environmentalists this is exactly the problem.

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[1] Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1933), p. 45; Ronald Reagan as governor of California in 1969.

According to one recent account by the editor of the journal published by the Natural Resources Defense Council, an organization both responsible for and benefiting from the mainstreaming of the movement, "environmentalism" stands "at a crossroads" because its soul may have been lost while success was achieved.[2] There are some environmentalists who are extremely proud of the successes achieved and of the movement in from the fringe. There are others, though, who worry about whether the process of achieving mainstream success has been a sacrifice of old goals of environmental protection for new ones of bureaucratic power and compromise.[3] For these latter environmentalists the issue of co-option is more prominent than any successes achieved. For these latter environmentalists, the glass of success holds a bittersweet drink.

For the fundamentalist or radical environmentalist, the point of the movement is not simply to have government and industry agree on the need for pollution standards, agreement which led to endless discussions on appropriate pollution standards. Instead the environmental movement is supposed to be the beginning of a transformation of the way people live on the Earth, a transformation in the way they relate to the Earth and to each other. It is to be a holistic revolution in both thought and action, in which an understanding of the nonsustainability of Western industrial civilization leads us to discover, or rediscover, ways of living that respect and sustain all life on Earth.

The present fragmentation of the environmental movement to include guerilla-style radical activists[4] and radical political parties advocating fundamental ecological and social change, for example, most prominently in West Germany,[5] is a direct reflection of discontent with the now mainstreamed reform-based environmental movement. As the statements of these discontented groups make so clear, many people do not believe it is possible to reform Western industrial society into an ecologically sustainable society.[6] Environmental problems are root problems and as such require equally deep solutions.

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[2] Peter Borelli, "Environmentalism at a Crossroads," *Amicus Journal* 9 (1987): 24–37.

[3] Kirkpatrick Sale, "The Forest for the Trees: Can Today's Environmentalists Tell the Difference?" *Mother Jones* 11, no. 9 (November 1986): 25–26, 28–29, 32–33, 58.

[4] Dick Russell, "The Monkeywrenchers," *Amicus Journal* 9 (1985): 28–42.

[5] See for instance, Charlene Spretnak and Fritjof Capra, *Green Politics: The Global Promise* (Santa Fe: Bear and Co., 1986); Johann Galtung, "The Green Movement: A Socio-Historical Exploration," *International Sociology* 1 (1986): 75–90; Carl Boggs, "The Green Alternative in West Germany," in *Social Movements and Political Power: Emerging Forms of Radicalism in the West* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), pp. 170–221; and Werner Hulsberg, *The German Greens: A Social and Political Profile* (New York: Verso, 1988).

Because environmental problems are root problems, coming out of our basic concepts concerning the natural environment and each other, many promoters of radical environmental change base their conceptions upon alternative philosophical tenets, most notably, deep ecology[7] and ecofeminism.[8]

Deep ecology is an ecophilosophical alternative about which there has been a great deal of writing and debate. Deep ecology attempts to examine the deeper root questions concerning human interactions with the natural world, rather than the "shallow" issues such as pollution or species extermination, which it identifies as more the symptoms than the cause of environmental breakdown. Its advocates have attempted to posit a new way of relating to the natural world in which the human is just another species, and the well-being of the human species is of no greater or lesser importance than the well-being of every other species, or the collective well-being of the ecological community. Deep ecology argues that all life on Earth from humans to ecosystems to soil microbes possesses equal intrinsic value, values which exist independent of human needs and desires.

Ecofeminism has also received a great deal of attention lately as an alternative to mainstream ways of relating to the natural world. This movement springs from a questioning of modern beliefs concerning the natural world, but ecofeminism does so from a more relational and integrative viewpoint—a feminist viewpoint. In particular, ecofeminism equates the suppression and domination of nature with the domination of women, and for similar reasons. Each was, and is, perceived as dangerous and in need of control. Ecofeminism encourages more spiritual approaches to the natural world, in complement to other approaches, and as such, offers an alternative to the subject-object dualism that so often has characterized our relationships with the natural world. Both deep ecologists and ecofeminists call for the development of a new human consciousness, one of humility, which recognizes the importance of all life, including the life of the organism Earth.[9]

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[6] See Die Grunen, *The Program of the Green Party of the Federal Republic of Germany* (Bonn: Die Grunen, 1985); The Green Party, *Politics for Life: The Green Party Manifesto* (London, England: Green Party, 1985); and Russell, "The Monkeywrenchers."

