

**SUSTAINABILITY AND THE SACRED:
AN ANTHOLOGY OF TEACHINGS ON
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND NATIONAL PARKLANDS**

Chapter 1.

TIME, CULTURE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE

Indigenous Knowledge and Ritual As Public Policy. The idea for establishing the Place and Native Voice Project arose from research on disputes over the management of sacred sites on public lands. Writing up that research in book formⁱ (*Worship and Wilderness*, Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2002) had a transformative effect on my understanding of ancient traditional environmental knowledge and ritual among the indigenous peoples of the United States.

In American academia, knowledge concerning the values, beliefs, and practices of indigenous peoples' relationship to their environment is studied mostly in disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, religion, or history. But what I came to realize during the course of this work is that it is equally important and valuable to see these well-preserved teachings as examples of anciently rooted *public policy*, conveyed down through the ages by peoples who have managed to survive and thrive in the landscapes of North America for the last several thousand years.

Framing these teachings as values-rooted public policy accomplishes two purposes. First, it acknowledges the durable wisdom of these teachings as an

element of our common human heritage. Their preservation through programs such as the Place and Native Voice Project is thus an exercise in heritage preservation.

As the elders of many indigenous culture groups in the United States pass away, there is a continuing danger of this ancient wisdom dying with them. That is why one function of the Place and Native Voice project is to train American Indian college students who are members of these cultures to learn and preserve what they can of these teachings. The Project also provides the opportunity for those teachings the elders authorize to be shared outside the tribe to be presented to visitors to the national parks and monuments where PNV students serve as cultural resource interpreters. Additionally, in *Sustainability and the Sacred: An Anthology of Teachings on Indigenous Peoples and National Parklands*, the Project provides a venue for PNV interns to convey their understanding of these teachings in their own voice.

A second purpose served by framing indigenous teachings on relationship to the environment as public policy is that it gives voice to the values inherent in these teachings in contemporary public discourse over what it means to live in a genuinely sustainable relationship with the natural environment on which the survival of all life depends. The concept of “sustainability” in public policy dialogues and debates over environmental decision making is a relatively recent phenomenon in terms of the use of language in contemporary politics. However, it has been and continues to be at the very heart of the ancient yet living cultures of nearly every indigenous group in the Americas.

Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Discourse. As the modern American political movement toward a more caring and conserving relationship with the environment gained momentum during the second half of the last century, some significant examples of inter-cultural misunderstanding and misappropriation began to appear. Some environmental advocates offered up reified, romanticized versions of indigenous teachings as a rationale for demanding changes in public land use policies. This led to charges by tribal leaders that environmental groups were appropriating and distorting indigenous teachings for their own political purposes without permission and without respect for the integrity of the cultures from which these teachings emanated. It also led to charges by Euro-American environmental advocates that tribal leaders were abandoning their own cultural heritage when they took actions like allowing their reservation lands to be used as nuclear waste dumps or mining them for fossil fuels.

More recently, such tensions have been renewed by self-described “New Age” religious groups within Western culture synthesizing teachings from a variety of ancient indigenous sources into a recombinant belief system that has at its core the felt necessity to reconnect the human spirit to the life force that pervades the natural world. While these New Age beliefs and rituals may be sincerely felt and practiced, many tribal groups are understandably incensed at having their

teachings appropriated without their consent, taken out of context, and used for purposes not necessarily in keeping with tribal valuesⁱⁱ.

Mutual understanding and respect were slow in coming. But some positive lessons were learned from those first painful encounters. One was a recognition that American Indian tribes as a group are among the most economically impoverished peoples of the United States. Environmental groups came to see that tribal land use decisions they saw as unsustainable oftentimes reflected a tribe's only perceived means of economic betterment.

Another political reality is that some tribes are just as internally riven by conflicts over environmental management as is American society as a whole. Conflicts within tribes can take on a special sensitivity and poignancy, however, because of the depth of core values on the one hand and the urgency of economic privation on the other. And some tribal leaders gradually came to see that, as is often the case, cultural appropriation of their teachings by environmental advocates was for the most part done out of ignorance of its effects rather than deliberate disrespect for the integrity of tribal culture.

