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POL 3062

12 December 2014

Native American Traditions in Environmental Movements

Humans, for the most part, have a parasitic relationship with their environment. This type of relationship results from one party benefitting while the other suffers. In the relationship between humans and the environment, humans reap several benefits from their natural surroundings, often to the degradation of those surroundings. While humans use the environment for raw materials, food production, and space for development, they often leave behind harmful side effects, such as pollution, the depletion of nutrients, and the destruction of habitats. Unfortunately, these issues are prevalent in many areas of the world today, including the United States of America. While there are some preventative measures in place in the United States, the policies that are supposed to enforce these measures are few and far between, and are rarely very effective. One way to potentially fix these issues is to incorporate traditional Native American beliefs and practices into modern environmental protection policies. Native American tribes are well known for their excellent stewardship of their surroundings. Including Native American stewardship beliefs into American environmental movements will not only help them better stimulate policy change, but will also be an excellent opportunity to bring about a renewal in the respect and practice of Native American traditions.

Successful environmental movements are extremely important in the United States today because of the negative effects humans have on their environment. Greenhouse gas emissions, climate change, air pollution, development, and overall poor stewardship of the environment over time has been very damaging to the earth. Trends in global warming, such as higher temperatures, less precipitation, and melting of the arctic ice, have all been tied to human activity (AchutaRao, pg. 927). For example, humans are altering the cycle of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by combusting more fossil fuel—which emits carbon dioxide—then nature can absorb, especially since people are constantly destroying habitats in lieu of development. Carbon dioxide is a heat-trapping, greenhouse gas, and too much of it in the atmosphere has aided in the increased temperatures and the consequences that follow experienced in the past few years (“Overview”, n.p.). The United States of American alone produces as much carbon dioxide as the continents of Europe and Africa combined, and sixteen percent of the total world production, which is 32,723.209 million metric tons (“International”, n.p.). Air pollution in cities have gotten poor over the years, with almost half of the world urban population exposed to air pollution at least 2.5 times higher than levels recommended by the World Health Organization (“Air”, n.p.). Wildlife has been suffering across the globe, as well, with populations declining by fifty-two percent in the last forty years, which is the result of both habitation loss and over hunting (“Protecting”, n.p.). All of these environmental issues, plus many more, have been plaguing the United States for several years, and unfortunately, the government has limited ways of combatting them.

In the United States government, the Council on Environmental Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency create and uphold regulations regarding the environment based off of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA was passed in 1970, and it established national environmental policy and goals for protection, maintenance, and enhancement of the environment, and also provided the process for implementing these within federal agencies (“National”, n.p.). Both the Council on Environmental Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency were created in NEPA. The job of the Council on Environmental Quality is to gather information on conditions and trends in the quality of the environment, evaluate federal programs in light of NEPA goals, and develop and promote national policies to improve environmental quality. The Environmental Protection Agency prepares and reviews NEPA documents, and reviews and publicly comments on environmental impacts of major federal actions (“National”, n.p.). NEPA documents are Environmental Assessments, which evaluate the significance an action may have on impacting the environment, and Environmental Impact Statements, which document the actual impacts, as well as impacts of alternative options. NEPA also asserts that the public’s input on environmental issues must be addressed and taken into consideration during the documentation period (“National”, n.p.). Although many state governments have since modeled their own environmental protection acts after this document, NEPA is not actually all that effective. The only requirement of NEPA is for the Council on Environmental Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency to document how the environment may be impacted during certain developments or actions. Past that, however, there is nothing in the act itself that actually outlaws environmentally damaging actions, which shows there is a dire need for improved environmental policies in the United States. One way to improve these policies is to include Native American environmental values.

