

Wild Mountains, Wild Rivers: Keeping the Sacred Origins

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Abstract—For many indigenous peoples in North America, wild mountains and rivers and other natural formations exist as physical beings formed as part of a whole by forces that interconnect people with them. This perspective frames a discussion around an idea that expresses time and space as wrapped up in the mountain. If time is within the being of place and space within the mountain, actions to remove parts of the mountain remove pieces of time, such as in the case of putting roads on Mt. Graham in Arizona, damming the Skokomish or drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The task and its implications are to move at the grassroots level to begin meaningful consultation between agencies and tribes and to use discretionary authorities to resolve problems. The work indicates a need to move at the highest political levels as well, to take model grassroots solutions to the legislative arena.

“Shika analyeed, Nika ishyeed.” (Athabaskan saying meaning, “I help you, you help me.”)

For many Tribes in North America, sacred wild mountains, rivers and other natural formations exist as physical beings formed as part of a whole by forces that interconnect people with them. This perspective expands, and to some extent, challenges, the general view that suggests that the sacredness should be understood as a cultural construct developing along the path of linear time. Instead, the sacredness of a mountain is based on the rejection of the generally accepted concept of time as the only version of time: it extends time in motion and it moves backward, forward, and cyclically as it stays in the same place all at once. In this view, these natural features of wild landscapes are becoming original themselves and constantly emerging from the origins of being. This creates a kind of dependent origination, because both place and people are engaged. In this way, time itself resides in sacred sites, while knowledge is transmitted verbally through constructed time from the initial being. They are the seats of wisdom and the guiding principle of an indigenous land ethic of caring for the land and the waters.

These sacred places provide models for restoration practice engaging humans in action through constant renewal. This is the case with Mt. Graham in Arizona. The Apache people hold this mountain in esteem as the home of the Ga’an or Mountain Spirits. The mountain, in this respect, becomes a

holy place that should be preserved intact as an ecological and spiritual whole. Far up in the Northwest, the Salish peoples of the coastline hold the purity and force of their rivers in high regard. Polluting and damming the waters interfere with the First Salmon ceremony and other rituals that threaten their spiritual life and the sustainability and balance of the ecological systems upon which they depend. Other areas like the Arctic Wildlife Refuge exist in a similar pattern.

The reinterpretation of time into a multiplicity of times changes both theory and practice of the experience of wild places and science. It is not unscientific to view time differently in the context of wild places; anymore than chaos theory is unscientific because it challenges linear thinking. However, this approach has different effects, because the theory and practice of the wild experience is then unified with human understanding and compassion and spiritual being connected with sacred places. These ideas meet today at a nexus point where a variety of people who work in different mediums—ranging from the journal of a wilderness hiker, to the work of an anthropologist, to filmmakers or indigenous science philosophers like Greg Cajete (2000)—explore these ideas.

This alternative view of time and origins within sacred places connects restoration and action through the notions of respect and reciprocity. If time is within the mountain, actions to remove parts of the mountain thus remove pieces of time. Such is the case when multiple roads and observatories are developed on Mt. Graham in Arizona or drilling and development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge occurs.

This alternative view of time and origins within sacred places opens the door to an indigenous methodology (Smith 1999) for restoration based on place. If sacred places are the homes where knowledge rests, then a human responsibility for the protection of their ecosystems and knowledge is critical to ensure human understanding of wild places. Sacred places, because of limited use, become the refuges for life and for critical patterns of human understanding. If such sacred places are damaged, restoration action should follow. To prevent such damage, there is a need for better policy and legislation to protect sacred sites. When they are assaulted and damage occurs, restoration action is a responsibility to restore their original dynamic character. Such efforts need to be guided by the application of traditional knowledge about the specific place.

Physical places and wild spaces express natural laws that can be interpreted through culture, but are expressed through their physical nature at the same time. Time and knowledge are wrapped up in the mountain—in its space—and knowledge cannot be separated from the mountain. Time is simultaneously cyclical, linear, and forever in sacred places.

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Western science recognizes that Mt. Graham represents seven life zones and unique ecologies, threatened and endangered species, and old-growth forests. However, Western science cannot extract all the knowledge held by the mountain, because it is the Apache people who care for the mountain who are connected to that knowledge. Natural laws are both posed and felt through sacred places as a way of connecting cause and effect. Learning how these components work together to create and support life is both the basis of a cosmology and the practice of ecology. Data collection and empirical knowledge can be practiced and embedded in Indian cultures as well as the theories of science.

Understanding the idea of sacredness in the mountain is not only the work of poets and scientists, but also the journal of a wilderness hiker and indigenous scientist like Greg Cajete, and the building coalition of multiple Apache Tribes. As culture members might vibrate into their relationship with wilderness through vocal sound, we vibrate in wilderness in chaotic times by running, smelling, intensified exertion, and announcing ourselves in song or voice to the mountain, and reflection finally on its original nature that we act to protect. The heartbeat of the world is felt from our feet to our pounding hearts in a way that cuts across culture. From this an interactive methodology emerges guided by natural laws such as the recognition of dependent origination and spreads over diverse places.

