

**Wisdom of Understanding, Respecting and Developing an Affinity with Nature: A  
Native American Ecological Perspective**

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**Abstract**

*Indigenous people are known for their knowledge of nature and its subtle ecosystem. They have acquired this ability to understand the environment and its changes through worship and submission that is the fundamental principle of their survival. Whereas, environmental education including teaching, research, and practice now-a-days have been reported by the traditions of western and Euro-centric culture. In this context, indigenous perspective of environment is totally neglected, marginalized because it is alleged to be unscientific and impractical. In fact, to greater extent Euro- centric methods, approaches and attitude towards nature are very often proved malicious and destructive. Their attempts to safeguard environment have resulted to be futile because they could not understand the relation between man and nature. Their quest for control and superiority over nature created numerous problems through-out the world. Unlike modern man, aboriginal people of America managed to cultivate a balanced life style without disturbing the susceptible ecosystem. This led them to be happy and prosperous for ages with the abundant resources of nature. Indigenous have always lived on the best of terms with the natural world but on the other hand the western European civilizations have always been at odds with nature. In this context, there is a significant mounting body of literature exploring the aboriginal environmental philosophy that can provide solutions to the present environmental issues. The*

*present paper examines the behaviour of Natives towards ecosystem in general and American Indians in Particular. It also emphasizes on the ways and means that can be drawn from life experiences of First Nations to restore sustainable ecosystem.*

**Key Words:** Indigenous, ecosystem, Euro-centric, marginalized, aboriginal etc.

Indigenous people usually have a lot of knowledge about nature and its subtle ecosystem. They in-fact acquired the ability to understand the environment and its changes through worship, respect and submission, which is a fundamental principle of their life and survival. Their influence can be clearly felt even now as today's environmental education teaching, research, and practice have been reported by the traditions of western and Euro-centric culture. In the same context, it is observed that indigenous perspective of environment is totally neglected and marginalized. It is alleged to be unscientific and impracticable. In-fact to a greater extent, Euro- centric methods, approaches and attitude towards nature are very often proved malicious and destructive. Their attempts to safeguard the environment have resulted to be futile because they could not understand the relation between man and nature. Their quest for control and superiority over nature created numerous problems throughout the world.

Unlike the modern man, aboriginal people of America managed to cultivate a balanced life style without disturbing the susceptible ecosystem. This led them to be happy and prosperous for ages with the abundant resources of nature. In the same context the famous novelist N.Scott Momaday's novel "House Made of Dawn" was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969, and is considered the first major work of the Native American Renaissance. Momaday observed that the "Indian has always lived on the best of terms with the natural world. Western man and western European civilization has always been at odds with nature" Momaday further argued that, "through an exchange of ideas, both cultures could achieve their final goal of a sustainable Earth. There is a significant mounting body of literature exploring aboriginal environmental philosophy that can provide solutions to the present environmental issues. Modern man is responsible for today's world's problems like global warming, ozone layer depletion, deforestation ecological imbalance and loss of biodiversity." (Costo,4-5). This created various problems to everyone irrespective of the nation that they belong to. The natives actually contributed much to the world, but they are not properly recognized. For them relation with the land was not only physical but also biological, emotional and spiritual. In fact, they were truly the models of ecological sustainability. Reverence and passion for thousands of years towards the earth and its web of life was the

primary focus and way of life for them. This was actually a direct result of their values and worldviews.

In the same context Roderick Frazier Nash, regarded as a national leader in the field of environmental history and management and environmental education, writes, “Native Americans can be regarded as the first American environmentalists by their practices that illustrated their understanding of nature as a community to which humans as well as every other thing belong. The Native Americans undoubtedly used the earth’s resources but they respected the limits of the environment and understood the need to restrain human impact. Most Native American religions and ethical systems was the idea that humans and other forms of life constituted a single society”. (Nash,1989).On the other-hand the Western thinkers and scientists generally have a tendency to find solutions to the present ecological crisis only with the help of science. They usually do not consider the past as an important source being informative and enlightening. Neither do they consider the traditional cultures of Original Peoples as holding meaningful answers for the world community. In-fact for the Western European peoples, the knowledge system of Original Nations is not standard and practicable. As a result this misconception has pushed the world into severe problems without reasonable answers.