One focus of my own policy-analytic and academic career has been on the cultural aspects of American environmental law and policy, and so have watched the inter-cultural dynamics described above evolve over time. Thus, in taking on the admittedly sensitive task of reframing and re-presenting indigenous traditional environmental knowledge and ritual as teachings in public policy, the research and

writing described here that I have done was informed principally by five

complementary sources:

- Direct observation of ceremonies, councils, and other gatherings to which I was invited, complemented by interviews with participants at these events.
- Literature in which tribal members describe the events and significance of such rituals and events in their own words.
- Writings on traditional cultural knowledge and ritual practices by indigenous American authors.
- Writings by non-indigenous authors who were known to be portraying indigenous peoples with their permission (as is the case with my own writings).

For students in the Place and Native Voice Project whose work is presented in *Sustainability and the Sacred*, their principal source is the traditional knowledge conveyed to them by their elders, family members, and other acquaintances in their culture group who share responsibility for the preservation of these teachings. Since nearly every indigenous culture group in North America maintains some traditional teachings that can be freely shared with persons outside the tribe, and other knowledge that as a matter of cultural integrity must be held within the tribe alone, every effort has been made by students to integrate into their presentations only those teachings they have been given to understand may be shared outside their tribe.

Ways of Knowing. Central to the understanding of indigenous traditional teachings and ritual as core value statements of public policy is awareness of the fact

that the human mind is capable of different and potentially complementary ways of knowing. For example, consider these two different creation stories of Bears Lodge/Devils Tower, a landmark in northeastern Wyoming that was established by President Theodore Roosevelt as the nation's first national monument:

“Seven young girls strayed from camp and were chased by bears. As the bears were about to catch them they sought refuge on a low rock about three feet in height. One girl prayed for the rock to take pity on them. As a result the rock began to grow skyward pushing the girls out of reach of the bears. The bears jumped and scratched at the rock [giving it its present columnar character]. The young girls are said to be still in the sky” [and became the seven stars of the Pleiades

“Some 60 million years ago, great Earth stresses began to deform the crust of the continent, resulting in the uplifting of the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains region. As the surface rock layers began to crumple and fault, magma from deep inside the Earth welled up into resulting gaps and fissures . . . The Missouri Buttes and Devils Tower . . . are believed to be necks of extinct volcanoes. Geologic evidence indicates the Missouri Buttes formed first in two separate eruptions. The magma hardened plugging the plumbing underneath. A third eruption to the southeast resulted in Devils Towerⁱⁱⁱ

“One way to comparatively understand these two accounts is from the perspective of logical positivism. The two different tales both describe the materialization of the same natural phenomenon; they are mutually exclusive in all their particulars; and an analysis of the available evidence will determine which one is true or correct. But there are other ways to view this apparent conflict. An alternative is to perceive them as simultaneously occurring differences in realms of knowing. Yet another is to acknowledge that each story reflects each culture's attempt to ascribe meaning to and better understand the significance of this unique monolith. The one is dispassionate, removed, and analytical; the other intimate, personal, and intuitive. Thus the two cultures perceptually construct this landmark in two very different ways: as a geologic curiosity and rock climber's playground through one cultural lense, and as a natural cathedral through the other. This is not to say that the scientific accounting is not an accurate one within its own frame of reference; only that is but one among several frames.

“Historically, these differing cultural perspectives also influenced the naming of the place. In accordance with the first of the creation stories, to the Kiowa, Crow, and some other nearby tribes this was “Bear’s Lodge”, the site at which to save them in a contest with a natural foe, Earth’s children were lifted into the heavens. It is a portal of entry into a welcoming universe (presaging movie director Steven Spielberg’s casting of the butte as an place of peaceable intergalactic “close encounters”). But to the Euro-American settler culture, which at mid-nineteenth century still tended to fear natural forces and to see wilderness as an ungodly chaotic domain to be tamed and subdued, a more fitting designation was an imprecise translation of another Indian name as “Bad God’s Tower”, or the “Devils Tower” . . .