Almost all Native American tribal groups had some form of traditional practice or belief that revolved around taking care of the environment. For example, the Sac and Fox Nation, two groups of Native Americans with similar cultures that banded together several centuries ago, had a traditional practice of stewardship. Natural resources were very important to the Sac and Fox’s old ways of life. In order to never deplete the raw materials supplied and supported by the environment, the Sac and Fox developed methods of structured hunting and gathering. Before hunting would commence, tribal leaders gathered together to plan out who would hunt where, and how many animals—which was based on the population of each tribe—were allowed to be killed (Heck, pg. 52). These decisions not only kept the animal population from being depleted, but it also helped each tribe avoid conflicting with one another about the rights to hunting grounds (Heck, pg. 54). Furthermore, when animals were killed, every part of the body was used. The skin of animals were used in a variety of ways, such as for the making of clothing, pouches, and tepee coverings. Bones, antlers, and hooves were used for jewelry, decorations, and weapons. The meat was either eaten right away or dried for later use (Heck, pg. 55). When the Sac and Fox Native Americans gathered, each individual was given a specific size and number of storage vessels, and they were not to permitted to gather more than what would fit in them (Heck, pg. 52). This practice helped keep the Sac and Fox from over-gathering their territories, and allowed the environment to also sustain other life. The Sac and Fox took excellent care of their surroundings, and they managed their resources very skillfully.

Another Native American tribe that held beliefs concerning the care of their environment was the Gwich’in in Alaska. One of the traditional values of the Gwich’in was the importance of community. According to these values, everyone had to be treated as equals because the Gwich’in believed that everyone was interconnected. The Gwich’in extended their community relationships and beliefs into their environment. Since the animals and plants are living, this Native American group considered them, and other elements of the earth, persons (Wolf, pg. 91). Because they believed the environment was a collection of people, the Gwich’in believed they must treat the environment as their equal, and strive to reach harmony with it (Wolf, pg. 92). One of the ways that these Native Americans in Alaska attempted to live in harmony with nature was by becoming adaptable to movement and change. This allowed the environment to go through its natural cycles and transformations without interference from outside sources (Wolf, pg. 77). Gwich’ins also took very careful steps to not harm the environment when they were gathering. For example, when harvesting an Alaskan herb, called devil’s club, Gwich’ins gently and patiently scraped away at the dirt until the root was exposed. The natives then cut off only as much as they needed, and then proceeded to water the remaining root and cover it back up (Wolf, pg. 93). The Gwich’in expected respect from the members of their community, and because of this, they treated everyone in their community, including the environment with respect. Everyone and everything was believed to be equal; thus, everyone and everything deserved respect.

A final example of a Native American group with traditional beliefs about their environment is the Esselens. One of the most significant principles of the Esselen was the principle of balanced reciprocity with both animals and nature (Breschini, pg. 123). Balanced reciprocity is the act of giving something back after receiving something of equal value, allowing for both sides to benefit from the exchange. One procedure the Esselen used to practice highlights this principle very well. When digging up roots from the earth, or removing bark, flowers, or leaves from trees, the Esselen first placed tobacco near the plant (Breschini, pg. 124). Tobacco leafs are rich in nitrogen and potassium, which allows them to work well as both fertilizers and insecticides. During the procedure of removing the plant substance they desired, the Esselen made sure to be extremely careful in not removing any more of the plant than absolutely necessary. While doing so, the Esselen prayed for the plant and to the plant, asking that its use might be successful (Breschini, pg. 124). This part of the procedure showcases another central belief of the Esselen, which is the importance of connecting and communicating with the spirituality of all life. The natives in the Esselen tribe believed that each plant has a spirit, and in order for the portion of the plant they remove to work in the way it’s supposed to, the Esselen had to first appease the plant’s spirit. The Esselen did this by treating the plant with respect, whispering their intentions to the plant, and practicing balanced reciprocity (Breschini, pg. 127). By using balanced reciprocity in nature, the Esselen developed a deep connection with their environment, which became ingrained in their culture.

These three Native American tribes have radically different cultures, yet they all have something in common: a love, respect, and desire to care for their environment. In modern day America, these kinds of values are often lost amidst the push for expansion and development. However, there are some people and organizations that are attempting to reestablish the importance of environmental protection through the use of the indigenist vision. The indigenist vision is the use of the traditional belief systems and practices of Native Americans as a whole in the hopes of achieving better maintenance of the environment. Indigenists often draw on a collection of traditions, knowledge, and values from many different Native American tribes (Moore, pg. 288-289). Whether it be an individual, a Native American tribe, or a coalition of tribes and outside organizations, people all over the United States are applying the indigenist vision to their environmental movements, including people in and working with the Sac and Fox, Gwich’in, and Esselen.

