

Valuing Nature from an Ecocentric Perspective

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Donna House, a Navaho botanist (North America), remembers the teachings of her grandfather, chairman of the Navaho nation and a yeibechi (singer of traditional tribal songs about the common origins of people, plants and animals):

He taught me that our creation stories protect the land and its people. What we do to the land we do to ourselves. We don't understand the separation you Anglos make between 'out there' and 'in here'. In the Navaho language, we refer to all things as 'people'. (quoted in Wolf, 1990)

The spiritual world is the ordinary everyday world. Somé (1994), for example, explains that in his native Dagara language (Burkina Faso in Africa) there is no word for the supernatural, because there is no split between the material and the spiritual. 'For us, as for many indigenous cultures, the supernatural is part of our everyday lives. To a Dagara man or woman, the material is just the spiritual taking on form.' Alfonso Ortiz, a Tewa (North America), explains that 'there's nothing that is religious, versus something else that is secular. Native American religion pervades, informs all life' (Knudtson and Suzuki, 1992, p. 16).

Power is essential to the relationship between humans and nature (Martin, 1978, p. 34):

Power – called *manitou* in Algonkian [North American Indian] – is a phenomenon common among pre-industrial people the world over. Roughly defined, it is the spiritual potency associated with an object (such as a knife) or a phenomenon (such as thunder). To the Micmac, as well as to all the rest of these Eastern Canadian hunter-gatherers, manitou was the force which made everything in Nature alive and responsive to man. Only a fool would confront life without it, since it was only through the manipulation and interpretation of manitou that man was able to survive in this world. To cut oneself off from manitou was equivalent to repudiating the vital force in Nature; without manitou Nature would lose its meaning and potency, and man's activities in Nature would become secular and mechanical.

The Amazonian Tukano (South America) similarly seek to conserve power by caring for the environment (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1996):

The forest ... is a depository, a vast storage place of vital forces upon which man can draw according to certain, culturally determined, rules. It follows that to destroy the forest or to misuse it would be equivalent to the destruction of a vital source of energy; even to ignore the forest would be man's loss.

A similar concept in Maori (New Zealand) is *mana*, which is defined as power and authority derived from the gods. Mana resides in nature, but in addition Maori social groups can have mana over a particular geographical area, and this obliges them to exercise stewardship over that area. Failure to do so will result in the loss of the life-sustaining capacity of the land and sea (Given, 1995).

These traditional views of the relationship between humans, nature and spirit provide the foundation for what we might regard as an environmental ethic. The environment is not

simply a collection of resources to be exploited, but is both a repository of power and a community of related beings, linked to humanity by ties of kinship. Acceptable behaviour towards something that is not only alive but also essentially spiritual is bound to be very different from behaviour towards a non-sentient, non-spiritual, material resource. Many indigenous groups therefore feel a great responsibility towards the natural world.

Of course, not all 'indigenous' populations or even individuals within those groups may share the ecocentric perspectives depicted above. In the same way, it would be misleading to caricature all of Judeo-Christianity as essentially anthropocentric in its narrative regarding nature. There are likely to be variations of perspective within as well as between different cultural traditions. What is important, though, is the influence of spiritual traditions on the quality of conversation; how we converse not only with non-human nature but also between human cultures. Peterson points out that Western observers often regard indigenous cultures, and particularly their ideas of animism (attributing agency to non-human others), as being 'primitive' and hence inferior. She does not suggest wholesale adoption of such worldviews, but argues instead that narratives of all kinds would benefit from having their assumptions questioned. There may be considerable benefit in carrying out such conversation with respect to developing Western or global North perspectives on nature. The aim is not to acquire some perfect understanding of nature, including the different human cultures that make up the natural world; rather, it is limited simply to living more respectfully with nature.