

# In Wilderness There is Life: An American Indian Perspective on Theory and Action for Wildlands

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**Abstract**—The concept of “origins,” as it relates to wildlands from a Native American perspective, emerges from a cultural understanding of the balancing relationships between humans and nature. Although the concept of origins in this context carries cultural meaning, it is firmly rooted in the ecology of place and long-term experiential knowledge. An examination of multiple and distinctive tribal understandings of wildlands specific to place leads one to some general philosophic principles. These are demonstrated through environmental practices on various tribal and public lands such as the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness (Salish-Kootenai Tribe) and the Sacred Blue Lake (Taos Pueblo). Wildland practices here are value driven and an ethic of reciprocity is embraced. Collaboration with tribes and the acceptance of indigenous knowledge are important contributions to protecting on-tribal lands already under wilderness designation and for creating and maintaining alternative models for the protection of wildland values.

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The essence of wilderness is not in arguments over post-modern definitions, but in its value as places of origin and life. The idea of wildness as life itself stretches across American Indian cultures in North America. Crowfoot, of the Blackfoot Indian Nation, related life to wilderness when he 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.

The cultural significance of wilderness encourages a balancing relationship between humans and nature. It is the primary reason why involvement by indigenous people is critical to future and existing initiatives to sustain wilderness ecosystems. Where value drives use, an important philosophical reordering of human relationships to the environment is created. Tribes maintain a significant knowledge base relevant to sustainable practices within their cultures. In addition, much of the land needed to sustain ecosystems upon which wildness depends is outside designation under the Wilderness Act, as has been noted in previous years by the Wildlands Project. Tribes hold a significant amount of land (5 percent of the United States) that must be considered in efforts to develop a sustainable system.

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The United States and European countries signed treaties with North American Indian Nations as sovereign governments under the canons of international law. The treaties established a unique forum for protection of indigenous rights and self-governance.

Through treaties or Executive Orders of the President of the United States, reservation lands are homelands with reserved rights that are implemented as property rights. Tribes often hold senior water rights. Under the policy of self-determination, tribal governments are staffing their own professional departments and writing their own decision documents. Unique forms of wilderness designation on lands separate from public lands designated under the Wilderness Act of 1964 are evolving. Treaty rights to hunt and fish extend regulatory influence beyond tribal reservation boundaries.

## Four Points of Understanding \_\_\_\_\_

### Spirit

There are four key components for understanding the role of indigenous people in sustaining wildlands. First, a deep connection to wildlands is embedded in the philosophy and spirit of American Indian tribes. For many tribes, wildlands represent the origin of life and its sustenance.

### Ecology

Second, it is important to recognize that tribes possess a critical body of knowledge about wildlands as ecological benchmarks within complex cycles. Matthew King, a Lakota Sioux, understood dynamic change in nature: “Volcanoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes will happen. They will come. So just tell them the noble Redman told you that.” On the Klamath National Forest, American Indian basketmakers have taught Forest Service crews to apply prescribed burns at lower temperatures and in more selective plots, demonstrating their accumulated knowledge about the role of fire in local ecosystems.

### Knowledge

Third, it is critical to understand the objectives of American Indian practices in wildland areas. Physical scientists map ancient fire scars resulting from prescribed burning by indigenous people, their marks left like fingerprints on the cycle of forest history. American Indians are the only people in the United States with culturally transmitted knowledge of the factors that have driven change in the 200-to-800-year

cycles of growth that scientists consider. Okute, a Teton Sioux, illustrated this awareness as he spoke in 1911:

An animal depends a great deal on the natural conditions around it. If the buffalo were here today, I think they would be different from the buffalo of the old days because all the natural conditions have changed. They would not find the same food, nor the same surrounding.

## Governance

The practical exercise of culturally based governance, sustained by the knowledge of place, completes the fourth portion of the circle of shared understandings. Despite depredations and poorly formulated advice from federal managers in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (in the United States Department of the Interior), much reservation land remains less damaged and developed than adjacent public and private lands, so far.

Indigenous people know the land and they know where the animals are; they live there. The Hopi Tribal Delegation, in a Statement of Commitment to the Land issued in 1929, understood that:

We the traditional leaders want you...to know that we will stand firmly upon our own traditional and religious grounds. And that we will not bind ourselves to any foreign nations...We have met all other rich and powerful nations...all of whom have used force in trying to wipe out existence here in our own home. We want to come to our own destiny in our own way.

