

A [sample entry](#) from the

# **Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature**

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Edited by

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Guajajara Indians took hostages in 1989 in order to force the government Indian affairs agency to let them sell timber. The image of Indians clear-cutting their forest is jarring for some observers, including some environmentalists and indigenous activists. Yet as indigenous communities seek to achieve higher levels of economic development and social well-being, they may often be faced with the same kinds of decisions regarding environmental quality that non-Indians must confront.

The tremendous diversity of Latin American indigenous peoples is reflected in the heterogeneity of their religious beliefs and relations to nature. Yet Indians throughout the Americas share a basic experience of colonization and social, political, and economic marginalization in which assimilationist efforts to eradicate indigenous belief systems have persisted from missionary colonists through post-Independence education policies, as have the dispossession and destruction of Indian lands by outsiders. For many indigenous peoples religion as an expression of a unique identity and a philosophy of connections to particular territories and places is central to their struggles to secure and protect their rights as distinct peoples.

Brandt Gustav Peterson

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- See also: Aboriginal Environmental Groups in Canada; American Indians as "First Ecologists"; Indigenous Environmental Network; Maya Religion (Central America); Maya Spirituality (Guatemala Highlands); Mother Earth; Native American Languages; Noble Savage; Religious Environmentalist Paradigm; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; United Nations' "Earth Summits"; World Conference of Indigenous Peoples (Kari Oca, Brazil).

#### P Indigenous Environmental Network

This relationship to the sacredness of our Mother Earth and all her children, defines our spiritual, cultural, social, economic, and even, political relationship we have with each other and with all life (Tom "Mato Awanyankapi" Goldtooth, Indigenous Environmental Network 2002).

The Indigenous Environmental Network was born in 1990 from a national gathering of tribal grassroots leadership and youth to discuss common experiences regarding environmental assaults on our lands, waters, and communities and villages. At that time, a significant number of our tribal communities were targeted for municipal

and hazardous waste dumps and nuclear-waste storage facilities.

Indigenous activism seeking justice on environmental issues was new to many tribal members and tribal governments in the early 1990s. Such activism was quickly connected with an indigenous treaty rights agenda, namely, a commitment to strengthen the cultural and spiritual traditions that have sustained us since time immemorial. Within the U.S., by the early 1990s, a new “environmental justice movement” recognized that minority and low-income communities in the U.S. bear a disproportionate burden of pollution in our society. This movement was especially relevant to our subsistence-based communities. Many indigenous communities in North America are affected through a traditional cultural and spiritual relationship to the ecosystems in which we live, including subsistence on fish, game, traditional agricultural practices, livestock, and gathering of plants for baskets and medicinal purposes. This relationship is deeply integrated into spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices, the disruption of which constitutes religious intolerance and violates basic principles of human rights.

Following the 1990 gathering, indigenous activists, youth and concerned tribal community members continued regularly in North America to put our minds, heart and spirit together for a common course of action as a means to restore our homelands to environmental health and harmony. From these initial gatherings, the idea of the formation of a network of indigenous peoples, with a commitment to respecting our spiritual traditions, was born – an idea born of hope, courage and common vision. This network was named the Indigenous Environmental Network.

### Guiding Principles

We endorse the following principles as a statement of our beliefs and a guide to our actions:

Mother Earth, Father Sky, and all of Creation, from microorganisms to human, plant, trees, fish, bird, and animal relatives are part of the natural order and regulated by natural laws. Each has a unique role and is a critical part of the whole that is creation. Each is sacred, respected, and a unique living being with its own right to survive, and each plays an essential role in the survival and health of the natural world.

As sovereign peoples and nations, we have an inherent right to self-determination, protected through inherent rights and upheld through treaties and other binding agreements. As indigenous peoples, our consent and approval are necessary in all negotiations and activities that have direct and indirect impact on our lands, ecosystems, waters, other natural resources and our human bodies.

Human beings are part of the natural order. Our role and responsibility, as human beings, is to live peacefully and in a harmonious balance with all life. Our cultures are based on this harmony, peace and ecological balance, which ensure long-term sustainability for future generations. This concept of sustainability must be the basis of the decisions and negotiations underway on national and international levels.

The Creator has given us a sacred responsibility to protect and care for the land and all life, as well as to safeguard its well being for future generations to come.

Indigenous peoples have the right and responsibility to control access to our traditional knowledge, innovations and practices, which constitute the basis for the maintenance of our lifestyles and future.