Problems such as man’s alienation, detachment from nature and rude treatment of environment have resulted in alarming living conditions worldwide. In-fact, solutions for environmental issues cannot be found in modern science or technology because the development of science and technology is partially responsible for the problem. People for their temporary pleasures and needs started exploiting and disturbing the nature indiscriminately for centuries. Native people on the other hand led their lives for many centuries by being a part of the nature, adjusting themselves according to it and adapting to the changing climatic conditions. However, modern man has failed to understand the power and response of environment and begun to play with it senselessly by ignoring the implications of the act. Further all the nations are worrying a lot about degradation of environment and the problem is on par with other major problems such as illiteracy, unemployment and poverty.

As a result, United Nations Organisation and other international voluntary organisations are sensitising people to the dangers that are threatening the environment. However, now that ecological limits of the Earth are being reached, and the future supply of fresh water, air on the planet and the health of the oceans are being seriously called into question. Moreover some Western thinkers are finally coming to the realization that the Earth and its ecosystems have biological limits, and there are severe consequences when humans arrogantly refuse to

maintain ecological balances and safeguard the waters of life. Actually original Nations' knowledge systems were grounded and continue to be ashore for thousands of years of multi-generational and interactive understanding of the biological processes of Life.

In-fact when the early Europeans travelled for the first time across Native lands in North America, they did not find the ecosystems devastated by Native cultural practices. The Explorers, chroniclers, surveyors, and missionaries described the vast majority of the Indian lands as virtual "Edens" with wonderful profusion. Yet the same time our ancestors who worked with the natural life systems to build such places were not and are still not credited for their amazing ecological accomplishments. They for that matter are not acknowledged at all. In-fact, the environmental wisdom and spirituality of North American Indians was really great. Animals at that time were respected as equal in rights to humans. Of course, they were hunted, but only for food, and the hunter first asked permission of the animal's spirit. Among the hunter-gatherers the land was owned in common and there was no concept of private property in land. The idea that land could be bought and sold was disgusting. Many Indians had an appreciation and affection of nature's beauty.

Though religious beliefs varied between tribes, there was a common widespread belief in a Great Spirit who created the earth and pervaded everything. The Indians viewed the white man's attitude to nature as completely opposite of theirs. The white man seemed determined on destroying whole natural order, felling forests, clearing land, mining for minerals, killing animals for sport. In other words, the Indians were not an alien race of impossibly wonderful people. They were human just like the rest of us. It is aptly said that wisdom derives from way of life, and is as fragile as nature. In the process many Indians shared their animism, their respect for nature and their attitude to the land with other hunter-gatherers. But when the ways of life change, beliefs too change to support them.

After that the advent of agriculture and then industry brought massive shifts in attitudes to nature. Our present way of life is laying waste to the environment that supports us. Rather new beliefs can actually help us change our way of life, and arrive at those beliefs where one can learn immensely from the North American Indians. Perhaps the most famous of all Indian speeches about the environment is the wonderful speech of Chief Seattle of the Squamish tribe of Northwest USA (1854). He rather asks beautifully by addressing a white man in the following manner, "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of the Earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clear and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the

memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man. You must teach your children that the ground beneath their feet is the ashes of our grandfathers. So that they will respect the land, tell your children that the Earth is rich with the lives of our kin. Teach your children what we have taught our children that the Earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons of the Earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves.” It is still a brilliant piece of work that distills the essence of many scattered Indian speeches. It is a moving lament on the passing of the Indian, but with only a fraction of the ecological awareness. They have stronger attachment with the land they live in. The soil is always soothing, strengthening, cleansing and healing. That is why the old Indian still sits upon the earth instead of propping himself up and away from its life-giving forces. For him, to sit or lie on the ground is to be able to think more deeply and to feel more keenly. This way he can see more clearly into the mysteries of life and come closer in kinship to other lives about him. In addition to it native people believe that kinship with all creatures of the earth is an essential principle of life.