[7] See Arne Naess, "The Shallow and Deep Long Range Ecology Movement," *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95–100; Bill Devall, "The Deep Ecology Movement," *Natural Resources Journal* 20 (1980): 299–322; William Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985); Michael Tobias, ed., *Deep Ecology* (San Diego: Avant Books, 1985); and Teresa deGroth and Edward Valauskas, *Deep Ecology and Environmental Ethics*, CPL Bibliography no. 185 (Chicago: Council of Planning Librarians, 1987).

[8] See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980); Ariel Kay Salleh, "Deeper Than Deep Ecology: The Eco-Feminist Connection," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984): 339–45; Karen J. Warren, "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections," *Environmental Ethics* 9 (1987): 3–20; Kirkpatrick Sale, "Ecofeminism—A New Perspective," *The Nation*, 26 September 1987, pp. 302–05; and Michael E. Zimmerman, "Feminism, Deep Ecology, and Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 9 (1987): 21–44.

As radical activists and philosophers begin to articulate and implement their ideas for a truly ecological world, they find themselves drawn, again and again, to the beliefs and traditions of North America's Native Americans.[10] Native Americans are often portrayed as model ecological citizens, holding values and beliefs that industrialized humans have long since sacrificed in the pursuit of progress and comfort. This interest in Native American relationships with the natural world has an old history. As Cornell points out, influential members of the early American conservation movement were deeply impressed by Native Americans and their knowledge of and relations with the natural world.[11] Such interest is shared even by less radical elements in the environmental movement.[12]

Native American statements about the integrity and inherent importance of the natural world, such as those of Luther Standing Bear, stir many Western people, but there seems to be surprisingly little understanding of Native Americans' actual relationships with their environment. Even so, this does not keep elements of the environmental movement, mainstream and radical, recent and historical, from using Native Americans for their own ends. In this article we attempt to redress this situation by offering a synthetic, detailed discussion of Native American beliefs and relationships with the natural world as presented by Native Americans and by anthropologists and historians. As such, we take a broad approach to the nature of Native American culture, addressing it as a singular phenomenon. Although we are aware of the significant differences among Native American cultures, as we argue in the next section, there is enough similarity in environmental views to warrant this type of cross-cutting approach. More detailed descriptions of the works used here are available in a recent annotated bibliography.[13] It is our hope that this article will help the environmental movement develop an empathic and analytic understanding of traditions that they now use so loosely.

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[9] James E. Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

[10] For one set of prominent examples see Devall, "The Deep Ecology Movement," and Green Party, *Politics For Life*, p. 13.

[11] George L. Cornell, "The Influence of Native Americans on Modern Conservationists," *Environmental Review* 9 (1985): 105–17.

[12] See for instance Stewart L. Udall, "Indians: First Americans, First Ecologists," in *Readings in American History—73/74* (Connecticut: Dushkin Publishing Group, 1973).

[13] Annie L. Booth and Harvey M. Jacobs, *Environmental Consciousness: Native American Worldviews and Sustainable Natural Resource Management: An Annotated Bibliography*, CPL Bibliography no. 214 (Chicago: Council of Planning Librarians, 1988).

BELOVED MOTHER TO CONQUERED ENEMY

Although they varied significantly between different cultures, Native American relationships with the natural world tended to preserve biological integrity within natural communities, and did so over a significant period of historical time. These cultures engaged in relationships of mutual respect, reciprocity, and caring with an Earth and fellow beings as alive and self-conscious as human beings. Such relationships were reflected and perpetuated by cultural elements including religious belief and ceremonial ritual.[14]

We do not claim that natural communities remained unchanged by human activities, for they did change, considerably so, and in some instances, negatively so. However, the great majority of natural communities remained ecologically functional while supporting both Native American cultures and a great diversity of different plant and animal species.

In contrast, invading Europeans brought with them cultures that practiced relationships of subjugation and domination, even hatred, of European lands. They made little attempt to live *with* their natural communities, but rather altered them wholesale. The impoverishment of the ecological communities of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe was so great that, in contrast, early settlers of the New World found either a marvelous paradise or a horrendous wilderness, but certainly something completely outside their experience.[15]

Native American cultures had adapted their needs to the capacities of natural communities; the new inhabitants, freshly out of Europe, adapted natural communities to meet their needs. The differences between these two approaches have had profound impacts on the diversity and functioning of natural communities in North America.