### The Need for Indigenous Organizing

The need for IEN arose due to increasing political and social pressures. The U.S. has been increasing efforts through its federal agencies and with energy legislation and through its corporate energy partners to push more mineral and resource-extraction development within tribal lands. Ten percent of U.S. untapped energy-related resources are under Indian lands. The U.S. energy plan calls for more oil and gas development, the construction of more coal-fired power plants, the potential for construction of more nuclear power reactors and the buying of electricity from large hydro-dam projects in Canada. All of these development initiatives are being planned within our tribal reservations and traditional territories, and they threaten tribal sovereignty. Such challenges need to be weighed when addressing environmental injustices related to American Indian and Alaska Natives.

Due to Western forms of development, the world is in a compounding crisis from greenhouse gases of the fossil fuel industry that is causing climatic changes and global warming. Many indigenous peoples with close relationships to the culture, language and environment have the most to lose when the land/water is contaminated, and when severe weather changes occur, which can disrupt their traditional, subsistence food systems and cultural practices.

Indigenous peoples in the U.S. and Canada continue to be confronted by many threats to their environment, whether they live on larger reservations or in smaller isolated communities and villages, or in Indian neighborhoods within urban areas. In addition to minerals, our lands hold natural resources that the industrialized world and corporations want to develop, own, and trade, such as water and timber, and forest products. Environmental problems are compounded by the increasingly toxic nature of industrial, agricultural and extractive industries.

Our tribal lands are viewed as places where municipal, industrial, federal and military toxic and radioactive waste can be dumped, burned, stored or reprocessed. In certain regions, toxic chemicals disproportionately contaminate tribal communities. These chemicals bio-accumulate and bio-magnify in the food chain, affecting both processed and indigenous traditional food systems. Our children are especially vulnerable. In some areas, health problems have resulted from decades of radioactive and toxic exposure. These are some of the reasons underlying the formation of IEN and they have taken environmental justice issues into the global issue-area concerning trade and globalization.

#### History of U.S. Indigenous Peoples and Colonization

Congress must apprise the Indian that he can no longer stand as a breakwater against the constant tide of civilization . . . A . . . thriftless race of savages cannot be permitted to stand guard at the treasure vaults of the nation which hold out gold and silver . . . the prospector and miner may enter and by enriching himself enrich the nation and bless the world by the result of his toil (United States Senate, Congressional Globe, 27th Congress, 1846.)

As many as 15 million indigenous peoples lived in North America when Europeans first arrived in the late fifteenth century. By 1890 there were less than 500,000; the population decimated by European diseases and warfare. By the early twenty-first century, indigenous numbers had grown to over two million. The indigenous peoples of the U.S. are tribally diverse with over 500 different tribes and over 400 federally recognized tribal nations, each with its own tradition and cultural heritage.

In spite of the historical policies of the U.S. government of military campaigns, removal of indigenous peoples from traditional homelands, outlawing traditional indigenous cultural and spiritual/religious practices and forbidding speaking of language at governmental-imposed schools, indigenous peoples of the U.S. have been able to retain a commitment to maintain and restore language and culture, as well as interweaving modern technology into everyday life.

Since the colonization of North America, control of land has always been the central political and economic issue. Those who control the land are those who control the resources. Social control and all the other aggregate components of power are fundamentally interrelated to the control of the land. To gain control the U.S. government signed more than 400 treaties with indigenous tribes. In exchange for land and agreements to cease resistance, tribes were promised protection, material goods, services, and sometimes cash payments. By entering into treaties with the tribal nations, the U.S. government acknowledged their sovereignty, although with restrictions. The colonial leaders recognized that land is essential to the

survival of indigenous peoples and that a denial of indigenous peoples' right to land is racial discrimination. Land is central to the spiritual and physical well-being of indigenous peoples.

Within the U.S., tribal reservations – or “reserves,” as they are called in Canada – constitute a small but crucial “piece of the rock.” Approximately one-third of all western U.S. low-sulfur coal, 20 percent of known U.S. reserves of oil and natural gas, and over one-half of all U.S. uranium deposits lie under the reservations. Energy companies, logging and mining interests, and publicly owned utilities, driven by industrialization and accelerating demands for energy and natural resources and materials are disproportionately affecting indigenous peoples. These developments build dams that flood indigenous lands; for example, like those of the James Bay Cree in Canada and the Standing Rock Lakota (Sioux) in the United States.

