

Ecocentrism and Traditional Ecological Knowledge

By [J. Stan Rowe](#)

Of what relevance to current industrial civilization are Indigenous Cultures (ICs), those islands of aboriginal society that still persist here and there in quiet backwaters not yet invaded by world trade and commerce? Does Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) offer useful lessons for Westerners seeking harmonious and sustainable ways of living on Earth? Recent discussion of TEK on the Internet (Ecopolitics-l listserver) prompted the following essay.

Anthropologists and sociologists have long had an interest in the flexible ways diverse cultures adapt to the various physical and biological landscapes of Earth. One modern approach is the study of Historical Ecology, tracing patterns of change in cultures as they evolve. The presumption is that cultures are subject to historic selection, responding to what is outside them and within. External forces - varying according to geographic place- are local environmental conditions (soils, water, climate, biota), large-scale environmental change (especially climatic change), and local human actions (cooperation and/or competition with neighbouring societies). Internal forces, the focus of particular interest, are traditional activities and beliefs that determine "the practical engagement of people in the world." In other words, how a society adapts to its dynamic environment.

The question is whether, in a world rapidly being overrun by Western Civilization (aka Global Capitalism, Global Corporatism, Global Industrialism), the study of any but our own "practical engagement in the world" has relevance to the current scene. Does the historical ecology of various Indigenous Cultures here and there around the world illuminate our future path?

Affirmative answers point out that much can be learned from the ICs because they have lived sustainably for a long time. Therefore they can teach us the fundamentals of living with one another and with Earth in ways that are relation-based rather than consumption-based, responsibility-based rather than right-based. We look at these aboriginal cultures and marvel at their ways-of-living that seem so wholesome compared to our own. Here apparently is TEK that can be borrowed and used.

We of the "Western Civilization" comprehend most easily the visible parts of other cultures, particularly the *activities* of daily living whereby tribal people interact with each other and with the ecosystems that enclose them. Anthropological studies detail these observable features: the small population in a close-knit community, the binding rituals, the methods of settling disputes, the foraging habits, medicinal plants, organic agriculture, small but sophisticated technology, reliance on solar power, taboos on over-hunting, and so on. These relatively easy-to-understand habits demonstrate, some say, "the most ecological way to go." No doubt about it, they do offer useful clues for such marginal activities (in our culture) as gardening and herbal medicine.

But the essential cultural soul of tribal people - their cosmology and fundamental *beliefs* about themselves in the world they occupy - is relatively inaccessible and strange to us. Even if a

committed student spends long years with a tribe, empathically exploring and then explaining for us the tribe's belief-system, its relevance to improving or redirecting our industrial society seems minimal or non-existent. What we learn is curious and alien because it does not conform to our understanding of biology, ecology, psychology, evolution, geology, and cosmology, nor to our understanding of sociology, economics, and politics.

Many of us accept and support much of what tribal peoples do in the name of their cultures, admiring and perhaps imitating through Voluntary Simplicity parts of their sustainable life styles. Our difficulty is in accepting their deeply rooted religious or philosophical faiths and beliefs *that support them in living the way they do*. Without some such radical, binding glue, the communes and other utopian experiments we attempt, even when "love-based," soon fall apart.

Can we really move toward a sustainable society via the wisdom of Indigenous Cultures with their Traditional Ecological Knowledge or must we develop our own brand-new set of fundamental beliefs about people-on-Earth, beliefs compatible with (or at least not contradicted by) the sciences of our science-dominated culture, beliefs capable of mobilizing the finer feelings of everyone and not just "the grief of the Leftists and the guilt of the Liberals?"

Every effort should be made to preserve cultural diversity globally, and not just because much of academic interest can be learned from remnant ICs. The sound truth they teach is that way-of-living is intrinsically bound up with beliefs, often described as "spiritual," that give each tribe member a sense of belonging, as well as confirmation that the tribal way of being-in-the-world is good. This we moderns lack and, in fact, the very mention of "spiritual" is off-putting to the many skeptics in our science-dominated world.

Fortunately Fritjof Capra (in his book **The Web of Life**) has rescued "spirituality" from theological mists and New Age fog. He defines it as a sense of belonging, a sense of connectedness to the cosmos, and therefore (he says) *"ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest essence."*

Knowing that fundamental beliefs and way-of-living are unitary in culture, we who are swathed in Western culture cannot hope to borrow from the most enlightened ICs either their fundamental beliefs nor their way-of-living, let alone both together. To switch Western culture from its present track to a saving ecopolitical route means finding a new and compelling belief-system to redirect our way-of-living. It must be a vital outgrowth from our science-based culture.

It seems to me that the only promising universal belief-system is Ecocentrism, defined as a value-shift from *Homo sapiens* to planet earth: Ecosphere. A scientific rationale backs the value-shift. All organisms are evolved from Earth, sustained by Earth. Thus Earth, not organism, is the metaphor for Life. Earth not humanity is the Life-center, the creativity-center. Earth is the whole of which we are subservient parts. Such a fundamental philosophy gives ecological awareness and sensitivity an enfolding, material focus.

A common assumption is that any New Ecological Way must be advanced through some form of communal living. Ecocentrism puts a new interpretation on "community" and "communal living." The Ecosphere is central and it constitutes the largest "world community." Its component "geographic communities" are sectoral ecosystems, at various size scales from the regional to the local. Thus "communal living" does not necessarily mean a gathering of humans, although some may want to get together for mutual support. True "communities" are ecosystems, with all their inorganic and organic parts, the latter including humans. A community can be one person, or a family, at home with and caring for a piece of Earth.

Ecocentrism is not an argument that all organisms have equivalent value. It is not an anti-human argument nor a put-down of those seeking social justice. It does not deny that myriad important homocentric problems exist. But it stands aside from these smaller, short-term issues in order to consider Ecological Reality. Reflecting on the ecological status of all organisms, it comprehends the Ecosphere as a Being that transcends in importance any one single species, even the self-named sapient one.

Ecocentrism is a new way of thinking. It proposes an ethic whose reference point is supra-human, placing Ecosphere health before human welfare. It points the way to solving questions that, within humanistic or biocentric frameworks, are virtually unsolvable: the Growth Problem, the Population Problem, the Technology Problem. It gives new and constructive direction to philosophers, economists, scientists, and engineers.

While we cannot adopt holus-bolus any indigenous "beliefs & way-of-living" system, we can hone our ecological awareness, look outward instead of inward, learn to see ourselves as dependent Earthlings and not the center, recognize our interesting partners - 30 million other kinds of creatures - joined with us in a yearly whirl 'round the sun, climb down from our self-erected pedestal and show a little humility. Get "spiritual" in Capra's sense. Such a new Ecological Knowledge would do wonders for our way-of-living. In time it could become the world's saving Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

[Other Ecocentric Texts](#)