NO SUCH THING AS EMPTINESS

In the songs and legends of different Native American cultures it is apparent that the land and her creatures are perceived as truly beautiful things. There is a sense of great wonder and of something which sparks a deep sensation of joyful celebration. Above all else, Native Americans were, and are, life-affirming; they respected and took pleasure in the life to be found around them, in all its diversity, inconsistency, or inconvenience. Everything had a place and a being, life and self-consciousness, and everything was treated accordingly. Hughes points out that only the newly arrived Europeans considered the land to be a

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[14] J. Donald Hughes, *American Indian Ecology* (El Paso: Texas University Press, 1983).

[15] See William Cronan, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); and Hughes, *American Indian Ecology*.

"wilderness," barren and desolate.[16] To Native Americans, it was a bountiful community of living beings, of whom the humans were only one part. It was a place of great sacredness, in which the workings of the Great Spirit, or Great Mystery, could always be felt.

Hultkrantz argues that it is only because nature reflected the presence of the Great Mystery that it was considered to be sacred.[17] His interpretation suggests that the Indians' appreciation of nature, whether for its beauty or for its productivity, was influenced by the presence of other values. Hultkrantz felt that the Native American's relationship with nature reflected a dynamic tension, which was inherent in a relationship which both loves and exploits the natural world. This tension was reflected, in part, in the Native American's view of nature, which often included some quite terrifying aspects such as cannibalistic and malevolent spirits. Nature is both nurturing and attractive as well as destructive and dangerous.

In distinct contrast to Hultkrantz's interpretations, however, Native American writers focus on the wonders of the land. Standing Bear, a Lakota Sioux, wrote that Native Americans felt a special joy and wonder for all the elements and changes of season which characterized the land.[18] They felt that they held the spirit of the land within themselves, and so they met and experienced the elements and seasons rather than retreating from them. For Standing Bear and the Lakota, the Earth was so full of life and beings that they never actually felt alone. This belief is echoed in many statements by Native Americans mourning over the empty, lonely land that the white cultures have left behind:

> There was no such thing as emptiness in the world. Even in the sky there were no vacant places. Everywhere there was life, visible and invisible, and every object possessed something that would be good for us to have also—even to the very stones. . . . Even without human companionship one was never alone. The world teemed with life and wisdom; there was no complete solitude for the Lakota.[19]

This is a very central belief which seems consistent across many Native American cultures—that the Earth is a living, conscious being that must be treated with respect and loving care. The Earth may be referred to as Mother, or Grandmother, and these are quite literal terms, for the Earth is the source, the mother of all living beings, including human beings. Black Elk, a Lakota, asked, "Is not the sky a father and the earth a mother and are not all living things with feet and wings or roots their children?"[20] The Earth, and those who reside upon her, take their sacredness from that part of the Great Spirit which resides in all living beings. They are not the source of sacredness, but are no less sacred for that circumstance.

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[16] Hughes, *American Indian Ecology*.

[17] Ake Hultkrantz, *Belief and Worship in Native North America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981).

[18] Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*.

[19] Ibid., p. 14.

The Koyukon of central Alaska also see the Earth as something alive and powerful, something which must be treated with respect:

> For traditional Koyukon people, the environment is both a natural and supernatural realm. All that exists in nature is imbued with awareness and power: . . . all actions towards nature are mediated by consideration of its consciousness and sensitivity. The interchange between humans and environment is based on an elaborate code of respect and morality, without which survival would be jeopardized.[21]

Interestingly, the idea of the Earth as a living, conscious being, Gaia, has recently been the subject of discussion and debate within the mainstream Western scientific community.[22] A very old and sacred idea appears to be in the process of being rediscovered.

WE ARE THE LAND

The belief in a conscious, living nature is not simply an intellectual concept for Native American cultures. For most, perception of the landscape is important in determining perception of self. Vine Deloria, Jr. argues that Native Americans hold a perception of reality which is bound up in spatial references, references which refer to a physical place.[23] In Deloria's view, a spatial reference is important in establishing positive relationships with the natural world. Because of its basis in a particular land or place, a spatial orientation requires an intimate and respectful relationship with that land:

> The vast majority of Indian tribal religions have a center at a particular place, be it river, mountain, plateau, valley, or other natural feature. Many of the smaller non-universal religions also depend on a number of holy places for the practice of their religious activities. In part, the affirmation of the existence of holy places confirms tribal peoples' rootedness, which Western man is peculiarly without.[24]

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[20] John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (New York: Pocket Books, 1975), p. 6.

[21] Richard K. Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 240.

[22] Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth.*

[23] Vine Deloria, Jr., *God Is Red* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1973).

[24] Ibid., p. 81.