Such developments have forced tribal peoples to relinquish their culture and economies and claims to their traditional homelands. These developments have disrupted habitat and have thereby limited the ability of tribal people to carry on traditional subsistence practices such as hunting, gathering and fishing rights. Unsustainable development has made indigenous peoples dependent on government-subsidized housing and “non-traditional” diets.

#### Biological Diversity and Indigenous Languages

The world's biological, cultural and linguistic diversity are imperiled. Over 80 percent of the world's remaining biodiversity is found within indigenous peoples' lands and territories. Although globally there are an estimated 350 million indigenous individuals, our cultures constitute about 90 percent of the world's cultural diversity. Our distinct ways of life vary considerably from one location to another. Of the estimated 6000 cultures in the world, between 4000 and 5000 are indigenous. Approximately three-quarters of the world's 6000 languages are spoken by indigenous peoples. Of the nine countries in which 60 percent of human languages are spoken, six also host exceptional numbers of plant and animal species unique to those locations. When looking at the global distribution of indigenous peoples, there is also a marked correlation between areas of high biological diversity and areas of high cultural diversity. This link is particularly significant in rainforests, such as those found along the Amazon, and in Central America, Africa, Southeast Asia, the Philippines, New Guinea and Indonesia. Wherever we live, we use our highly specialized, traditional knowledge to care for and conserve the interconnected web or Circle of Life known as “biodiversity.”

In November 2000, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF International), in collaboration with the international NGO Terralingua, published a report entitled

*Indigenous and Traditional Peoples of the World and Ecoregion Conservation: An Integrated Approach to Conserving the World's Biological and Cultural Diversity.* The report reveals that 4635 ethnolinguistic groups, or 67 percent of the total number of such groups, live in 225 regions of the highest biological importance. The study reported that languages spoken by indigenous and traditional peoples are rapidly disappearing. Since the ecological knowledge accumulated by indigenous peoples is contained in languages, and since in most traditional cultures this knowledge is passed on to other groups or new generations orally, language extinction is leading to loss of ecological knowledge, and with that loss cultural and spiritual knowledge also disappears. It is widely accepted that biological diversity cannot be conserved without cultural diversity.

It has been said that languages are the foundation of peoples' intellectual heritage and the framework for each society's unique understanding of life. Given the rate of language extinction, cultural diversity is threatened on an unprecedented scale. In the twentieth century the world lost about 600 languages. Nearly 2500 languages are in danger of immediate extinction; an even higher number are losing the "ecological contexts" that keep them "living" languages. At current rates, 90 percent of the world's remaining languages will be lost in the twenty-first century, most of them belonging to indigenous peoples (World Wide Fund for Nature: 2000: Executive Summary). We are concerned that these languages, and our traditional ecological knowledge, are increasingly being lost. The expansion of market-based economic systems, communications, and other aspects of globalization, which promote dominant languages, do so at the expense of our indigenous languages.

The link between culture, spirituality and environment is clear to indigenous peoples. All indigenous peoples share a spiritual, cultural and economic relationship with our traditional lands. Indigenous traditional laws, customs and practices reflect both an attachment to land and a felt responsibility for preserving it for future generations. In Central America, the Amazon Basin, Asia, North America, Australia, Asia, Pacific Islands and South and North Africa, the physical and cultural survival of indigenous peoples is dependent upon the protection of our land and its resources – among a technological society that does not value these links.

### **Clash in Sustaining Values**

The source of this world's collective social, economic and environmental crisis can be traced to the long historical processes by which people have become increasingly alienated from the Earth. This includes alienation from self, community and nature. This concept of alienation has roots in colonialism. Intellectually it is rooted in Western dualism, which sets humanity apart from nature and legit-

imizes the view that humanity has not only the right, but also the obligation to subdue nature to its own benefit. Institutionally it is rooted in the institution of money, which created a powerful illusion that people can live apart from nature, and are no longer dependent on her.

Ever since Pope Alexander VI's 1493 papal bull "Inter Caetera" called for the subjugation of the America's "barbarous nations," first colonial and then successor states have forcibly and violently destroyed indigenous peoples. To this day, the racist discrimination and cultural denigration established by Pope Alexander VI are engraved in the mentality of the Americas and continue to underlie the rationale for racial discrimination against indigenous peoples globally. The religious imperative of conversion and annihilation has been replaced by assimilation, "development schemes," international trade systems, privatization of land, and economic globalization as the most desirable end for indigenous peoples. The nation-state economic elites and transnational corporations have replaced the earlier conquistadors and colonists as the beneficiaries of indigenous lands, knowledge and resources.