## Four Roads to Collaboration: Distinctive Tribal Conceptions of Wildlands

Successful construction of future strategies to protect indigenous relations to wildlands depends on understanding cultural differences. The American Indian conceptualization of wildlands embraces the notion of a cultural heartland encompassing natural components and processes. Traditionally, the European colonists separated the natural and cultural dimensions. The colonial philosophy of Manifest Destiny guided "civilization" of the Western United States through agriculture. It constructed a moral authority of human superiority. Standing Bear, an Oglala Sioux, noted:

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' and the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and savage people.

From the Indian perspective, value drives use; therefore, value is reinforced by human use and presence in the cycles of natural processes. The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wilderness as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (Public Law 88-571). Yet Goyathlay, known to the world as Geronimo, spoke of the wildlands of Arizona as home:

There is no climate or soil, which, to my mind, is equal to that of Arizona, that land which the Almighty created for the Apaches. It is my land, my home, and my fathers' land,

to which I now ask to be allowed to return. I want to spend my last days there, and be buried among those mountains.

The second cultural distinction is the connection between wildlands and spiritual value for American Indians. It extends beyond geographic description and life cycle. Human-defined boundaries are not relevant. Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce explained the problem:

The earth was created by the assistance of the sun, and it should have been left as it was.... The country was made without lines of demarcation, and it is no man's business to divide it.

The third distinction is the American Indian ethic of reciprocity. A gift calls for something in return. Historically, American Indians sustained life through a variety of practices based upon observed historic variation in the environment. At Yosemite National Park, Jay Johnson of the Ahwahnee tribe worked to convince the National Park Service to allow the collection of a sensitive species of willow for ceremonial use. After gathering, the remaining willows (no longer choked by unnatural density) thrived.

The fourth distinction emerges from restoration. Embedded in American Indian cultural traditions is the idea that human actions have uncertain results, and that results often occur outside human control. Restoration is undertaken with humility, in reaction to human error, and must be approached with more humility. Tribes must work as sovereign nations, in coordination with United States government agencies, to develop ecological restoration initiatives. Some areas under tribal control will be quite difficult to include in wilderness protection due to their ecologically degraded state. Herein is a powerful line of reasoning for supporting American Indian participation in wilderness designation and active restoration.

Some sacred cultural sites, valued for spiritual restoration, are many miles within designated Wilderness areas, which precludes the use of vehicles. A government official once considered denying tribal elders vehicle access to a religious site by an administrative road, stating, "Your grandfather didn't have a vehicle, he had to walk." The Chumash elder requesting the access quietly replied, "My grandfather did not need to walk. He lived here." Fortunately, arrangements are now often made to allow elders access to such remote areas.

Recreation values can conflict with traditional religious uses, also. In Bandelier National Monument, a stone formation called the Stone Lions is a significant site to Pueblo Indian people. The Park Service created trails nearby, however, resulting in physical damage and loss of solitude and privacy. The problem was somewhat resolved when the National Park Service subsequently placed cast reproductions of the stone lions in an area more easily accessed by the public.

Critical knowledge is encoded in cultural practices, institutional relationships, and stories.

Curiously enough, waste and destruction had not always been rampant throughout America. Long before the White man came, certain tribes of Algonquin Indians had learned the wisdom of dividing their tribal hunting grounds into family-size parcels in which none but family members had the right to hunt or fish. These family parcels descended from father to son. In them, the game was kept account of, closed some years for certain kinds of game, and killing was strictly regulated within the

limits of natural regeneration. Centuries before conservation policy was born, here was conservation practice at its best. The natural resource on which these Indians depended for their very life, as you and I depend on natural resources for ours, was being handled with foresight and intelligence (Pinchot 1947, p. 24-25).

## **Models for Collaboration in Wildlands**

The web of relationships between Tribes and the United States Government provides several collaborative management opportunities. Wilderness will be enriched for the world by further study of several potential models for collaborative wildland management. A few are considered here.

### **Federal Management; Tribal Consultation— a Chumash Tribal Model: Sacred Spaces and Sacred Species in Central California**

Federal management on public lands through the Wilderness Act of 1964 is the most common model of wilderness administration in the United States. About 70 percent of the 2-million-acre Los Padres National Forest is now under wilderness designation. Today, the Forest Service consults with Chumash Tribal Shamans when planning for prescribed burns there.

The Chumash people use lands now within Los Padres National Forest for collecting plant, mineral, and other materials significant to cultural practices. The Forest Service eliminated the requirement for a written permit on this Forest at the request of the Tribe. The Forest Service also complied with the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act by closing a popular public campground that was built on a Chumash cemetery. Chumash youth crews, in turn, removed physical evidence of old campgrounds and other nonconforming facilities in the Wilderness. Tribal members participated in the release of the California Condor, referred to as the Great Thunderbird by the Tribes, now an endangered species, into wilderness areas of the Los Padres National Forest.