Brown and Hughes concur with Deloria's argument.[25] For Native Americans, nature is a reality rather than an abstraction, and residents and landforms are experienced as locuses of spirit beings whose collective and individual presence give meaning and sacredness to a person's perception of the land. As Brown points out, "It also gives meaning to the life of man who cannot conceive of himself apart from the land."[26] It is the sense of place which defines a person's life. Native American cultures and histories are based in the land and their lives are inseparably intertwined with it. In a most real sense, it *is* their life.

Not only do Native Americans see themselves as part of the land, they consider the land to be part of them. This goes beyond the romanticized love of nature that modern-day environmentalists are said to indulge in, for the Native American faced the best and worst of the land, and still found it to be sacred, a gift from the Great Mystery of great meaning and value: it offered them their very being. As Paula Gunn Allen makes very clear:

> We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life and culture in the Southwest. More than remembered, the earth is the mind of the people as we are the mind of the earth. The land is not really the place (separate from ourselves) where we act out the drama of our isolated destinies. It is not a means of survival, a setting for our affairs, a resource on which we draw in order to keep our own art functioning. It is not the ever-present "Other" which supplies us with a sense of "I." It is rather a part of our being, dynamic, significant, real. It is ourself, in as real a sense as our notions of "ego," "libido" or social network, in a sense more real than any conceptualization or abstraction about the nature of the human being can ever be.[27]

In a very organic sense, the roots of the Native American peoples were always, and still are, in the natural communities in which they have lived.

This theme is echoed by Luther Standing Bear when he describes the elders of the Lakota Sioux as growing so fond of the Earth that they preferred to sit or lie directly upon it.[28] In this way, they felt that they approached more closely the great mysteries in life and saw more clearly their kinship with all life. Indeed, Standing Bear comments that the reason for the white culture's alienation from their adopted land is that they are not truly of it; they have no roots to anchor them for their stay has been too short:

> The white man does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America. He is too far removed from its formative processes. The roots

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[25] Joseph Epes Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1985); Hughes, *American Indian Ecology*.

[26] Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of The American Indian*, p. 30.

[27] Paula Gunn Allen, "Iyani: It Goes This Way," in Geary Hobson, ed., *The Remembered Earth* (Albuquerque: Red Earth Press, 1979), p. 191.

[28] Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, p. 192.

> of the tree of his life have not yet grasped the rock and soil. The white man is still troubled with primitive fears; he still has in his consciousness the perils of this frontier continent. . . . The man from Europe is still a foreigner and an alien. . . . But in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested; it will be until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm. Man must be born and reborn to belong. Their bodies must be formed of the dust of their forefather's bones.[29]

This interconnection between person and land is not merely a thing of historical significance. Present-day Native Americans continue to acknowledge their ties to their land. Utes in the Southwest faced with the question of mining on their lands are deeply troubled, for the land is more than mere resource, as several individuals have tried to explain:

> The land is a living body with spirit and power, which contains tribal genealogy. It is necessary for the people to remain in the place in which they have always been, as guardians, and as an inseparable part of that place and space.
>
> The tribe doesn't want to diminish the land, but not because of money issues. But because you diminish *us* when the land is eaten away.[30]

At the Tellico Dam congressional hearing in 1978, Jimmie Durham, a western Cherokee, tried to express what his people felt for a land they could no longer even live upon, but wished to preserve nonetheless:

> Is there a human being who does not revere his homeland, even though he may not return? . . . In our own history, we teach that we were created there. . . . In the language of my people . . . there is a word for land: Eloheh. This same word also means history, culture and religion. We cannot separate our place on earth from our lives on the earth nor from our vision nor our meaning as a people. . . . So when we speak of land, we are not speaking of property, territory, or even a piece of ground upon which our houses sit and our crops are grown. We are speaking of something truly sacred.[31]

RELATIVES IN FUR MASKS

Recognizing that they were part of the land meant that many Native American cultures did not intellectually or emotionally isolate themselves from the land and her other inhabitants, as did European-derived cultures. The idea which appears over and over is "kinship" with other living beings:

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[29] Ibid., p. 248.

[30] Stephanie Romeo, "Concepts of Nature and Power: Environmental Ethics of the Northern Ute," *Environmental Review* 9 (1985): 160–61.

[31] Peter Matthiessen, *Indian Country* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), p. 119.