The fifteenth-century papal bulls established a criterion for indigenous peoples which remains a part of established law in many parts of the world today, especially in the Western Hemisphere. The racist doctrine of discovery established in the later part of the fourteenth century continues to exercise influence. The 1955 Supreme Court ruling in *Tee-Hit-Ton Indians v. U.S.*, for example, based its decision against the land petition of the Tee-Hit-Ton on the Doctrine of Discovery (348 US 272 1955). These processes, policies, political and religious theories provided the basis for land takings in the U.S., South and Meso-America, and other frontiers.

Gross and massive, pervasive and persistent violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including genocide, ethnocide, forced removal and forced assimilation are somehow justified by the devaluation of indigenous peoples, our cultural and worldviews. Described as "stone age" by anthropologists, accused by dominant religions of being pagan or practitioners of black magic and witchcraft, our destruction as peoples has been taken by most dominant societies in the Americas as necessary for "progress."

Yet indigenous peoples seek only to be left alone, to be who we are, to remain on our lands, to practice and live our traditional cultures, languages and spiritual/religious practices. These are human rights and fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the United Nations' International Bill of Human Rights.

Many nation-states have policies that in effect if not intent forcibly assimilate indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples continue to suffer forcible and violent mass relocations, as well as denials of their land rights and ruination of our environments. Forced relocation is also

found in the economic need to migrate to urban areas caused by the loss of lands and territories and means of subsistence.

In the U.S., institutional racism prevails throughout federal policies that fail to protect the environment, our natural resources, and the lands we hold sacred. Socially ingrained attitudes of racial superiority and inferiority, which were given birth during historical colonialist attitudes, are now buried into the very fabric of the Americas and the collective unconscious of all Americans. The continuing denigration of our cultures and traditions, sanctioned by the state, damage and destroy our identity, our children, our lands and our future. The persistent refusal of many nation-states to recognize the rights of indigenous peoples as “peoples” underpins and justifies the deplorable state of human rights of indigenous peoples.

#### **Building Sustainable Communities**

Youth and tribal leadership are just now beginning to develop dialogue and strategy for resisting these damaging realities, beginning with the effort to rebuild sustainable indigenous communities and villages. With strong, committed and knowledgeable leadership, IEN has come to understand the importance of coming to grips with internalized oppression, the role of the older generation and younger generation in leadership development, and the recognition and application of traditional ecological knowledge, and to provide positive and strong models for community change. The IEN understands our responsibility to provide a voice of reason and wisdom as a means to mend and repair the delicate fabric of life while restoring balance and harmony to our communities and villages.

#### **Reevaluating Our Relationship to Our Sacred Mother Earth**

The path of Western development has produced many technological advances, which many indigenous peoples have embraced. But technology has further separated all humans from our sacred relationship to Mother Earth. We have become alienated from the most fundamental basis of our human nature, our spiritual connection to the Earth and the living universe. Within our foundation of utilizing indigenous traditional knowledge in our work, IEN has consistently challenged nation-states, environmental organizations, faith-based groups and other non-governmental organizations that are doing environmental work to examine the spiritual aspects of this work. From the tribal perspective, water, air, ground-soil, and fire are sacred elements deserving of respect and protection.

In 1998, the IEN facilitated the participation of traditional elders and tribal grassroots members in the “Circles of Wisdom” Native Peoples/Native Homelands Climate Change Workshop. It was held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the traditional territory of the Pueblo

peoples of southwest United States. IEN brought to this meeting our profound concern for the well-being of our sacred Mother Earth and Father Sky and the potential consequences of climate imbalance for our indigenous peoples, our environment, our economies, and our relationships to the natural order and laws.

At this meeting, there was a strong statement that indigenous prophecy now meets modern scientific prediction. Indigenous peoples have known that the Earth is out of balance, which was a message that Western scientists were beginning to deliver. At this meeting, the collective mind and heart of indigenous participants from many tribal nations developed the following preamble that well reflects the cosmos vision of indigenous peoples of North America:

#### *Preamble*

As Indigenous Peoples, we begin each day with a prayer, bringing our minds together in thanks for every part of the natural world. We are grateful that each part of our natural world continues to fulfill the responsibilities that have been set for it by our Creator, in an unbreakable relationship to each other. As the roles and responsibilities are fulfilled, we are allowed to live our lives in peace. We are grateful for the natural order put in place and regulated by natural laws.

