

# Cultural Biodiversity: Indigenous Relationships within Their Environment

Tom Mexsis Happynook  
World Council of Whalers

When we talk about indigenous cultural practices we are in fact talking about responsibilities that have evolved into unwritten tribal laws over millennia. These responsibilities and laws are directly tied to nature and is a product of the slow integration of cultures within their environment and the ecosystems. Thus, the environment is not a place of divisions but rather a place of relations, a place where cultural diversity and bio-diversity are not separate but in fact need each other. The most important aspects of cultural bio-diversity are those that integrate people, (the human relationship), with the ecosystems found within their environment. Some indigenous practices had cultural importance at the time they were being practiced, (arranged marriages, etc), but most indigenous practices, such as fishing, hunting and gathering have a much deeper ecological management role. These indigenous practices maintained the balance within nature, the environment and the ecosystems. I am not talking about the morality of the cultural practice, but rather the cultural practice of responsibility to bio-diversity. It is from this perspective that we begin to realize that the realm of cultural diversity and bio-diversity are not separate from the environment but rather connected through our relationships with the ecosystems. This is **cultural bio-diversity**; a practice which has been developed and nurtured over millennia; in the Nuu-chah-nulth language “Hishuk Tsawalk”, everything is one, everything is connected.

In today’s world, laws have been created around “the human relationship aspect”. Unfortunately, these laws have established a system that leaves humans outside of nature or makes us believe that we are dominant over the environment or a cancer on this earth. We have even created a set of consequences for any broken human relations within this system: fines, prisons, institutions, etc. On the other hand, indigenous peoples have lived within the “law of nature”. It is within this boundary that our indigenous systems of justice, tribal laws, societies and cultural practices developed and have turned into the indigenous rights of today.

## PROTEST INDUSTRY

Over the past 30 years I have observed the environmental movement evolve from individuals who were truly concerned about the environment to a “Protest Industry” which is now a multitude of multi-million dollar corporations collecting billions of dollars. This industry preys on people who are unaware of the dynamics of indigenous cultures or the importance of coastal communities and our relationships to the environment and ecosystems.

In fact over the past 15 years the “Protest Industry” has been very successful in media manipulation, lobbying initiatives and misinformation dissemination through photography, newspaper ads, television segments and documentaries. As Mr. Paul Watson has stated in his book *Earth force; An Earth Warriors Guide to Strategy*, (page 42), “ ***A headline comment in Mondays paper far outweighs the revelation of inaccuracy revealed in a small box***”

*inside the paper on Tuesday or Wednesday”.*

One of the Protest Industries most successful strategies to date has been the crusade towards “Bio-diversity”. Regrettably, they have convinced the general public to overvalue certain parts of the environment and remove the cultural aspects, (human relationships), from bio-diversity. The result is an unbalanced environment and ecosystem. We are not a cancer to mother earth and until the cultural aspects of indigenous peoples are reinstated the natural balance that everyone has been seeking will never return.

### **TRADITIONAL NUU CHAH NULTH TEACHINGS**

I was fortunate to be raised and taught by my grandfather, grandmother, two great grandmothers and two great aunts. They taught me many things but the most important thing they taught me was my place in this world. I was taught there is: A natural law of nature which we must live by. We are only one component in the web of life. We are not dominant over nature but in fact related. Everything is inter-connected and when one component in the environment or ecosystem is over exploited and then protected, the balance is lost. Humans have a very important role to play which is to help maintain the balance through our relationship with nature, the environment and the ecosystems. One of the most important tools we have at our disposal to meet this obligation is respectful, responsible and sustainable utilization of the resources. And we must manage the relationship between humans, the environment, the ecosystems and natural resources. Indigenous peoples around the world have learned over the millennia, and it has become very clear in recent years, humans can not be managed

nor can the natural resources it is the relationship between these entities that must be managed.

### **TRADITIONAL NUU CHAH NULTH BELIEF SYSTEM**

Our traditional belief system had 4 spirit chiefs. On the Land Spirit Chief; in the Sky Spirit Chief; in the Water Spirit Chief and Beyond and Below the Horizon Spirit Chief. The last spirit chief is considered to be unattainable, unapproachable, unseeable and unknowable. Just as you can, and will, chase the horizon forever. We also believed there is a multiplicity of spirits which are found in everything that surrounds us. It was this belief system that ensured respect was given to the natural resources for the many functions that they played within Nuuchah-nulth life. We always positioned ourselves in relation to nature because everything has a value other than its physical anatomy. For example, when we were about to use a cedar tree we not only thanked the spirit of the tree but we also describe all the beautiful things that we would be making to survive culturally, socially and economically.