> In the Native American system, there is no idea that nature is somewhere over there while man is over here, nor that there is a great hierarchical ladder of being on which ground and trees occupy a very low rung, animals a slightly higher one, and man a very high one indeed—especially "civilized" man. All are seen to be brothers or relatives (and in tribal systems relationship is central), all are offspring of the Great Mystery, children of our mother, and necessary parts of an ordered, balanced and living whole.[32]

Brown comments that while humans serve as the intermediary between earth and sky, this does not lessen the importance of other beings, as they are the links between humans and the Great Mystery.[33] To realize the self, kinship with all beings must be realized. To gain knowledge, humans must humble themselves before all creation, down to and including the lowliest ant, and realize their own nothingness. Knowledge may come through vision quests, and this knowledge is transmitted and offered by animals. Nature is a mirror which reflects all things, including that which it is important to learn about, understand and value throughout life.

Standing Bear explains that all beings share in the life force which flows from Wakan Tanka, the Great Mystery, including "the flowers of the plains, the blowing winds, rocks, trees, birds, animals," as well as man. "Thus all things were kindred and brought together by the same Great Mystery."[34] The other animals had rights, the right to live and multiply, the right to freedom, and the right to man's indebtedness. The Lakota Sioux, says Standing Bear, respected those rights.

Most Native American legends speak of other species as beings who could shed their fur mask and look human, as beings who once shared a common language with humans, and who continued to understand humans after the humans had lost their ability to understand them. Callicott quotes the Sioux holy man Black Elk, who describes the world as sharing in spiritedness.[35] Because everything shares in this spiritedness, it is possible for humans to enter into social and kin relations with other beings.

Martin, discussing subarctic bands, also notes that Native Americans felt and acknowledged a spiritual kinship with the animals they dealt with.[36] A sympathy built up between the human person who hunted and the animal persons who were hunted, a sympathy which pervaded human life. Animals lived in a world that was spiritual, although they assumed a fleshy body in the physical world. Their connection with the spiritual world made them mediators in all things to do with the spiritual world, such as when humans attempted to enter that world.

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[32] Paula Gunn Allen, "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective on American Literature," in Hobson, *The Remembered Earth*, p. 225.

[33] Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian*.

[34] Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, p. 193.

[35] J. Baird Callicott, "Traditional American Indian and Traditional Western European Attitudes towards Nature: An Overview," in Robert Elliot and Arran Gare, eds., *Environmental Philosophy: A Collection of Readings* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), pp. 231–59.

[36] Calvin Martin, "Subarctic Indians and Wildlife," in C. Vecsey and R. W. Venables, eds., *American Indian Environments: Ecological Issues in Native American History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1980), pp. 38–45).

According to Nelson, the Alaskan Koyukon sense that the world they live in is a world full of aware, sensate, personified, feeling beings, who can be offended and who at all times must be treated with the proper respect.[37] The animals with which the Koyukons interact are among these powerful, watchful beings. Legend states that they once were human, becoming animals when they died. Animals and humans are distinct beings, their souls being quite different, but the animals are powerful beings in their own right. They are not offended at being killed for use, but killing must be done humanely, and there should be no suggestion of waste. Nor can the body be mistreated: it must be shown respect according to any number of taboos. Consequently a complex collection of rules, respectful activities, and taboos surround everyday life and assist humans in remaining within the moral code that binds all life.

Martin's conclusions regarding the subarctic Native Americans are similar.[38] He states that the relationship between a hunter and the animal he hunts is very important. At all times, there is a mutual obligation felt, an obligation to be courteous. An animal is not killed unless the hunter is able to obtain its consent in the spiritual world; the animal must be willing to surrender itself to the hunter. Hunting, and associated relationships with the animals, give meaning to the hunters' lives; it gives a sense of identity. It is the animal which grants this sense of identity, and which guides the hunter in establishing the proper sort of relationships between himself and the animals with which he associates.

The practical consequences of such relationships with animals are profound. There is considerable archaeological evidence to suggest that the great prairies and the northeastern forests discovered by the Europeans were a product of modification. Hughes argues that the difference between these historical modifications and those made by the present-day inhabitants is demonstrated by the fact that the first Europeans found a forested and abundant country easily supporting the inhabitants, a country so different from fifteenth-century Europe that it was taken to be an unspoiled paradise.[39] Although animals were taken, sometimes in large numbers, rarely were species endangered or exterminated, for trying to exterminate a species would have meant trying to eliminate not only an essential of life, but a kindred being.

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[37] Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven;* Richard K. Nelson, "A Conservation Ethic and Environment: The Koyukon of Alaska," in Nancy M. Williams and Eugene S. Hunn, eds., *Resource Managers: North American and Australian Hunter Gatherers,* AAAS Selected Symposium no. 67 (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), pp. 211–28.

