

2012 Snoqualmie Summit: Traditional Knowledge and Healthy Ecosystems

Introduction

Indigenous peoples have used traditional knowledge to relate to and interact with the environment since time immemorial. Through traditional knowledge, American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians historically achieved a healthy balance between the needs of ecosystems and the needs of people. Traditional knowledge can be defined as the “holistic, evolving practices and beliefs passed down through generations about the relationships of living beings to their environment” (Swinomish 2010). This body of knowledge encompasses language, naming and classification systems, and sustainable practices for the use of resources. It also guides the use of rituals, and defines the indigenous worldview and spirituality (Boven and Morohashi 2002).

When colonizing Europeans invaded indigenous communities and landscapes in the Americas, indigenous values, knowledge systems and beliefs were suppressed and replaced by European religion and education systems, which severely threatened traditional knowledge. While some knowledge and traditions were lost, much has been preserved with the perseverance of indigenous peoples. Many tribes and native groups continue to apply traditional knowledge to manage indigenous resources and to maintain healthy communities. More and more often, western scientists and educators are realizing the value of traditional knowledge in understanding many of today's most pressing environmental issues, including climate change.

In August 2012, the Snoqualmie Tribe of Washington celebrated indigenous knowledge systems by hosting the *Traditional Knowledge and Healthy Ecosystems Summit*. The Summit, held at the Skamania Lodge near Stevenson, WA, brought together indigenous leaders, tribal members, resource managers, academics and students to discuss and learn about the importance of traditional knowledge in natural resource management and in everyday ways of life. Participants came from Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Alaska, and British Columbia to partake in the various presentations, roundtables, panels, and workshops that formed part of this event. Dr. Daniel Wildcat, author of *Red Alert: Saving the Planet through Indigenous Knowledge*, and Larry Mercurieff, with the Alaska Native Science Commission, were the keynote speakers. Summit highlights included storytelling by elders, presentations on traditional knowledge in contemporary resource management, presentations on traditional knowledge and indigenous health, and field trips featuring traditional sites and activities.

Summit Highlights

Storytelling

Highlights of the Summit included sessions with tribal elders sharing stories about traditional landscapes, beliefs and practices. In the "*Tamanawit- Sacred Ceremonies of the River and Mountain*" presentation, Warm Springs traditional elders talked about the Creator's laws that define traditional tribal cultural practices and beliefs. These laws, which encourage a reciprocal relationship with the land, have guided the Warm Spring's Tribes in their traditional land management for millennia. The Columbia River, known to regional tribes as *Nch'i-Wána*, or "big river", is vital to many tribes in the area and



Geraldine Jim, a Warm Springs elder, tells stories to an attentive audience during the *Tawanawit* Knowledge Keeper Circle.

featured prominently in these stories. In the "*Traditional Hunting and Fishing*" presentation, Yakama Traditional Leaders told hunting and fishing stories and described the ways in which traditional practices and beliefs protected valued resources such as salmon. They reminisced about the good old days before dams dramatically changed the Columbia River, changing with it the lives of the many tribes that revered the river and depended on it for subsistence.

Through the sessions, tribal elders shared several concerns, including a concern that younger generations are losing their traditional values. The debate between the benefits and drawbacks of western education for indigenous peoples seeking to preserve their traditional ways was also a recurring theme. Finally, the importance of spending time with elders and engaging in traditional activities was emphasized as a means to carry traditional knowledge into the next generation and preserve traditional ways of life.

Traditional Knowledge and Contemporary Resource Management

Many of the presentations, roundtables and workshops highlighted the role of traditional knowledge in contemporary resource management. Tribes and indigenous groups are increasingly formalizing resource management plans and using traditional knowledge to drive these efforts. Additionally, many governmental agencies and non-tribal organizations that have historically been guided by Western science are starting to understand the value of traditional knowledge as a way of knowing that has much to contribute to management practices. The Summit featured presenters with both traditional and Western science backgrounds that have incorporated traditional knowledge in various types of resource management initiatives.

Dr. Eugene Hunn's presentation described his life's work studying traditional environmental knowledge in Columbia Plateau Indian communities. He provided regional historical context, and gave Summit attendees a glimpse into the ways tribes interacted with the land along the Columbia River prior to the arrival of Europeans. He also discussed the contemporary significance of traditional knowledge, highlighting its relevance in the arenas of diet and health, treaty rights, and indigenous identity.

In his presentation *Applying Traditional Knowledge to Food Security*, Center for World Indigenous Studies Chair Dr. Rudolph Ryser addressed the importance of traditional knowledge protection. Ryser emphasized that in contemporary research and planning efforts, traditional knowledge must be respected and protected. He asked, "How do we know what we know? How can we defend it?" and asserted that these questions must be answered to ensure that traditional knowledge doesn't disappear. Among various suggestions, Ryser advocated for the inclusion of traditional knowledge protection in climate change treaties.

Other presentations and sessions served to actively guide contemporary applications of traditional knowledge. One example was a Roundtable session titled "*Making the Connection between Traditional Knowledge and Contemporary Land Management*" led by Maurice Majors with the Washington State DNR. Another was "*Fisheries Issues in the Columbia Basin*" presented by Colville Tribal Leader Michael Marchand. Marchand talked about the reinstatement of traditional fisheries practices as a means to revitalize regional fisheries, and highlighted some of the already-emerging success stories.