One individual who has been very active in environmental movements today is Grace Thorpe of the Sac and Fox Nation. In 1991, the Department of Energy began to offer grants to any Indian tribe that would store nuclear waste on their land. To Thorpe’s dismay, twenty-one tribes showed interest in this offer, including Thorpe’s own Sac and Fox tribe (Schilling, pg. 67). Thorpe knew the environmental impacts of radioactive fallout, as she had worked in Japan in the Women’s Army Corps after the atomic bombs had been dropped (Schilling, pg. 61). Unfortunately, as Thorpe had learned, there is currently no way to safely dispose of radioactive waste, and it takes thousands of years for the deadly chemicals to diminish. In an effort to warn Native American tribes about the harmful effects of radioactivity and put a halt to bringing nuclear waste onto tribal lands, Thorpe used the indigenist vision, and drew upon some of the traditional beliefs of the Gwich’in, who respected their environment and treated it as part of their community. Thorpe applied these beliefs by explaining to Native Americans across the United States that tribal lands were apart of tribal identity, no matter what tribe you are in. Without the land, a tribe cannot survive; therefore, it is part of the tribe’s community, and should be treated as such (Schilling, pg. 68-69). According to Thorpe, placing hazardous nuclear waste in the environment is not respectful, as no human would ever consider storing radioactive discards in their own homes. In 1993, Thorpe founded the National Environmental Coalition of Native Americans (NECONA) to warn other the tribes about the dangers of nuclear waste (Schilling, pg. 68). The United Nations General Assembly, as well as many American states both supported and praised the work of Thorpe and NECONA as they successfully created seventy-five nuclear free zones (Schilling, pg. 69-70), which showed the Natives that they were not alone in their efforts. Although Thorpe was a member of the Sac and Fox tribe, she effectively applied the beliefs of the Gwich’in to her environmental movement.

Another example of an environment movement that used the indigenist vision was when the Gwich’in in Alaska and environmental activists fought against oil development in the Arctic Refuge. Established in 1960 with 8.9 million acres, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has since been expanded to cover 19.2 million acres of state-managed wildlife—some of which includes a very fertile coastal plain—in the northeastern corner of Alaska (Ganapathy, pg. 88). The expansion of the area occurred as a result of the Alaska National Interest Lands and Claim Act (ANILCA), which both protects the wilderness and establishes a region for future economic gain. This is especially evident in section 1002 of ANICLA, which leaves open interpretation for exploring the potential for oil drilling in the coastal plain (Ganapathy, pg. 89). Although activists in both the Gwich’in tribe and those outside of it would allow for the development of oil drilling if it could be done in a way that was not environmentally damaging or interfering to Native communities, the one location oil companies are interested in drilling on—the coastal plains—would do both (Ganapathy, pg. 103). The coastal plains are the calving and post-calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd, which the Gwich’in community subsists off of (Ganapathy, pg. 101). However, the fear of losing their primary means of sustenance is not the only reason the Gwich’in opposed oil drilling in the coastal plains; rather, they were driven by the Esselen beliefs of balanced reciprocity. The caribou herd had sustained the Gwich’in tribe for several generations, and the current tribal members felt it was their turn to sustain the caribou and protect them from losing their habitat (Ganapathy, pg. 104). The Gwich’in were also supported in their movement by non-Native, non-governmental environmental organizations, although none were specifically mentioned. Together, the groups participated in public speaking, consciousness raising, and networking (Ganapathy, pg. 107). As of today, the Gwich’in and their supporters have been successful in using Esselen beliefs to keep oil drilling companies away from the coastal plains, though the companies continue to push for drilling rights.

A last illustration of the indigenist vision in use was when the Esselen tribe and several environmental activist groups fought against the construction of the New Los Padres Dam in California. From 1987 to 1992, Monterey County, California suffered from a series of environmentally damaging droughts. In response to this, the Monterey County government put into movement the idea of building a dam on Carmel River, called the New Los Padres Dam (Moore, pg. 292). The Esselen, paired with multiple organizations, such as the Cachagua Area Property Owners Association and Citizens for Alternative Water Solutions, rose up to oppose this idea. Their arguments used the indigenist vision, as the arguments were based off of stewardship and management of the environment, both of which are traditional Sac and Fox ideologies. For example, the Esselen and their many allies pointed out that dam construction in the U.S. has caused the extinction and endangerment of two-fifths of freshwater fish (Moore, pg. 290). Studies have also shown that water and fish are contaminated by methyl mercury when rivers are dammed (Moore, pg. 291). The environmental activists also argued that the water used from Carmel River could be better managed. For instance, golf courses near the river were using eight percent of the river’s water supply to keep their grasses green. It was also discovered that the Cal-Am Water Company was illegally pumping out water from the Carmel River to supply their customers (Moore, pg. 301). The activists and the Esselen called for the supporters of the dam to become better stewards of their environment, and search for a solution to the droughts that would be more environmentally friendly. They also encouraged the government, Cal-Am, and organizations that used massive amounts of water to help Monterey County better manage its resources. On November 8, 1995, the citizens of Monterey County voted against the construction of the New Los Padres Dam. The Esselen and their non-native environmental allies had been successful in their use of traditional beliefs from another tribe to protect the Carmel River.