[38] Martin, "Subarctic Indians and Wildlife."

[39] J. Donald Hughes, "Forest Indians: The Holy Occupation," *Environmental Review* 2 (1977): 2–13.

Hughes believes that the "ecological consciousness" of the Native American was in part due to their sense of kinship with the rest of the world, and in part made up of an extensive working knowledge and understanding of the world with which they lived. Much of this knowledge was codified and passed on through the medium of myths and legends handed down between generations. Such intimate knowledge permitted careful and judicious hunting, based on the knowledge of what animals resided in the area, how many there were, and how many were required to ensure a healthy population. Hunting territories were shared by families or bands, but misuse, such as excessive killing, might be grounds for war.

RECIPROCITY AND BALANCE IN ALL THINGS

Interactions with these important beings, these fur-covered kin, required careful consideration. Reciprocity and balance were required from both sides in the relationships between humankind and other living beings. Balance was vital: the world exists as an intricate balance of parts, and it was important that humans recognized this balance and strove to maintain and stay within this balance. All hunting and gathering had to be done in such a way as to preserve the balance. Human populations had to fit within the balance. For everything that was taken, something had to be offered in return, and the permanent loss of something, such as in the destruction of a species, irreparably tore at the balance of the world. Thus, offerings were not so much sacrifices, as whites were inclined to interpret them, but rather a fair exchange for what had been taken, to maintain the balance. In this way, the idea of reciprocity emerges. From the Native American perspective, as Hughes puts it, "mankind depends on the other beings for life, and they depend on mankind to maintain the proper balance."[40] According to the Koyukons, for example, humans interact with natural things on the basis of a moral code, which, if properly attended to, contributes to a proper spiritual balance between humans and nonhumans.[41]

Momaday, a Kiowa writer and teacher, describes the necessary relationship as an act of reciprocal approbation, "approbations in which man invests himself in the landscape, and at the same time incorporates the landscape into his own most fundamental experience."[42] The respect and approval is two-way: humans both give and receive value and self-worth from the natural world. According to Momaday, this act of approbation is an act of the imagination, and it is a moral act. All of us are what we imagine ourselves to be, and the Native Americans imagine themselves specifically in terms of relationships with the physical world, among other things. Native Americans have been determining themselves in their imagination for many generations, and in the process, the landscape has become part of a particular reality. In a sense, for the Native American, the process is more intuitive and evolutionary than is the white Western rational linear process. The Native American has a personal investment in vision and imagination as a reality, or as part of a reality, whereas many whites believe such things have very little to do with what we call reality.

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[40] Hughes, *American Indian Ecology*, p. 17.

[41] Nelson, "A Conservation Ethic and Environment: The Koyukon of Alaska."

[42] N. Scott Momaday, "Native American Attitudes towards the Environment," in Walter H. Capps, ed., *Seeing with a Native Eye*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 80.

Toelken examines the idea of reciprocity between the Navaho people and what he describes as "the sacred *process* going on in the world."[43] Religion embodies a reciprocal relationship between the people and this process, and everything becomes a part of this circular, sacred give and take. Part of the idea of reciprocity is the necessity and importance of interaction. Participation in reciprocity is vital; a failure to interact, or a breakdown in interaction, leads to disease and calamity. Thus, everything that is used in everyday life is used for its part in that interaction; it becomes a symbol of sacred interaction and relationship between the people, the plants, the animals, and the land. Rituals such as those used for healing are not designed to ward off illness or directly cure the ill person. Rather, they are designed to remind the ill person of a frame of mind which is in proper relationship with the rest of the world, a frame of mind which is essential to the maintenance of good health.

LIFE AND RELIGION

The concern for reciprocal relationships between people and the earth becomes a strong focus within Native American spiritual beliefs. According to Deloria:

> The Indian is confronted with a bountiful earth in which all things experienced have a role to fill. The task of the tribal religion, if such a religion can be said to have a task, is to determine the proper relationship that the people of the tribe must have with other living beings.[44]

As Toelken points out, Native Americans rarely distinguish between their religious life and their secular life.[45] Instead there is nothing in life that is *not* religious, whether it is hunting or gathering, or greeting the sun as it rises each morning. Brown offers a remarkably lucid explanation:

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[43] Barre Toelken, "Seeing with a Native Eye: How Many Sheep Will It Hold?" in Walter H. Capps, ed., *Seeing with a Native Eye* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 14.