To Protect and Restore: The Origins of Conflict

The commitment of here, now, and always to protect sacred places like Mt. Graham often places Tribes in conflict with Federal policy-makers, especially in Congress and where private interests who seek to influence public policy for private gain interact with the process. The attempt to educate and fragment the physical space to please multiple interests contradicts the sacred wholeness of the idea of a spiritual home as expressed by traditional Apache people.

Sacred places have become conundrums for public policy. Many such places exist on public lands. Tribes and local land management officials often begin a process of meaningful consultation, but there is a lack of agency policy that has been operationalized to give agency employees a sense of security as they proceed. An Executive Order, during the Clinton administration, underlined the importance of Sacred Sites, but a lack of understanding and legislative direction creates problems that end up in muddled legal decisions from the courts. The nature of traditional knowledge and methodologies is local, but often "solutions" are imposed from far away.

The Sky Islands of Arizona

In the early 1980s, the University of Arizona and several international partners, including the Vatican, sought a permit to build 17 telescopes on Mt. Graham. To the Apache, such development was a desecration of the mountain as a sacred place that would severely impact their centuries-long spiritual practices. The mountain, called in Apache, "Dzil

nchaa si an," was originally set within the bounds of the San Carlos Apache Reservation. But Congress responded to demands for logging and mining, and so the mountain was removed from the reservation. As Keith Basso, an anthropologist well-regarded by many Apache people and an expert considered to be a leader in his field, states the choice for the University of Arizona: "Would the University of Arizona and its associated institutions know more about the heavens or would they rather know that they have reaffirmed the religious integrity of a people who have worshipped for centuries in a sacred place beneath them" (Basso in Warshall 1997: 7). The idea that the whole mountain ridge might be sacred and needed to be preserved intact collided with the multiple interest policy process, and conflict was born.

The fact that Apache shrines do not reflect evidence of significant material construction did not help the claim. In 1988, the University spent one million dollars to get a rider attached to the Arizona-Idaho Conservation Act that would allow construction of the observatories without the application of Federal environmental and cultural resources laws. The University of Arizona continues to resist efforts to access Mt. Graham for religious purposes and has, in fact, required a permit to pray that involves extensive personal documentation and information.

Over the years, the University has continued to seek additional permits and locations, while Apache people, environmentalists, and some scientists have formed the Mt. Graham Coalition, one of the most effective networks to fight the global nature of this very effective project. Though the San Carlos Tribe has passed eight resolutions against the observatories, its promoters claim the Apaches do not really oppose the development. Long-term efforts by Apache leaders like Ola Cassador Davis, Wendsler Nosie and other tribal leaders have received national and international recognition (Warshall 1997). In fact, the Mt. Graham Coalition, including the Apache Survival Coalition, created a highly effective network of tribes, concerned citizens and environmental organizations and nonprofit organizations. In 2005, the 13th Annual Sacred Run was held beginning at Mt. Graham. This involved runners from tribes in Arizona, New Mexico, and Mexico who ran 350 miles from the top of Mt. Graham to the summit of the San Francisco peaks to bring attention to proposed developments in both sacred mountain areas. The runners did this in an effort to bring public awareness to the pollution of the earth. Wendsler Nosie, Apache Tribal Councilman, noted, "It is essential for all tribes to work together. The abuse of our people and our land is widespread and we must act in unity to stop it" (editorial in *The Apache Moccasin*, August 3, 2005, Globe, Arizona, p. 11).

Continued legal action and appeals have not produced resolution to the conflict. The heart of the controversy is America's failure to come to grips with the larger issues of a land ethic (Martine 1993). Even units of wilderness management do not encompass whole ecosystems, or even mirror biodiversity and ecosystem processes. Their boundaries are not drawn by the broad spiritual brushes that encompass physical knowledge embedded over the centuries. With sacred places, the reformation, restoration and re-creation of the relationship between humans and nature is at stake.

The idea of sacred places shapes how we view wildlands and rivers and our beliefs about time and the physical world. It places humans into the land and the rivers, while it guides our actions as they modulate in relation to natural variations. Things are never exactly the same twice, because sacred places are connected to the origins of life. Life is unpredictable, unperiodic—similar but not repeating—and sensitive to initial conditions. The conditions within sacred places are the holders of the origins and the patterns of the future. Radically changing those conditions in sacred places is to act out of time and out of respect. It is to swat the proverbial butterfly whose flapping wings are driving the change across the globe. Rather, the indigenous objective is to be involved in the creative process of life through natural and cultural unions, not dominion.