“Consider also the possibility that these two stories emanate from two different modes of thought. The philosopher Martin Heidegger distinguishes the first as contemplative thought, a reflection on meaning -- from calculative thought, a linear process directed toward the achievement of an action-oriented end-result. In many non-western traditions, contemplative thought and knowledge are based largely on the direct sensory experience of oneself and the environment. In the words of the Keres Indian Larry Bird, "You watch, and wait, and listen and the answer will come to you. It's yours then, not like in school." Dennis and Barabara Tedlock, who recorded this observation, go on to comment, "What we learn in school is never ours; lectures by experts can never produce the light in us which comes when, suddenly and all at once, *we know*".^{iv}

Indigenous Peoples and America’s National Parklands. The material appearing in *Sustainability and the Sacred* was gathered in the course of administering the Place and Native Voice Project. The Project is a partnership between the University of Colorado’s School of Public Affairs and the National Park Service. Its purpose is to train American Indian college and university students to act as cultural resource interpreters at national parks and monuments in America’s Mountain West. Therefore, each of the chapters below tells the stories of these students’ tribes mostly as they relate to the plants and animals or sacred sites at these parks and monuments.

From “time immemorial” until the present, many the parks and monument of the American West have been places of great significance to indigenous culture groups. The same geologic or aesthetic features of these places that rendered them valuable enough in the eyes of presidents or members of Congress to set them aside for preservation and appreciation also moved these ancient cultures to regard them as holy places, and to treat them accordingly.

The very sight of an animal like the buffalo can instill respect and even awe at their power and majesty in anyone who first encounters them. An additional reason the Plains tribes worship them is that at one time they were the very basis of these tribes’ physical and cultural existence. Adobe dwellings built hundreds of years ago by the ancestors of contemporary Puebloan peoples are thought to still be inhabited by the spirits of those who built them, and their wisdom continues to be consulted by their present-day descendants.

Organization of This Anthology. The following chapters in *Sustainability and the Sacred* all follow a pattern of setting *calculative* teachings from the Western social sciences and humanities (Part I of each chapter) alongside more *contemplative* teachings in the presentations of student interns from the Place and Native Voice Project, as conveyed to them by members of their own culture groups (subsequent Parts). The purpose in doing so is not to privilege either one set of teachings or the other, but to demonstrate instead that they are both useful and legitimate ways of learning history and teachings of indigenous peoples of the western United States in relationship to the environments we all now share –

particularly the national parks and monuments of the Mountain West and western Great Plains. These places all contain sites and resources held sacred by indigenous peoples and equally prized for other reasons (e.g., scientific, educational, recreational) by the dominant culture.

Part I of each chapter is further divided into the subsections “Pre-Columbian Conditions”, “Contact and Conquest”, “Contemporary Conditions”, “The Parklands Connection” (see map below for NPS sites in the Intermountain Region), and “Teachings”. As the reader will see, this organizational framework is not used to tell a simplistic tale of noble savages idyllic in an American Eden until European pillagers first made their appearance. While there may be some truth in this caricature, there is also evidence that some indigenous peoples of the American West over-exploited their resource base and triggered serious ecological disruptions in their environment well in advance of the first *conquistador* or fur trapper appearing on the scene.