[44] Deloria, *God Is Red*, p. 102.

[45] Toelken, "Seeing with a Native Eye."

> . . . with the American Indians we are dealing with a quality of cultures wherein action and contemplation are interrelated and integrated. Or . . . it may be said that special rites and ceremonial acts, as well as the actions of everyday life, constitute meditative acts which open, to the exceptional person at least, possibilities for pure contemplation. A man who is a hunter, for example, is not just participating in a purely mechanical subsistence activity; he is engaged in a complex of meditative acts in which all aspects of his activity—whether they be preparatory prayer and purification, pursuit of the quarry, or the sacramental manner by which the animal is slain and subsequently treated—are infused with the dimension of the sacred.[46]

Everything from hunting to healing is a recognition and affirmation of the sacredness of life. In the weaving of a basket is the creation of the whole world. In a proper life there is never a sense of disconnectedness from the Earth. As Peter Matthiessen suggests:

> . . . the whole universe is sacred, man is the whole universe, and the religious ceremony is life itself, the miraculous common acts of every day. Respect for nature is respect for oneself; to revere it is self-respecting, since man and nature, though not the same thing, are not different. . . .[47]

Both action and contemplation are interrelated for many Native Americans, and every action may be an opportunity for meditation and reflection, an opportunity to search for new truths and meanings. Lame Deer, a Lakota medicine man, explains the difference this creates between Native American ways of being and those of whites in this way:

> I am an Indian. I think about ordinary, common things like this pot. The bubbling water comes from the rain cloud. It represents the sky. The fire comes from the sun which warms us all—men, animals, trees. The meat stands for the four-legged creatures, our animal brothers, who gave of themselves so that we should live. The steam is living breath. It was water; now it goes up to the sky, becomes a cloud again. These things are sacred. . . . We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one. To you symbols are just words, spoken or written in a book. To us they are part of nature, part of ourselves—the earth, the sun, the wind and the rain, stones, trees, animals, even the little insects like ants and grasshoppers. We try to understand them not with the head but with the heart, and we need no more than a hint to give us the meaning.[48]

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[46] Joseph Epes Brown, "Modes of Contemplation through Action: North American Indians," *Main Currents in Modern Thought* 30 (1973): 195.

[47] Peter Matthiessen, "Native Earth," *Parabola* 6 (1981): 12.

[48] John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 108.

The ability to recognize and learn from such living symbols is not something unique to Native Americans. Everyone has or can acquire such openness if he or she is receptive and willing to try to understand with the heart. Anthropologist Richard Nelson, for example, came to the Alaskan Koyukon tribe pursuing a traditional anthropological study. What he took away with him was a new and deeper understanding of reality:

> I stood beneath the tall timber and watched a raven fly above me, vanishing and reappearing as it passed behind the treetops. And I wondered what, or who, it really was. Certainty is for those who have learned and believed only one truth. Where I came from, the raven is just a bird—an interesting and beautiful one perhaps, even an intelligent one—but it is a bird, and that is all. But where I am now, the raven is many other things first, its form and existence as a bird almost the least significant of its qualities. It is a person and a power, God in a clown's suit, incarnation of a once-omnipotent spirit. The raven sees, hears, understands, reveals . . . determines.
>
> What is the raven? Bird-watchers and biologists know. Koyukon elders and their children who listen know. But those like me, who have heard and accepted both, are left to watch and wonder.[49]

DEVELOPING AN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Western culture is most certainly in need of an ecological consciousness, and of new kinds of relationships with the natural communities within which they coexist. Species of plants and animals disappear every day. Land grows less productive, and soon is unable to support any form of life. The lives of living beings, including human beings, lose meaning, purpose, and function. Such a state of affairs can no longer be ignored, or treated with less than deadly earnestness.

For more than a century concerned Western environmentalists have held up Native Americans as one contemporary model of a way humans can learn to live in harmony with the natural world. Our detailed investigation of this assertion, cutting across Native American cultures, suggests that the basic premise of those holding this position is correct. However, it is likely that for many who hold this position, their conception of the Native American world view is limited in its appreciation of the depth and breath of Native Americans integration with the land of which they are a part. For example, the extent to which Native Americans understand the Earth and all life upon it as fully alive and needing and deserving of a reciprocal, respectful relationship, and the thoroughly religious character of Native American relationships with the natural world, demonstrate how far a construction of a Western environmental consciousness has to go to truly learn from and draw upon that which Native Americans have to teach.

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[49] Nelson, *Make Prayers To The Raven*, p. 248.