Additional topics covered in presentations and sessions included rain garden design, tribal resources mapping, traditional knowledge in climate change initiatives, and traditional uses of fire in ecosystem restoration, and tribal social marketing strategies, to name a few.

Traditional Knowledge and Indigenous Health

Another topic of major interest was the role of traditional knowledge in the preservation of indigenous health. Presenters stressed the importance of cultivating, harvesting and using traditional foods and medicines in an effort to reverse the health impacts suffered by indigenous



Botanist and Director of Wild Foods Adventures John Kallas takes a group out on a Traditional and Wild Food Plants walk around Skamania Lodge.

peoples as a result of land loss, assimilation, and poverty. As climate change continues to impact traditional landscapes and resources, the preservation of traditional foods and medicines is as relevant as ever.

One such presentation was *"Traditional Foods and Medicines for the Prevention & Treatment of Diabetes & Traumatic Stress"* by Leslie Korn. Korn, who directs the Center for Traditional Medicine & Health Alternatives in Olympia, WA, described the loss of traditional foods and medicines as a major cause of type 2 diabetes among indigenous populations. She discussed practical approaches to managing physical and mental health by using traditional foods and medicines.

Another presentation with a traditional foods focus was *"Educating Urban and Reserve Youth about Traditional Foods and Health"* by Polly Olsen with the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute. Olsen described this initiative in which youth explore their relationship with traditional foods through digital storytelling. Participating youth gain a better understanding of what constitutes traditional foods and understand why these foods are culturally meaningful. Several of the participants' digital stories were shown during the presentation, revealing their observations and transformations.

Additional presentations addressing the importance of traditional foods and medicines ranged from hands-on workshops teaching how to use specific traditional plant species, to presentations highlighting strategies to recover traditional indigenous diets and medicines.

On-the-ground Traditional Knowledge: Field Trips

On the last day of the Summit, participants had the opportunity to attend one of several regional field trips highlighting historical and present-day applications of traditional knowledge.

In the *Traditional Fishing and Hunting in Practice* field trip, Yakama tribal fisherman Haver Jim took participants to active Columbia River fish camps, among other destinations, to see fishing platforms that are still actively used by tribal fishermen to this day. The *Traditional Land Management in Practice* field trip, led by Carlo Abbruzzese and Maurice Major with the Washington DNR, and by Aleut native and naturalist Hugh Thompson-Ahnatook, took participants to the fire-managed Washougal Oak Prairie, as well as to Wapato beds in the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge where attendees could witness traditional harvesting techniques that enhance the habitat. In a third tour, the *Archeology & Cultural History Tour*, featuring Yakama Nation Cultural Resources Manager Johnson Meninick, participants had the opportunity to see some of the region's pictographs and petroglyphs that were rescued from the rising river waters after the building of the Dalles Dam. "She Who Watches", one of the region's most famous pictographs, was a part of this field trip experience.

Other field trips included *Traditional Plants of the Columbia River Gorge* with John Kallas, and a scenic tour of the Columbia River Gorge.

Conclusion

Traditional knowledge is a thriving knowledge system in North America. In addition to guiding indigenous ways of life, many tribes and native groups are using traditional knowledge in contemporary resource management. Western scientists and educators are progressively realizing the importance of traditional knowledge, and are beginning to incorporate it into research and planning efforts.



Participants in the *Archeology & Cultural History Tour* hike next to the Columbia River in search of rock art.

As indigenous populations prepare for the threats of climate change, traditional knowledge must be at the forefront. Having a strong traditional knowledge foundation can help tribes and native groups be better prepared for climate change impacts. The *Traditional Knowledge and Ecosystem Summit* gathered regional tribes, native groups, resource managers, educators and students to celebrate and strengthen the use of traditional knowledge. While it did not have an explicit climate change focus, the ideas and relationships harbored at the Summit help strengthen indigenous communities in a climate change context. Indigenous leader Larry Mercurieff said: "It is our people that are going to show the world where we need to go". Similarly, Dr. Daniel Wildcat stressed the importance of using traditional knowledge, or "indigenuity", to address the world's most pressing problems.

For More Information:

Event Website: <http://snoqualmietksummit2012.wordpress.com>

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References:

Boven, K.; Morohashi, J., eds. 2002. Best practices using indigenous knowledge. Published by Nuffic, The Hague, The Netherlands & UNESCO/MOST, Paris, France. Accessed June 27, 2012.

<http://www.unesco.org/most/Bpikpub2.pdf>

Swinomish Indian Tribal Community (Swinomish). 2010. Swinomish climate change initiative climate adaptation action plan. Accessed June 27, 2012. http://www.swinomish-nsn.gov/climate_change/Docs/SITC_CC_AdaptationActionPlan_complete.pdf

Tribal Climate Change Profile Project:

The University of Oregon and the USDA Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station are developing tribal climate change project profiles as a pathway to increasing knowledge among tribal and non-tribal organizations interested in learning about climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. Each profile is intended to illustrate innovative approaches to addressing climate change challenges and will describe the successes and lessons learned associated with planning and implementation. For more information about the initiative, visit: <http://tribalclimate.uoregon.edu/>.

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