The Northwest Waters

Attempts at dominion over the mountains were shortly followed by attempts at dominion over the waters in North America. The Skokomish River provides a parallel case of conflict over the waters. The wild flowing river poured thousands of gallons of clean mountain water into the waters of Puget Sound. It was a premier salmon fishing and salmon reproduction river and the site of rituals and cultural activities for the Skokomish people. The salmon are a food source for the Skokomish and food is given by the Creator; this makes the river and the surrounding ecosystem that support the salmon sacred. In an unprecedented policy move, the city of Tacoma developed hydroelectric dams on wild rivers in Washington State. The Skokomish was dammed in the early 1930s and Tacoma Power and Light reaped the benefits. No Federal permit was taken, none was asked for. Later, a second dam went up. The impacts to the Skokomish people and their sacred waters were ignored; sometimes salmon were not even available for the First Salmon Ceremony. Tacoma Power and Light continued to argue that the upper river was never salmon habitat, but such remonstrations are hard to swallow when one reads old fish and game records that show people being cited for catching salmon in the area or hears the stories of elder Skokomish.

Years later, the Federal Energy Regulation Commission (FERC) granted Tacoma Power and Light permission as they “relicensed” the dam that never had a license, despite clear documentation that Skokomish religious and cultural use was affected. The first great problem created by the first dam on the Skokomish was that it disrupted fishing and salmon ceremonies. The second great problem was increased flooding for the rural families and Skokomish people below. To the degree that the dams turned the water off, the sediments went up. Further, extensive logging along the river on public land increased the problem. Today, floods wipe out banks and delta habitat for salmon. The Skokomish Tribal Natural Resource Department continues to devise innovative responses, chaining logs into the river and replanting riparian areas. Despite years of lawsuits, the conflict continues. Millions of dollars in the loss of fisheries and the loss of cultural practice is amplified by the loss of safety for whole communities from flooding for the Skokomish and their rural neighbors, who can no longer even build on their property along the river in Mason County.

Sacred Theory, Sacred Practice _____

If a connection of sacred mountains and rivers to chaos theory is made, there is a possibility of prediction that extends time from being. Chaos theory is used to clarify the complex behavior of a complex system like weather. As a meteorologist works on a simple computer weather model solving equations with three variables, chance in one variable in the scientific equation causes unexpected results in the outcome of the weather. So it is with the sacred mountains and waters that hold the multiple equations and models of life drawn from years of experience. Taken further, sacred mountains and waters are the origins and the reflections of what might be called The Indigenous Hypothesis: Chaos is the essence of the universe and thus our destiny is related to chaos and our ability to reciprocate and restore essential conditions while adapting to some level of change. Unpredictability, such as experienced in sacred and wild places, provokes anxiety, but it can also be a source of happiness. Through protecting sacred sites and the practice of restoration for humans and for their environment, we can become more responsible and closely aligned with our future. We can connect the relationships to create positive life conditions out of our past and present chaos. Sacred places harbor understanding through the natural laws that they pose. As members of cultural communities might vibrate with vocal sound, we all vibrate in wilderness by running, smelling, intensified exertion, and announcing ourselves in song or voice to the mountain in the practice of wilderness. We feel the heartbeat from our feet to our pounding hearts that reverberates in the heartbeat of the earth in these places of origins.

Implications and Recommendations: Expanding the Definition of Wildness _____

Everything follows natural law and everything possesses the ability to understand and live with it (Cajete 2000). It is not all about the butterfly’s wings; it is about where it flaps them and the direction of the vibrations. Sacred places are nexus points that change everything and change humans as well. This was the point of the Go Road controversy in Northern California, when a recreation road was proposed that would make a jagged cut through “the center of the universe,” for the Klamath peoples. Through the long process of resolution and litigation, some resolution emerged in a different form—the area was ultimately saved by wilderness legislation and associated areas were eventually protected by informed decisions of Forest Service land managers in cooperation with tribal liaisons. Yet today, these conflicts continue to play out in cases again and again. From the classic case of Mt. Graham, to the rivers of Washington State, to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the pattern emerges.

As humans, we still need to recognize these sacred places. The worldview of Tribes offers a new perspective on the evolving discussion on the definition of wilderness and wildness and an expansion of the land ethic to include long-term human relationships through sacred places. The idea of wilderness from this point of view broadens the

conservation of biodiversity and whole ecosystems as inclusive within saving the sacred places as the origins of life. This view needs support through the development of meaningful consultation procedures where tribal representatives play a key role in decision-making, and agency officials have firm support and guidance for programs that protect and restore sacred places. In addition, as a new wilderness, monument, park or refuge are established under the Wilderness Act or other congressional legislation, there is considerable discretion to add specific passages that allow protection of sacred areas on these public lands.

The physical and spiritual definition of wilderness is broadened by the inclusion of sacred spaces. They teach us that if chaos is the essence of the universe and our destiny is related to chaos, there exists anxiety, satisfaction and resolution in wild places. These sacred places of our origins create a vision of what is and what can be. They hold the patterns and the gyroscopes for the balance of life and they outline for us our reciprocal responsibilities to restore and

protect the lands and waters. If the answers to conflicts are not tangled in distinctions between economics and the environment, then accepting the process of chaos and resolution can lead to a balancing of human needs that links land and water use decisions to an ethic of human and ecological rights. That balance includes respect for sacred places, those centers of the universe where changes born every day reach out to shape our shared destiny.

References

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