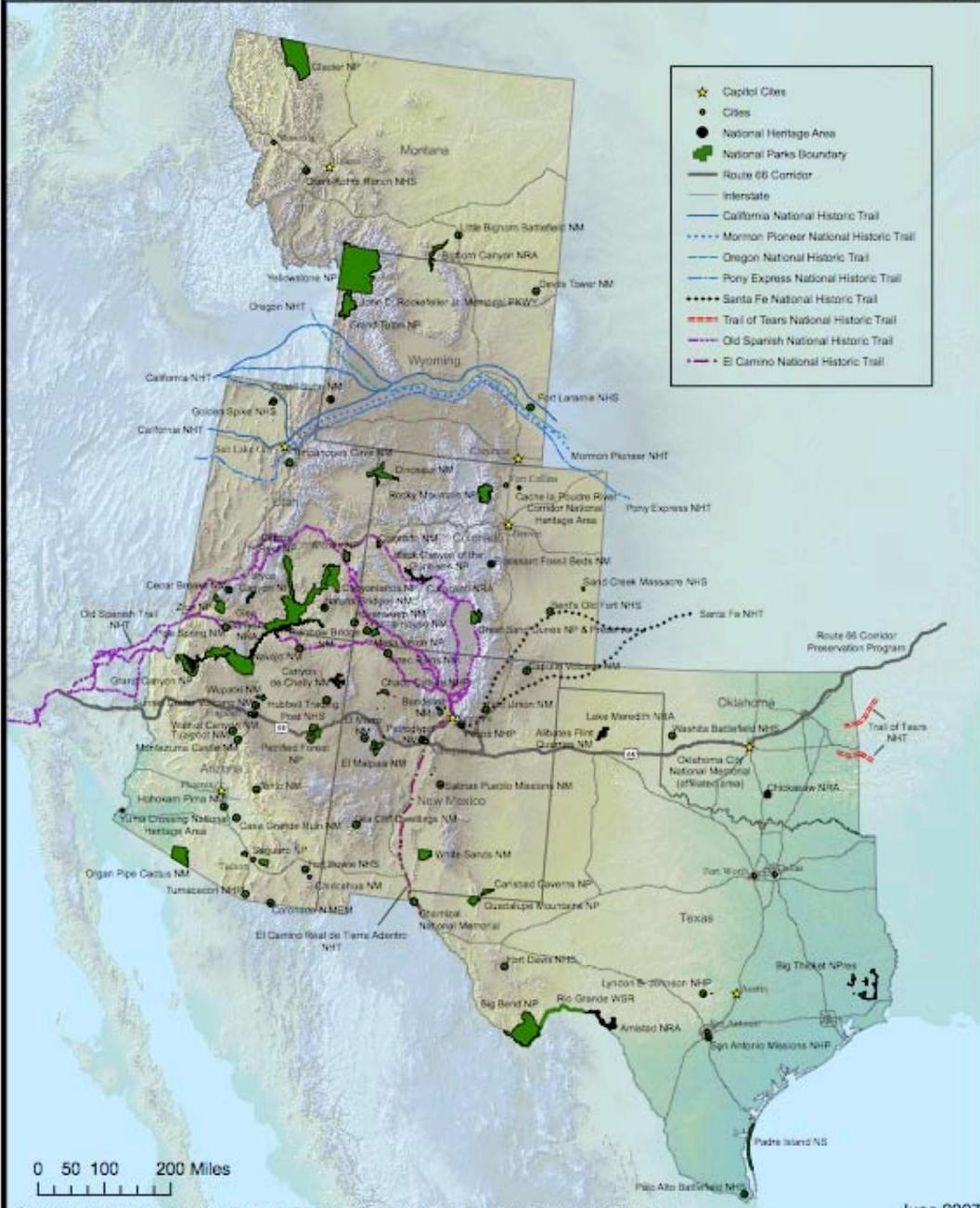
However, there is also evidence that these same tribes learned from the environmental catastrophes their unsustainable harvesting practices may have helped bring about. And having learned these painful lessons, they thereupon incorporated into their religious rituals teachings on how to avoid wreaking such environmental havoc in the future.

For important historical reasons, Western culture organizes its calculative knowledge into discrete categories such as history, science, public policy, law, and religion. One reason for such this organizational framework is to create a common understanding of what this knowledge means. For instance, the federal

courts hearing disputes over whether “creationism” can be taught in public schools had no problem with this practice as long as the subject was being taught in a comparative religion or philosophy class. But they have disallowed its being taught as science, since it has been determined to be a set of

Intermountain Region

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Maps available for download at: www.nps.gov/imgr

beliefs held by certain religious sects rather knowledge that was created by the scientific method.