Yet this is exactly the type of understanding which is reflected in the contemporary scholarship of environmental philosophy, particularly with regard to deep ecology and ecological feminism. Concerns and articulations of reciprocal respect for all life forms, a recognition of the Earth itself as a living being, and the recognition of the critical place of some form of spirituality in environmental consciousness permeate both strands of ecophilosophy. But these two approaches to a Western environmental consciousness have come to be characterized as oppositional, rather than integrative.[50] One lesson to be drawn from Native American beliefs is the utility of integrating these two approaches to ecophilosophy so they can work together in the construction of a Western environmental consciousness in which the Earth and all its beings, including humans, have a niche, and humans in particular have an awareness of the importance of all other life forms.

As we turn to Native American cultures for their wisdom, however, it is important to keep in mind that their cultures and relationship with the natural world will not provide any instantaneous solutions to the problems Western culture is presently facing. Cultures, or selected bits of one or two, cannot and should not be arbitrarily grafted onto one another.

Native American traditions, as in all cultures, are embedded in a particular context. The impact and meaning of a tradition stems from lifelong conditioning, preparation, and participation. It is built into the language, into the way day-to-day life is lived and experienced over time, and within a specific physical/social context. Attempts to borrow culture, whether it be wholesale or piecemeal, are doomed to failure.

If we ignore this fact, we risk harm not only to ourselves, but to Native Americans as well. There is a delicate line between respectful learning and intellectual plundering. Richard White questions our casual and constant habit of using the Native American as a symbol without reference or regard to real Native Americans or their attitudes and feelings.[51] In doing so, White argues, we are just as guilty of using and exploiting these cultures as we are when we steal their lands or their lives and spirits.

But there are less imperialistic approaches to Native American cultures. They can be studied as a contrast to our own destructive relationships with the natural world, and as a reminder that positive relationships can and do exist. An open hearted and respectful investigation of Native American cultures, particularly when members of these cultures voluntarily share with us their understandings and perceptions, can help us discover new directions in which to travel to realize our own potentials. As a Pueblo has commented,

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[50] See for example Janet Biehl, "Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology: Unresolvable Conflict?" *Our Generation* 19 (1988): 19–31, and Warwick Fox, "The Deep Ecology-Ecofeminism Debate and Its Parallels," *Environmental Ethics* 11 (1989): 5–25.

[51] Richard White, "Introduction" [to special issue on the American Indian and the environment], *Environmental Review* 9 (1985): 101–03.

> There are hundreds of religions in this country, and still you white people are searching for something else. We are not searching—we are already there. And you don't have to join us: you are already there too. You just have to realize it.[52]

Luther Standing Bear believed that it took generations of dying and being reborn within a land for that land to become a part of an individual and of a culture.[53] Deloria suggests that it is possible for peoples and lands to adapt and to relate to one another very powerfully, leading to a spiritual union which benefits both; a particular land determines and encourages the nature of a religion that will spring up upon it, and within a religion lies an entire way of life.[54] This is, in fact, exactly the premise of bioregionalists, who add a third strand to the deep ecology-ecofeminism discourse by stressing the need to become intimately aware of particular places, not just place in general.[55] The next step, then, in learning from Native Americans may be to move beyond general study to an examination of individual tribes and cultural groups to understand how the more universal themes addressed in this article were and are articulated in particular places.

All told, we may well be on the path to a sustainable Western environmental consciousness. At least in the case of Native Americans we appear to have encountered and long recognized enduring environmental wisdom, even if we have been unable to integrate it into the mainstream of Western culture. At present, the active discourse among deep ecologists, ecofeminists, and bioregionalists suggests serious work on the shaping of an environmental consciousness in a form appropriate to Western culture. We can and should look for assistance in this effort from Native Americans; they appear willing, even anxious, to aid, as long as in so doing we recognize the boundary between learning and exploiting.

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[52] Matthiessen, "Native Earth," p. 7.

[53] Standing Bear, *Land Of The Spotted Eagle*, p. 248.

[54] Deloria, *God Is Red*, p. 294.

[55] See for example, Peter Berg, ed., *Reinhabiting a Separate Country* (San Francisco: Planet Drum Foundation, 1978); Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1985); James J. Parsons, "On 'Bioregionalism' and 'Watershed Consciousness,' " *The Professional Geographer* 37 (1985): 1–6; Peter Berg, Beryl Magilavy, and Seth Zuckerman, *A Green City Program for San Francisco Bay Area Cities and Towns* (San Francisco: Planet Drum Books, 1989).

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