Natives knew that man's heart away from nature becomes hard; he knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon leads to lack of respect for humans, too. So, he kept his youth close to its softening influence. They believe that men must be born and reborn to continue their sense of belonging. Their bodies must be formed of the dust of their forefathers' bones. An Indian similarly remains kin to all living things and he gives equal rights to all the creatures around him. Everything belonging to the earth is loved and revered. In contrast to him, the Modern man on the other hand considered animal life just as a tool for food and pleasure. In the same context Luther Standing Bear goes on to describe “Forests were mown down, the buffalo exterminated, the beaver driven to extinction and his wonderfully constructed dams dynamited ... and the very birds of the air silenced ... The white man has come to be the symbol of extinction for all things natural in this continent. Between him and the animal there is no rapport and they have learned to flee from his approach, for they cannot live on the same ground”. He also remarked, many non-Native Americans don't understand the deep attachments of Native people to the land and how forcible removal of Native lands from them by the European settlers challenged their cultural identities.

All humans have a basic urge to claim the land, bodies of water and other resources needed to produce the food and shelter required by their families and communities. Europeans and most Asian immigrants came to the Western Hemisphere believing that they would have opportunities to purchase and own the resources needed to produce food and fibre, as ownership had become the accepted practice in their own countries. With most of the land in Europe and Asia owned by the princes, rulers, religious institutions, and the

wealthy, America offered possibilities for land ownership to the new immigrants. By then the Native Americans had no concept of ownership. Land, water and other resources of the earth were still considered as divine gifts to be shared without ownership and conserved respectfully. They believed that all forms of life come from the Mother Earth. Land and its gifts of bison, fish, corn and vegetables are supposed to be very sacred for them. Sharing Mother Earth's gifts is considered an essential part of spirituality in their cultures.

When Europeans and other immigrants took control over tribal hunting and fishing territories, the Native Americans naturally felt that the Mother Earth was being dishonoured. Forcible removal of their ancestral lands and confinement to reservations totally violated the Native Americans' agrarian imperative. As a result, it is not surprising that such devastating violations of what was most important to them led to profound disillusionment and cultural depression among themselves. As they already had the survival capacity in a less complicated world, their approach to living sustained the environment for future generations and had an inherent fairness doctrine. The construct of the **agrarian imperative** helps us identify the factor devised by the earlier indigenous Americans to appreciate its contributions to humankind. They had actually figured out a method of democratically sharing Earth's gifts. As the American Indians survived for many centuries while inhabiting in this hemisphere, they altered their environment very little. While they thrived, they developed various methods of recording information, systematic methods of observation and experimentation that resulted in sustainable agriculture techniques, astronomy and engineering. Their methods of living nurtured cities of approximately 30,000 to 40,000 inhabitants until the new immigrants arrived with unfamiliar diseases to which Natives had little resistance.

As the pace of ecological change increases, so too does the need for baseline information with which to direct conservation and restoration activities. Often, however, the data are scarce. Thus local knowledge becomes the richest source when it has accumulated over generations, embedding observations and corresponding cultural adaptations within a context of long-term ecological change. In fact most of the Western ecologists are unfamiliar with many ways in which renewed interest in Traditional Ecological Knowledge is adding to the common store of knowledge about existing ecosystems and its relevance to ecological restoration and conservation. According to Alison Stormwolf and Pat Wilson, Native American wisdom is deep, insightful, simple and true. It has passed the test of time. The wisdom of their elders is very pertinent to the times in which we are living. Had the rest of the world lived according to their philosophy as 'Earth Keepers', we as a planet would not have faced the dreadful problems that attack in the ways of pollution, climate change and plundering of resources. In-fact there is countless tribes, each with his own language, sacred stories, customs and ceremonies. However, they all share the wisdom of being aware of the



cosmic connections not only with each other but also with the very earth and sky, trees, rocks, animals and plants.

The above paragraph evaluates Natives' philosophy of life that incorporates values and ethics in binding them with nature. Thus environmental ethics have existed in the US even much before the European settlement by beginning with the native cultural beliefs and traditions. The modern environmental ethics consists of views correlating with the modern conservation movement in the US. The ancient vision of the fourth world people has the resonance to deal with every contemporary ecological problem. The only thing required is to explore and decode the belief systems and ways of life. Finally, when we think of answers and solutions to our environmental issues such as loss of biodiversity and global warming, it is important to respect, recognise and apply traditional ecological wisdom of the Fourth world people. It will certainly help us enrich our lives and communicating knowledge to achieve a better and sustainable relationship with the environment. After all we need to collaborate with environment to change the world for the better by revisiting our relationship with nature.

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