Applying indigenous ideologies and practices to environmental movements and policies has been beneficial to the dying culture and livelihood of the Native Americans. Although the government has taken strides to better the lives of Native American populations, they continue to suffer greatly as compared to the United States as a whole. Only seventy-seven percent of Native Americans have their high school diploma or GED, and only thirteen percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher, as compared to eighty-six percent and twenty-eight percent of the United States as a whole, respectively (“Profile”, n.p.). With less of the Native American population getting a high-level education, they are unable to qualify for higher-paying jobs. Because of this, their median income is fifteen thousand dollars less than the national median, and twenty-eight percent of the population is at or below the poverty line, whereas the American population as a whole only has fifteen percent living in poverty (“Profile”, n.p.). Native Americans are also among the largest ethnic group to participate in binge drinking, especially that of excessive, intense binge drinking. Drug induced death rates in the thirty to thirty-nine age range is the highest among the Native American population (“American”, n.p.). While the Native Americans continue to live with poverty, low education, and unhealthy habits, they are also losing their culture.

One of the most important aspects of the Native American culture is their environment. For Native Americans, the environment is directly tied to their sense of identity. The land of a tribe holds spiritual meanings, both to the earth itself and the ancestors of the tribe who have been buried there (Wolf, pg. 95). The land is also the Native Americans’ home and main source of survival, and it provides them with a sense of security, community, and belonging (Wolf, pg. 94). In the modern day Gwich’in tribe, for example, the caribou herd helps to create relationships between the young and old. The old share their culturally significant hunting and butchering techniques, while the youth provide food to the elderly who cannot access it themselves (Ganapathy, pg. 107). Because of the unique and strong ties Native Americans have with their environments, the destruction of an environment results in the death of the culture of the Native American tribe residing there. As Ojibwe author David Treuer points out in a letter to the Washington Post, cultural death is a very important issue because it would mean Native Americans would lose the chance to live on and in their own terms, something that their ancestors had given their life for (pg. 2). By encouraging Native Americans to participate in modern-day environmental movements, they will not only have a chance to save their lands, but they will also have a chance to save their lives and their way of life because they will once again have something meaningful to fight for.

The positive impacts that will come from applying traditional Native American beliefs and practices to environmental movements is enormous. The traditional beliefs and practices held by Native American tribes varying, but they all focus on caring for the environment. The Sac and Fox, for example, promoted stewardship and vigilant management techniques. On the other hand, the Gwich’in tribe encouraged their members to respect their environment and treat it as part of their community. Yet another tribe, the Esselen, used the practice of balanced reciprocity when working with the environment. No matter what tribe originally held the belief, however, modern environmental movements have shown that, through the indigenist vision, anyone can promote and make use of traditional Native American beliefs to help protect the environment. This not only benefits the deteriorating environment; it also helps to promote the renewal and spread of Native American culture. Both of these are extraordinarily important, as the cultures of Native Americans are becoming lost, as is the health of environments across the United States. One way Native Americans can involve themselves in environmental movements in order to benefit both the environment and their culture is to share their traditions with others. They can go door to door dressed in traditional clothing to share their information and beliefs with others, like the Jesuits and Mormons do. This will help Americans to become more interested and informed. Native Americans can also use festivals, powwows, and tour groups to reach out to the public. This way, the American public will get a better glimpse into the lives of Native Americans, and actually have a chance to experience their practices, beliefs, and hardships. These activities will generate more deference from the public, which will cause them to be more supportive and respectful of the Native Americans and their environment, and, in turn, cause the Native Americans to become more supportive and respectful of themselves.

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