### **Legal Transfer and General Exclusion in Sacred Lands—Legal and Limited Use Model for Sacred Sites**

The sacred Blue Lake was returned to the Taos Pueblo by legislation in 1996. Because it is the site of important ceremonies, full Tribal control was necessary to protect sensitive values.

### **Transfer of Private Lands to the Tribes— Collaborative Adaptation/Purchase Model of the Lummi Tribe**

At Arlecho Creek in Washington State, the Lummi Tribe is regaining land through collaborative support from conservation groups, a corporate donor, and cooperation

from a large corporation. Over a period of 10 years, members of the Lummi Tribe perfected a plan to make a combined purchase of 2,240 acres. "Arlecho Creek Forest has been a sacred, spiritual place for many generations of Lummi people and now we know future generations will be able to experience this treasure of nature," said Daryl Hillaire of the Lummi Nation. When the tribe began its efforts, Crown-Pacific Lumber Company had designated it as a premium area for timber harvest. Arlecho Creek, however, provides habitat for endangered species, as well as spiritual values for the Lummi people. The Nature Conservancy now holds a conservation easement on this area, becoming a partner in protecting it for the future.

### **Land Purchase; Tribal Coalition—Intertribal Wilderness Designation with Multiple Sovereigns and Multiple Values: Strategy for Northern California's Lost Coast**

This model comes out of a coalition of tribes who are organized to purchase land along California's Lost Coast, adjacent to the State-administered Sinkyone Wilderness Area. The general objective of this coalition is to unite land parcels in the area into wilderness protection units, with restorative practices applied in areas previously damaged by logging and other uses.

### **Formal Tribal Wilderness Designation— Enhanced Cultural Elements in the Mission Mountains**

The 89,000-acre Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness in Montana is located within the lands of the Salish-Kootenai Indian Reservation in the area once known as the "Place of Encirclement." It is adjacent to the Mission Mountain Wilderness administered by the USDA Forest Service. Designation and regulation is similar to those areas established under the Wilderness Act. The late Clarence Woodcock, cultural director for the Flathead Reservation, described:

...lands where our people walked and lived. Lands and landmarks carved into the minds of our ancestors through coyote stories and actual experiences. Lands, landmarks, trees, mountain tops, crevices that we should look up to with respect.

A special grizzly bear reserve promotes biodiversity values in the Tribal Wilderness. Because tribal governments feel less of the downdraft of congressional winds on their regulations, sovereignty allows closures and limits with greater ease than federal agencies experience. The grizzly bear reserve is of ever more critical importance as Congress is now delaying needed protection of the grizzly bear elsewhere under the Endangered Species Act.

### **Internalized Respect for Wildland Values— San Carlos Apache Tribe**

The reservation of the San Carlos Apache Tribe contains 1.8 million acres in Arizona. Tribal Vice-Chairman Marvin Mull noted that these lands are important to maintaining

the knowledge of how the Apache People are related to wildlife and how to maintain space for various uses. In a recent speech he explained, "The reservation was created in order to contain many different groups of ndeh (the Apache people)... Honoring a heritage of living off the land, we continue to this day to harvest acorns, agave hearts, cactus fruit and jojoba nuts." He outlined the basis for a relationship to wildlands that has worked for centuries:

We have been successful at this for a variety of reasons. Our grandparents lived in the mountains and canyons of this land. They knew all the different animals that shared the woods and the desert by their Apache names. We were raised speaking our language and learning about the elk and the deer, how we are related to them and how the creator made space for all of us on this world.

The Natural Resource Committee and the Recreation and Wildlife Commission decide on policy issues. Tribal member Paul Nosie implements policy as Director of the Recreation and Wildlife Department under the policy of tribal self-determination. The Tribe sponsors a scholarship/cooperative education program to educate tribal members as resource professionals.

Building wildland recreation opportunities is important to tribal autonomy. A permit may bring in as much as \$60,000 for a world-class elk hunt. This economic stimulus can make preservation of forests a reality. The majority of permits are currently reserved for tribal members. Value is placed on the uniqueness of well-preserved lands, distinct from nonreservation lands that are experiencing fast urban growth. The Tribe has classified the bulk of the land as "inoperable for timber harvest." Clearcutting is not acceptable and is rated as both expensive and nonproductive. Multiple species planning is especially important.