However, in the indigenous cultures of the American West, it does some conceptual violence to their traditional cultural knowledge to force it into these academic categories; it can obscure an understanding of such knowledge rather than facilitating it. For it is precisely through the creation of a relational, connective, and contemplative knowledge of their environment that indigenous culture groups teach their members to care for that environment. This is yet another way the various parts of each of the following chapters complement each other, through the harmonizing of multiple voices addressing the same subject of study.

An Example of Sacred Ritual as a Traditional Teaching on Sustainable Environmental Policy and Management. What follows is a description of the practice of conveying core environmental policy and management values to members of a Pueblo Indian community by way of ancient ritual. This example drawn from the experience of witnessing the Deer Dance at the Taos Pueblo in January of 1999, in response to the invitation of a tribal official who was also a participant in this event:

“This particular dance started in mid-afternoon, and ended at sunset. It took place in a clearing in front of the adobe church across the street from tribal government offices. This was a big event with a great many spectators, from both the Pueblo and elsewhere.

In the midst of the crowd a space had been created, about fifty yards long and twenty yards wide, oblong in shape, with a narrow opening to the northeast (the direction of Blue Lake, the tribe's place of origin). Lining and defining the space were the women dancers, dressed to represent the earth, the forest, and its plant-life, and holding pine tree boughs. As the hunter/clown dancer explained it to me, they were standing in the shape of a valley, since in an actual group ritual hunt, men from the Pueblo fan out around the upper periphery of a canyon or deep valley, and herd wildlife down its slopes to its mouth, where armed hunters are waiting. Only later did I realize that the oblong space with the narrow opening at one corner was also in the approximate shape of a uterus. "Once the space had been well-defined, from the kiva on the far side of the plaza the animal dancers began to emerge. In a slow and steady procession they made their way to the mouth of the valley. Leading the group were two sets of especially striking figures. One was the deer dancers, who wore large racks of deer antlers on their heads and danced bent forward, holding long sticks in their hands to simulate front legs. They were led by two tall dancers in dressed in light buckskin, who one of the participants later described to me as wardens. "Gradually the valley space created, defined, and held by the women forest dancers began to fill with the male animal dancers, who were wearing the actual heads and skins of deer, elk, bison, and other game animals, moving to the beat of the big ceremonial drum being played by a group of elders. And then came the hunter/clowns in gray-face, cavorting and pantomiming the hunt. One by one they would each "slay" an animal by hoisting the animal dancer over their shoulders, and dancing toward the narrow opening at the corner of the valley.

"But at either side of the opening stood the wardens. As the hunter/clowns tried to leave the valley with their prey, the wardens forced them back into the clearing, where the animal dancers were released to take new life and dance within the open space, only to be slain again. This ritual kill-and-release took place over and over, first in the space in front of the church and later at another site in front of the largest, oldest residential structure in the Pueblo complex. The dance finally came to an end just as the Sangres began to turn pink and the sun began to go down.

"At a meeting about a month after the dance I had an opportunity to discuss the meaning of this ritual in some detail with two of the dancers, one of whom had also invited me to witness the dance. I was especially interested in the kill-and-release interaction between the hunter/clowns and the wardens, as well as why the hunters were also the clowns in the first place.

"As they both explained it to me, the hunter/clowns had a lot of energy, a lot of skill, and a lot of knowledge as to how to hunt and how to kill lots of animals. What they lacked was wisdom. They had no understanding of what the effects of all their energy, skill, and cleverly effective hunting methods were on the wildlife, whose populations they were needlessly wasting and depleting. It was

the role of the wardens to teach the hunter/clowns over and over what fools they were, and how their ignorance was threatening their own sustenance as well as everything else that lived in the forest.