Most of our ceremonies are about giving thanks, at the right time and in the right way. They are what were given to us, what makes us who we are. They enable us to speak about life itself. Maintaining our ceremonies is an important part of our life. There is nothing more important than preserving life, celebrating life, and that is what the ceremonies do. Our instruction tells us that we are to maintain our ceremonies, however few of us there are, so that we can fulfill the spiritual responsibilities given to us by the Creator.

The balance of men and women is the leading principle of our wisdom. This balance is the creative principle of Father Sky and Mother Earth that fosters life. In our traditions, it is women who carry the seeds, both of our own future generations and of the plant life. It is women who plant and tend the gardens, and women who bear and raise the children. The women remind us of our connection to the Earth, for it is from the Earth that life comes.

We draw no line between what is political and what is spiritual. Our leaders are also our spiritual leaders. In making any law, our leaders must consider three things: the effect of their decisions on peace, the effect on the natural order and law, and the effect on future generations. The natural order and laws are self-evident and do not need scientific proof. We believe that all lawmakers should be

required to think this way, that all constitutions should contain these principles.

Our prophecies and teachings tell us that life on Earth is in danger of coming to an end. We have accepted the responsibility designated by our prophecies to tell the world that we must live in peace and harmony and ensure balance with the rest of Creation. The destruction of the rest of Creation must not be allowed to continue, for if it does, Mother Earth will react in such a way that almost all people will suffer the end of life as we know it.

A growing body of western scientific evidence now suggests what Indigenous Peoples have expressed for a long time: life as we know it is in danger. We can no longer afford to ignore the consequences of this evidence. We must learn to live with this shadow, and always strive towards the light that will restore the natural order. How western science and technology is being used needs to be examined in order for Mother Earth to sustain life.

Our Peoples and lands are a scattering of islands within a sea of our neighbors, the richest material nations in the world. The world is beginning to recognize that today's market driven economies are not sustainable and place in jeopardy the existence of future generations. It is upsetting the natural order and laws created for all our benefit. The continued extraction and destruction of natural resources is unsustainable.

There is a direct relationship between the denial of Indigenous Peoples land and water rights, along with the appropriation without consent of Indigenous Peoples' natural resources, and the causes of global climate change today. Examples include deforestation, contamination of land and water by pesticides and industrial waste, toxic and radioactive poisoning, military and mining impacts.

The four elements of fire, water, Earth and air sustain all life. These elements of life are being destroyed and misused by the modern world. Fire gives life and understanding, but is being disrespected by technology of the industrialized world that allows it to take life such as the fire in the coal-fired powered plants, the toxic waste incinerators, the fossil-fuel combustion engine and other polluting technologies that add to greenhouse gases. Coal extraction from sacred Earth is being used to fuel the greenhouse gases that are causing global climate warming.

Because of our relationship with our lands, waters and natural surroundings, which has sustained us since time immemorial, we carry the knowledge and ideas that the world needs today. We know how to live with this land: we have done so for thousands of years. We are a powerful spiritual

people. It is this spiritual connection to Mother Earth, Father Sky, and all Creation that is lacking in the rest of the world.

Our extended family includes our Mother Earth, Father Sky, and our brothers and sisters, the animal and plant life. We must speak for the plants, for the animals, for the rest of Creation. It is our responsibility, given to us by our Creator, to speak on their behalf to the rest of the world.

For the future of all the children, for the future of Mother Earth and Father Sky, we call upon the leaders of the world, at all levels of governments, to accept responsibility for the welfare of future generations. Their decisions must reflect their consciousness of this responsibility and they must act on it. We demand a place at the table in discussions that involve and affect our future and the natural order and natural laws that govern us (The Albuquerque Declaration, "Circles of Wisdom" Native Peoples/Native Homelands Climate Change Workshop/Summit, Albuquerque, New Mexico 1998).

#### **Indigenous Peoples Working Internationally**

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992, was an important development for indigenous peoples and our rights related to the environment. The Conference, or Earth Summit as it is called, recognized that indigenous peoples and our communities have a critical role to play in managing and developing the environment. The importance of indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge and practices was acknowledged, and the international community committed itself to promoting, strengthening and protecting the rights, knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples and our communities.