### **TRADITIONAL NUU CHAH NULTH RESOURCE MANAGEMENT KNOWLEDGE**

The Nuuchah-nulth hereditary chiefs governed over the natural resources with the help of elders, advisors, wives, speakers and specialists who were taught from birth to look after the animals, waters, rivers and natural resources. In fact we had beach keepers, river keepers, mountain keepers. These people were expected to walk the beaches, rivers and mountains and apply their traditional knowledge to the caring of their respective areas of responsibility

When we talk about traditional resource management knowledge it is important to note there is a difference between resource management **knowledge** and resource management **information**. When a mother became pregnant the hereditary chiefs watched her and her husband very closely to see if they had begun the teaching (the education process) while the baby was in the womb. When the child was a few years old the hereditary chiefs would watch to see if the child was applying the teachings. As the child grew into adulthood if they continued to apply those teachings then the hereditary chiefs would begin to provide them with knowledge rather than just information. This was the beginning of their journey. They were being groomed to become a major contributor to the management of the natural resources, the community and the hereditary chiefs. However, even if a person was an exceptional hunter if he did not apply the knowledge he had been given or was seen hunting disrespectfully he would be shunned. In our view the taking of any life was looked upon as the most sacred responsibility that had been bestowed upon us because it is the hunters, fishers and gatherers that meet our social, cultural and economic needs.

Where did get this knowledge come from? The answer is simply “the animals”. Animals express life in many ways. For example: Otters teach us balance, not to be too serious, to have some fun. Whales are considered to be keepers of the history. Wolves are considered to be our professors and pathfinders in life. Mink express arrogance and self-importance. Eagles expressed love, honor, peace, and friendship, in fact it is believed that these things are needed to be free. Bears expressed solitude, loneliness and strength. Cougars expressed leadership and the Octopus expressed shyness, timidness and

modesty but yet has great strength in its own environment

## **NUU-CHAH-NULTH TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS:**

There are a number of key aspects to our traditional Nuu-chah-nulth tribal government structures. By making decisions that flow from **Respect** we ensure the natural resources will be with us in perpetuity, for the future generations, even though we are continually using them. **Order** is extremely important to the Nuu-chah-nulth. Tribal governments prescribed to strict principles, values, and teachings. This meant everything had to be in its correct place and done at the correct time. **Protocols** and unwritten tribal laws ensured the order was adhered to. The **Spoken word** within Nuu-chah-nulth society held authority. Witnesses were called to attend great feasts (potlatches) to bear witness to the business of the tribal governments. These witnesses gave the “spoken word” authenticity and authorization. **Teachings** were repeated and reinforced and government business became **Public Knowledge**. It was public knowledge that gave strength to the hereditary chiefs and their tribal governments. These feasts and celebrations also showed the tribal government was in place and functioning. It was during these feasts that **Ownership** was acknowledged. Great importance was put on ownership which also drew its strength from public knowledge. **Responsibility** was everyone’s role. It was taught from conception and continued throughout life. We believe this practice leads to a strong and healthy sense of belonging and fosters a strong loyalty to the society and the natural resources that we very much depend on. **Accountability** was maintained through checks and balances. These checks and balances were in place to ensure that everyone lived up to their responsibilities. Even the hereditary chiefs

were not exempt, in fact they were held more accountable. If an infraction to the natural resources took place, the person and the infraction, was reported to the family in charge of that resource. The infraction would then be dealt with in the appropriate manner according to strict tribal laws. **Discipline** in body, spirit and mind was highly valued in Nuu-chah-nulth society and we believe very strongly in **Preparation** especially when it has to do with resource management. Cleansing, bathing, praying and fasting is very important particularly when important decisions had to be made regarding natural resources extraction

## SUMMARY

There are several very important aspects to natural resource management which need to be addressed. We must reinstate a belief system. A belief system which dictates that we be respectful when we use the natural resources. Many of the global indigenous peoples already have these belief systems in place but can not use them due to oppression. In fact, over the past number of years there has been tremendous lip service given to indigenous peoples, the importance of their traditional resource management knowledge and their relationship in the environment. If you look hard enough you will find wonderful words enshrined in many international conventions and declarations, but as usual that's all they are, "words". We need to consolidate traditional resource management knowledge with science and incorporate it into well-founded modern management techniques. This means creating new regional management bodies that includes indigenous people and their communities into the decision making process. And we must apply traditional values and principles to resource management and resource extraction. But most importantly, we must be mindful of the

global hunters, fishers and gatherers. If we are not respectful, understanding and supportive we will be contributing to the extinction of cultural practices, traditional resource management knowledge and **cultural bio-diversity** and I am certain that none of us want that on our resumes.

This material was prepared by Tom Mexsis Happynook, founding Chairman, World Council of Whalers, Brentwood Bay, BC Canada. Submitted for a conference held in Corvallis, Oregon hosted by the International Institute of Fisheries Economics and Trade, July 10 – 14, 2000.