

I write about American Indian (Native American) perspectives on sustainability, but first a few points about me. One, I grew up with the term “Indian,” so I will use it from now on. Second, my primary professional area is Organizational Psychology, though I have done research and practical work with and substantial reading about Indian peoples throughout North America. Third, I am now Oregon Indian. My personal Indian community background is with the Haudenosaunee (“Iroquois Confederacy”) originally of the northeast and northern mid-west US and Canada. , I have really just begun to learn about the history of Oregon’s Indian peoples and about their current lives and perspectives. What I have to say about sustainability comes largely from experience with other Indian groups—including ones in the Pacific Northwest, mainly in Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska..

I define sustainability as ways of living that can endure over time instead of being inherently self-limiting. *Environmental sustainability* refers to modes of life that do not depend on resources and practices that disrupt the web of life. *Community sustainability* deals with whether and how human groups and humans as a whole can meet their needs in ways that can be maintained over time while maintaining the health of the physical environment. The vision of sustainable human communities is a goal that flows from certain values; other visions, goals, and values are possible, have dominated North America for the last two-three centuries, and still compete with the vision of sustainability.

Sustainability and Indian and Non-Indian Cultures

Indian values and cultures grew out of the strong adaptation to places and tend to still include a practical, experiential perspective of living symbiotically with other living creatures and the systems of nature. While Indian cultures and practices have always varied widely in some respects, and continue to do so, many of them traditionally shared a core of similarity that is relevant to sustainability. In the traditional Indian way of social organization the land and people cannot be separated. This is a key difference between traditional Indian cultures and communities and the majority of communities in the developed world today. In the latter, way of life and worldviews have been substantially divorced from the local ecology. This both alters values and makes sustainable practices difficult.

The sustainability-relevant values of traditional Indian cultures: humility, including the belief that human power and prowess always yield harm with good; respect and felt-connection

to non-human creatures and world-features; a spiritual focus in which the manifest world is inherently linked to a spiritual plane; a sense of obligation to ancestors and to life yet to come; and a circular rather than linear view of time and events.

But Indian cultures’ traditional approaches to the environment also differ from the approaches sometimes presented by mainstream environmentalists. In Indian cultures, people living on the land harmoniously are important to the health of the full web of life on earth and in the spiritual plane. Thus, attempts to preserve natural America by setting aside wilderness lands where people’s role is minimized does not quite fit the Indian model. Instead, on-going human participation is seen as an important role in ecological health. This role must be bound into all of the other facets of the system, not dropped into it infrequently, buffered from its immediate feedback cycles. As my friend Cliff Atleo (of the Nuu-chah-nulth on Vancouver Island, British Columbia) once said “We believe that resources are there for our use...but not for us to abuse. We have to take care of them.”

In the dominant trends of non-Indian societies (plural to include Canada and Mexico) in North America the local geography is not a center of culture. In fact, remaking the land is valued. Capitalist economics is a central, dominant element. This promotes both the commoditization of nature, and intense specialization that ends up buffering individuals and groups from the sources and consequences of their ways of life.

Mainstream society and scientists also incline toward compartmentalization and specialization such that facets of the world are considered and acted on separately from each other. Aspects of the environment are largely treated as distinct, unrelated resources; human systems and human needs are addressed separately from them; and emerging problems are largely viewed and acted on in isolation from each other. Specialization and compartmentalization certainly have their value. When taken to excess, though, and not balanced by at least equal attention to connections and integrative understanding produce results that will ultimately not be sustainable.

Non-Indian society also tends to look at the land, oceans, and rain only as physical features. To some, they have no spiritual component. To others, they have beauty and power, but ultimately only relative to the value that those provide to humans. Another segment of non-Indian society sees people as having the God-given right to use all aspects of the physical world purely for their own benefit. Human nature, outcomes, and obligations end up being treated as largely separate from the land, the plants that

grow on it, the water that flows through it, and the natural processes that inform the world.

Human power and prowess are seen as a generally good and increasing human power is part of the ideal of progress. The time orientation is short—now and the immediate future, though the longer-term future is often the locus of expectations of technological fixes that will render current difficulties and problematic trends moot.

Lessons from Indian Experiences of Disruption and Survival

With the coming of Europeans and other outsiders to North America, Indian peoples tended to be consigned to marginal lands that often have extreme environmental conditions. Most Indian groups survived major post-contact shifts in the ecology they live in, caused by either significant geographical relocations or major species and environmental changes. For those reasons, perhaps more than any other population in North America, Indian people have centuries of experience adapting to fragile and variable environment, social stresses, economic deprivations, and natural resource limitations. Understanding how they did so, to good and ill, can provide guidance for how other groups might deal with similar disruptions in the future.

Sustainability Planning and Action


Some Indian communities have had recent successes rebuilding their cultures, strength and health, but environmental and social problems remain such that sustainability planning is needed in Indian communities. Such planning might (and in a few cases, already has) yield unique, exemplary approaches to linking human health to environmental health.

Yet, Indian communities do not and cannot exist in isolation from other societies or the community of the world. Indian and non-Indian communities share bioregions; are linked economically, politically, and socially; and are embedded in the global networks of both earth systems and modern human technological power. Planning for Indian community sustainability requires collaboration with non-Indian communities. Some cutting-edge trends and themes in mainstream society, business, and science fit well with Indian traditional knowledge and Indian worldviews. Indian holistic and long-term perspectives could both contribute to those movements and benefit from them.

Historic and persistent realities of mistrust, miscommunication, and world-view and goal differences between Indian and non-Indian peoples make it critical to develop new strategies and systems for promoting partnerships for sustainability. Models for partnering exist, such as the Assembly of First Nations—the national umbrella group for Indian communities throughout Canada—list of six primary background needs for developing effective approaches to Indian and non-Indian collaboration community sustainability. Such partnerships will not be easy to achieve, but are necessary and possible.

Hale, Whole, Holy

Sustainability can only be measured by the ongoing health of all natural beings and all life forms. That includes human culture, human social systems, and human spirituality. We are a necessary part of the natural harmony that the earth produced and still needs. Indian people traditionally understood and lived by the concept that it is in the ties between the physical and spiritual worlds and in the ties among earth, animals, and humans that the health of them all rests. The wind, the trees, the fish, and fowl have spiritual roles and power that people can sometimes tap, but only with care, humility, respect, and a sense of mutual obligation. It seems to me that only such an ecocentric ethic can result in sustainability.

If we can clearly face up to how human systems have generally become estranged from natural systems, and vice-versa, we will see that we have already risked a lot and we have already lost a lot that will be difficult to recover. But as long as there is life, as long as visions of healthy, connected systems persist we still have an opportunity to move away from problematic trends. We have an obligation to try—as individuals, as Indian communities, as communities of communities, and as a species that is part of a covenant of life. If we face facts and accept our responsibility, we can live in harmony with the land. That is our challenge and I think we can meet it. 

lessons from
indian experience and culture

Keith James
Portland State University