During the Earth Summit, indigenous peoples and non-governmental organizations gathered in Kari Oca, Brazil, to share concerns about the environment. The Kari Oca Declaration and the Indigenous Peoples' Earth Charter adopted at this meeting expressed the values of the world's indigenous peoples and recognized our distinct relationship with the Earth. The united voice of indigenous peoples helped influence the outcome of the Earth Summit.

Another important result of the Earth Summit was the adoption of the Convention on Biological Diversity. The Convention recognized the close dependence of many indigenous communities on biological resources and the desirability of sharing the benefits that come from using traditional knowledge, innovations and practices to conserve biological diversity, including species diversity.

Interest in the rights of indigenous peoples and the environment grew after the 1992 Earth Summit. Indigenous

and non-indigenous peoples are increasingly aware that traditional lands and natural resources are essential to the economic, cultural and spiritual survival of indigenous peoples. Some countries, such as Canada, Australia, Finland, Brazil and the Philippines, have adopted legal measures that acknowledge indigenous land rights or have established legal procedures for indigenous participation in land-related issues. A growing number of governments have amended their national constitutions to recognize the ancestral rights of indigenous peoples to occupy, own and manage their traditional lands and territories. Although some governments now consult with indigenous peoples on land rights and the environment, however, many nation-states have not introduced laws or policies that provide for indigenous land claims or promote full political participation by indigenous peoples.

#### **Indigenous Peoples and the United Nations' "World Summit on Sustainable Development"**

At the 2002 United Nations' "World Summit on Sustainable Development," held in Johannesburg, South Africa, the IEN coordinated with other indigenous non-governmental organizational representatives in the drafting of our own Indigenous Plan of Implementation for the next decade. This was based on the "Kimberley Declaration," which had been developed at the International Indigenous Peoples Summit on Sustainable Development that was held in Khoi-San Territory in Kimberley, South Africa, the month before the United Nations conference in Johannesburg. This was our contribution for achieving human and environmental sustainability in the world. One sentence of the Kimberley Declaration that stood out toward confirming our relationship to the Earth was, "Today we reaffirm our relationship to Mother Earth and our responsibility to coming generations to uphold peace, equity and justice."

Indigenous peoples from every region of the world recognized the Kimberley Declaration and we reaffirmed our spiritual relationship in the text of the Indigenous Plan of Implementation, which reflected the heart and mind of indigenous peoples as traditional caretakers of Mother Earth. This was a message that we reaffirmed to each other as well as a message to the world.

One section of the Indigenous Plan of Implementation well illustrates this message, and is found in the section on Cosmo vision and spirituality. It states:

We will direct our energies and organizational strength to consolidate our collective values and principles, which spring from the interrelation of the different forms of life in Nature. Therein lies our origin, which we reaffirm by practicing our culture and spirituality.

We will strengthen the role of our elders and

wise traditional authorities as the keepers of our traditional wisdom, which embodies our spirituality, and Cosmo vision as an alternative to the existing unsustainable cultural models.

#### **Indigenous Peoples Will Continue to Seek Global Transformation**

Since the United Nations' "Earth Summits" at Rio and Johannesburg, the world has heard voices from indigenous peoples and civil society demanding a need for a radical change of humankind's destructive mentality and actions toward nature in the modern world system. The global sustainability crisis is a direct consequence of how Western forms of development have continued a colonial – conquest of the sacred and have resulted in humans increasing separation from their spiritual connection to nature, Mother Earth, to their human communities, and; most important, to themselves. A global transformation on the dimensions of societal values, lifestyles, worldviews and life-interpretations is a necessary key for the solution of the problems that arise in complex patterns of technical, social and economic development.

Our elders have been telling us that humans have arrived at a moment of critical choice. Repeating previous choices will certainly lead to accelerating social, political and ecological disintegration. The alternative, a choice for spiritual transformational change, represents more than an act of survival.

As indigenous peoples, we will continue to learn to develop and support community-building initiatives and organizations with a focus of maintaining and sharing those principles and spiritual values that have sustained our communities for millennia. Global spiritual transformation of civil society is a necessity. Spirituality and community, not money, must define the threads that bind all people and all life together. The IEN seeks to open a constructive dialogue for mobilizing societal forces, within all cultures, to reevaluate what their relationship is to the sacredness of our Mother Earth.