“At that moment I realized perhaps more clearly than ever before why this ancient community has been able to sustain itself and its physical as well as cultural integrity in the same location for more than five hundred years, surviving the onslaughts of first Spanish and then Anglo domination and suppression. Among other things, it is because throughout this period of time they have been continuously, ritually reminding themselves of how important it is to live with respect for and in balance with the all the various lifeforms on which their own lives and the survival depend. Euro-American society has no public national ritual even remotely resembling this teaching; and we are the poorer for it.”^v

Nearly every indigenous culture group in the American West that I have had occasion to spend time with or learn from has some form of teaching approximating that described above, and some means of seeking to convey it to their succeeding generations whose responsibility it will be to keep their culture alive. I have also encountered a willingness – sometimes even an urgency – on the part of tribal elders to share these teachings with the mainstream culture. Just as they understand the inter-dependence of their own cultures and their environment, so too do they understand that if the mainstream culture cannot learn enough from all available teachings on how to live sustainably (including indigenous ones) in time to put these teachings into effect, we are all doomed.

Judeo-Christian cultures and societies are not without their own teachings on this subject. While in Chapter 1 of Genesis, God does indeed empower humans to “overcome the Earth and subdue it”, in Chapter 2 he levies an even weightier responsibility on humankind to “dress and keep” this wondrous creation – these terms in the first English translations of the Bible being the same used at law to

define the responsibilities groundskeepers and gamekeepers owed to the lord of the manor.

Up to now, mainstream culture has tended to view ancient indigenous environmental teachings as quaint religious practices or superstitious rites unassociated with the “real” (scientific, economic, political) world. By contrast, *Sustainability and the Sacred* invites the reader to see that such categorization diminishes the importance of what these traditional teachings have to offer, and thereby obscures their meaning.

A few years ago the regional offices of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency held a convocation of tribal government leaders, for the purpose of soliciting advice on the possible cultural impacts resulting from the massive increase in oil and gas exploration and retrieval that was about to occur on federally managed public lands. The concern was (and is) that there are many sacred sites known only to the tribes that might be destroyed by this extractive activity unless there was adequate mitigation.

The tribal leaders who attended generally expressed their appreciation to the EPA for its concern and its efforts, but some of them also expressed their own concerns about the words and concepts being used. “You want us to tell you what lands are sacred and what lands are not”, one of them said. “However, to us there is no part of the Earth that is not sacred; that is not how we see this world”. They were also reticent to disclose the location of graveyards and other places of deep ritual significance, because of an unfortunate history of such information

being used for destructive purposes by racist vandals and commercial artifact dealers.

The root meaning of *sacred* is to “consecrate, to set aside, especially for a religious or ritual purpose”. We also “set aside” words and concepts, distinguishing the wise from the wild, the calculative from the contemplative, the scientific from the sensuous, the sacred from the secular. These distinctions have their uses, but sometimes they can inhibit understanding rather than facilitate it. In the language of the mainstream culture, events such as the Taos Deer Dance may be seen as sacred ritual. But from a different view, it is an eminently practical lesson on how to live sustainably on this Earth.

At this point in our history, there is no potentially useful contribution to public discourse on how to achieve genuine sustainability that should be rejected out of hand. Perhaps it is time to finally acknowledge that those whose ancestors survived and thrived in the Mountain West and Plains for hundreds or thousands of years before the first Europeans appeared may actually have something to teach the rest of us, if we are but ready to learn.

ⁱ Lloyd Burton, *Worship and Wilderness – Culture, Religion, and Law in Public Lands Management*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

ⁱⁱ *Id.* at 273-278.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lloyd Burton and David Ruppert, “Bear’s Lodge or Devils Tower: Intercultural Relations, Legal Pluralism, and the Management of Sacred Sites on Public Lands”, *Cornell Journal of Law and Public Policy* 8(2):201 (1999).

^{iv} Burton, *supra* note 1, at 8-9.

^v Id. at 41-42.