Jeanett Cassa of the San Carlos Elders Cultural Advisory Council lays out the underlying philosophy that plant and animal species are viewed as "gifts from the creator," and not "managed resources." In the words of Jeanett Cassa, "The idea we can manage resources is disrespectful. We can only manage ourselves." The northern area of old-growth forest on the reservation around Bear Wallow is viewed as a distinctive, unique area and is called a Wilderness. The Tribal Council has not wanted to place it in formal wilderness designation, however. Concern for rigid, long-term restrictions and impacts led to the choice of practical implementation over formal designation. For now, the multiple councils of the Tribe have relegated long-term care to cultural pride sustained by spiritual use and regard for the native species rather than structured zoning. National Environmental Protection Agency documents guide specific decisionmaking issues.

Some wildland areas are important for youth activities. Traditional "runs" are a source of accomplishment and pride for tribal youth. Such activities are often connected to accessing sacred mountain areas. The University of Arizona continues to restrict access for religious use by these "runners" to Mount Graham in Arizona.

The Tribal Program Manager is working on a 5-year plan to reintroduce fire into the pine forests, woodland and chaparral areas, and grass communities. Basketweavers have noted that burns encourage willow growth, which comes back in longer, straighter branches for weaving. Integrating traditional knowledge is important, as discussed

by Jeanett Cassa, who encourages teaching original tribal language to the botanist and in the science classes. Language is a great repository of knowledge about the environment and its relationships with humans for the Apache people.

The San Carlos strategy for their lands rests on tradition combined with professional training and scientific research. Most of all, their wildlands are protected in the hearts of the Apache people. Perhaps this is the strongest protection of all, for it extends to all of the lands.

## **Cross Boundary Cooperation: Tribal, Federal, and Private Collaboration—the Case for the Wolf and the Future of the Salmon: a Species-Oriented Model for Wildlands**

The wolf, nearly eradicated in the United States, has long been a symbol of wilderness. In the Northwest, reluctance from the State of Idaho to accept the role of Project Coordinator for wolf reintroduction, was bypassed when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service instead appointed the Nez Perce Tribe. This year, the Mexican Wolf runs free again on National Forest lands in Arizona and New Mexico. Introduction pens were established on the privately owned Ladder Ranch in New Mexico. One wolf has already entered the White Mountain Reservation.

In the Northwest, tribes have the knowledge and technical ability that may forge a collaborative leadership model to save the salmon.

## **Action Agenda**

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Collaborative involvement in wildlands protection will come only on terms initiated with the tribes. Reservation lands are often in better condition than surrounding lands, and undue pressure may fall upon tribes for preservation. It must be remembered that these lands are homelands for sustainable living. Sensitivity to cultural, as well as natural, regimes is critical. The practical use of lands extending out from designated Wilderness areas is an important component of wildland protection. The separation of indigenous knowledge from the full ethical and cultural range of understanding and its expression through community institutions will fail to produce collaborative action.

Not all wildland designation need take into account indigenous people—only those we want to be self-sustaining. Only when the human experience can be put back into nature will it be possible to create collaborative preservation strategies that work and that will:

1. Support indigenous people and their sovereign forms of governance that sustain past and present in the environmental continuum.

2. Shape a broader, larger role for American Indian involvement on all federal public lands. Government organizations are downsizing. The knowledge and management ability of tribes, with their professional natural resource departments and culturally based resource knowledge, can be used in restoration projects.

3. Develop and support legislative initiatives and institutional mechanisms that work to assist tribes to achieve sustainable land use, with positive benefits for wildlands.

4. Consider opportunities for tribal management of recreational use that avoid the problems of the market-only approach of commercial concessionaires. Emphasize guided, value-added tours and workshops that promote environmental education and provide American Indian youth with job opportunities using cooperative agreements, the Job Training Act, and other existing authorities.

5. Support legislation and administrative policy actions that return sacred sites and special lands of cultural significance to tribal control in order to maintain cultural and biological distinctiveness.

6. Support treaty rights through working to implement court decisions (such as the Boldt Decision in Washington State) that imply an inherent right to preserve species, waterways, and habitat covered by treaty rights.

7. Support tribally based collaborative efforts with government, private, or corporate entities to establish various forms of land ownership, easements, and tribal regulations to protect wildlands in a sustainable manner.

8. Encourage further research on tribal and indigenous models of land management worldwide as a means to expand sustainable wildland designation and other strategies that include long-term residents and traditional keepers of the wildland treasures.

9. Create educational programs that include indigenous youth in ecology, biology, wildlife, and cultural activities such as provided by the Native American Fish and Wildlife Association.

## Reference

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Pinchot, Gifford. 1947. *Breaking new ground*. Washington, DC: Island Press. 522 p.