#### **All My Relations**

*Tom Goldtooth*

#### **Further Reading**

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See also: Aboriginal Environmental Groups in Canada; American Indians as "First Ecologists"; Bison Restoration and Native American Traditions; Black Mesa; Casas, Bartolomé de Las; Cosmology; Devils Tower, Mato Tipi, or Bears Lodge; Earth Charter; Environmental Justice and Environmental Racism; G-O Road (North Carolina); Haudenosaunee Confederacy; Holy Land in Native North America; Indigenous Activism and Environmentalism in Latin America; Inuit; James Bay Cree and Hydro-Quebec; Lakota; Law, Religion, and Native American Lands; Manifest Destiny; Mother Earth; Native American Languages; Noble Savage; Rainforests (Central and South America); Romanticism and Indigenous People; Sacred and the Modern World, The; Sacred Geography in Native North America; Seattle (Sealth), Chief; Sky; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; Traditional Ecological Knowledge Among Aboriginal Peoples in Canada; United Nations' "Earth Summits"; World Conference of Indigenous Peoples (Kari Oca, Brazil); World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF); Yuchi Culture and the Euchee (Yuchi) Language Project (Southeastern United States).

## Indigenous Religions and Cultural Borrowing

Traditional indigenous religions tend to be intimately involved with the natural environments out of which they emerge. Indigenous peoples around the world have developed shamanic and animist belief systems that reflect their dependence on the environmental conditions directly affecting their communities. As social and economic circumstances have changed for indigenous peoples, religious practices have also been adapted and reshaped to accommodate new influences, desires and pressures. Likewise, traditional indigenous religions have had an influence on the wider world. They are often invoked, for example, as evidence of the connections that indigenous peoples are perceived to have with "Nature." As a result, elements of these traditions are frequently borrowed or appropriated by non-indigenous groups or individuals who want to strengthen or authenticate their own spiritual feelings toward natural landscapes.

Most cultural researchers acknowledge that the tendency to borrow ideas from others is a universal human practice, an inevitable outcome of interactions between individuals and cultural groups. This diffusion of beliefs and practices is evident in the development of cultural traditions throughout the world. Religious traditions in particular provide some of the most dramatic and widely recognized examples of cultural borrowing. Perhaps it is

for this reason that the study of religion has often included discussions about the significance and the implications of blending together elements selected from different cultures. The concept of syncretism, the attempt to reconcile or bring together diverse beliefs, conventions or systems, has frequently been applied in colonial settings to describe the ways in which indigenous peoples combined their traditional religious beliefs with those of the missionaries and colonizers.

"Syncretism" has acquired negative connotations in some places because it has been used to imply that religious traditions are somehow weakened or corrupted when they begin to incorporate practices drawn from other religious systems. This argument depends upon a set of culturally shaped ideas that assume "tradition" to be unchanging by nature and that therefore promote the importance of "purity" and "authenticity" within such traditions. It also reflects an understanding of cultures as essentially fixed and bounded entities, rather than overlapping and interacting systems of social engagement. These approaches fail to acknowledge that cultural traditions, religious and non-religious, indigenous and non-indigenous, are essentially dynamic; like all social practices they are repeatedly amended, altered and readjusted to meet the requirements of changing circumstances – even while they may maintain an appearance of unflinching stability.

Traditional indigenous belief systems tend to be directly and inalienably tied to specific places or sites; when indigenous peoples incorporate elements of other religious systems, both preexisting and incoming beliefs must be adjusted to accommodate new geographical and cultural contexts. Many indigenous groups who have been introduced to Christianity, for example, are faced with the challenge of reconciling their beliefs about the sacredness and centrality of land in their traditional religious practices with the "non-land-based" nature of the new religious system. Often indigenous peoples who take on one of the "world religions," by choice or by force, will find ways to incorporate their traditional beliefs about land and nature spirits, the spirits of place, into the new set of practices. Alternatively, the two systems of belief might simply coexist side by side.

One indigenous response to the "placelessness" of the Judeo-Christian tradition is evident in anthropologist Eric Wolf's 1958 account of the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a religious symbol of national significance in Mexico. Guadalupe appeared in a vision, in 1531, to Juan Diego, an ordinary indigenous man who had converted to Christianity. The shrine, built upon the hill where she appeared, became a major site of pilgrimage for indigenous Mexicans, who had, ostensibly, converted to Christianity. That same hill, however, was also an important pilgrimage destination before the Spanish arrived in Mexico, as the site of a temple dedicated to Tonantzin, the