

Understanding and Building Wilderness Management Partnerships with Indigenous Peoples and Communities

Gregory F. Hansen

Abstract—Learning about, understanding, and working with native cultures can be rewarding as well as enlightening. Such endeavors can also be time consuming, difficult, and even frustrating in certain instances. However, if coordinated carefully and managed properly, at the end of the day such efforts can ultimately result in innumerable benefits to native communities, land managers, and to the enduring resource of wilderness. Indigenous people have survived thousands of years of oppression, prejudice, and abuse. Yet today, some land management agencies and non-governmental organizations are beginning to realize that native people—the original keepers of the earth—have a great deal to offer, not only in terms of understanding and caring for the land in general, but more specifically, in caring for wild places. This paper will provide unique insights into how wilderness-benefiting, cross-cultural collaborations can be achieved and sustained by offering a simple-to-follow partnership development framework that has been ground-truthed and proven highly successful in many parts of the world. Furthermore, this indigenous partnership model will be supported by field-tested program examples in an attempt to provide wilderness managers with the basic tools and knowledge required in building and maintaining meaningful and productive wilderness management partnerships with indigenous people and communities.

Introduction

Terms Defined

Before delving into the particulars of building a fruitful partnership with native people, it is important to define a few integral terms that will be used throughout this paper. Although “Native American” is currently the politically correct terminology for referring to the original people of North America, excluding Alaska and Canada, it is not always the terminology that American Indian people prefer. Most

indigenous people around the world seem to appreciate being referred to by their respective tribal affiliations, and therefore, tribal names will be used throughout this piece whenever possible. General terms such as “indigenous” or “native” people, groups, and communities will also appear throughout this work, but in no way are intended to demean the individuality of any one group, band, nation, or native community.

It must be made clear that the author does not attempt to speak for indigenous people, as these proud Nations, tribes, bands and individuals speak for themselves—as they have always done. The information provided in this paper is, however, a direct result of the author’s experiences in growing up with, living, and participating in all aspects of traditional American Indian cultures for over 47 years. The basis of the information presented in this paper finds its roots in the author’s lifelong experiences with his traditional American Indian families, as well as over 6 years experience with various African tribal groups. However, the ideology, concepts, and techniques that are presented can most certainly be used as the basis for effectively bridging contemporary natural resource and wilderness management objectives with native cultures around the globe.

Many native people still have the ability to understand and communicate with the natural world. Throughout time, they have painstakingly managed to retain their deep-seeded relationship with the land and all that abounds on what many native groups refer to as “Earth Mother.” Numerous indigenous communities still carry the ancient knowledge of natural life cycles, medicinal plants, and the overall importance of respecting the land. Furthermore, these people have found ways to not only maintain the physical relationships with their environs, but their spiritual connectedness as well, both being central to how they view and engage the natural world around them. Ironically, these are fundamental and quintessential elements of the modern philosophy of “wilderness.” With imperative native issues such as the appropriate management of and access to indigenous religious sites located within public lands, it is long overdue for managers to seek out working relationships that move us closer toward the common goals of protecting and caring for wild places in a manner that benefits all people.

Better Understanding Indigenous Cultures

It is essential to understand how indigenous cultures “traditionally” or “historically” viewed the land; in many cases, native groups still adhere to these time-honored traditions

Gregory F. Hansen is a retired USDA Forest Service National Leave No Trace Coordinator, and Current Wilderness Management, Education, Indigenous Cultures: Outsourced Consultant, Writer, Instructor, Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, Washington, DC, U.S.A.

Watson, Alan; Murrieta-Saldivar, Joaquin; McBride, Brooke, comps. 2011. Science and stewardship to protect and sustain wilderness values: Ninth World Wilderness Congress symposium; November 6-13, 2009; Meridá, Yucatán, Mexico. Proceedings RMRS-P-64. Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. 225 p.

and cultural practices. Traditional or old-style beliefs and natural resource viewpoints may differ significantly from that of contemporary land managing agencies and organizations; such discrepancies must be clearly understood before approaching indigenous groups with the idea of building any type of wilderness management collaboration.

The six principles provided below are commonly recognized as being consistently present among American Indian Tribes, as well as many other native groups. As such, these are extremely helpful to managers in grasping how contemporary wilderness fits into some of the traditional systematic views of indigenous cultures worldwide. Thus, these six keys will serve to establish a basic foundation that managers may draw on when attempting to develop successful partnerships with native communities.

Values

If a manager wants to get to know more about a potential indigenous partner-group they should first make an effort to understand what is important to those people, or, what are their values? For example, many traditional (or old-style thinking) American Indian people—and many other native groups for that matter—have very different materialistic values than those of non-native cultures. To a traditional native person, it seems unimportant to own a big fancy house, an expensive car, or to have a television set and DVD player in every room of one's home, just for the purpose of status. What is important, however, is to have food and clothes for their family, to be free to live in a traditional manner upon the land, and to be allowed to practice their own religion without intrusion or fear of being persecuted for their spiritual beliefs and/or ceremonial practices. Such values can, to a large extent, influence decisions and/or actions pertaining to tribal natural resource management in general, and to tribal-related wilderness management more specifically.

Language

Language is at the center of any culture. The author's extensive experience with his American Indian relatives tells us that language plays an even more integral role with most native groups, as indigenous people seem to rely so heavily on oral traditions to pass cultural information down from generation to generation. For example, creation stories, tribal histories and important events, songs, and religious practices were, and to some extent still are today, passed down through word-of-mouth communication. Regrettably, many American Indian and other indigenous cultures around the world have lost their ancestral native tongues. Yet, a number of native groups have worked diligently to maintain their traditional languages, and some have made concerted efforts to revive them, because everything within the culture is so linguistically driven. It is not realistic for managers to be asked to learn a new language every time they deal with an indigenous group, but taking the time to recognize the basic principles of that language could be instrumental in perceiving how that group might deal with the natural world, or what their root-ideals relating to caring for wildlands might be.

Family

To indigenous people, family is the most important social, economic, and political structure within the tribal organization. In fact, many tribes are made up of groups of relatives, or clans, who traveled and lived together as bands in the past, and who still might live in family clusters of homes on tribal lands today. The significance of kinship in native cultures is essential in comprehending how native people interact with one another, with other outside ethnic groups, and with the natural environment; being a good relative has a strong influence over all aspects of every day tribal life. A prime example of this thinking is how, historically, large indigenous nations did not live all together in one consolidated group. They would be divided up into smaller family bands, or clans, because continually camping together would quickly deplete the very natural resources they depended on for survival. In many situations these same kinds of family influences can be recognized and translated into today's world and, therefore, should be acknowledged when attempting to partner with any native community or group.

Poverty

Please do not misinterpret and think that this text in any way insinuates that all native people are poor; we all know this not to be the case. Nonetheless, the reality is that some of the most impoverished places in the world are located on native lands. The reason this issue is necessary in understanding any culture plagued by poverty is that poverty can force people to do things they would not ordinarily do and, therefore, can change or modify typical cultural morals, beliefs, and or practices. An illustration of this would be a native rural community that is found poaching animals inside an adjacent park or game preserve. The primary rationale for the illegal behavior is simply that their families are hungry and they are doing whatever they must to feed them. Unfortunately, this all-too-often cultural dilemma must be recognized and sensitively adhered too when attempting to build any type of wilderness management relationship with native groups, bands, or tribes.

Humor

The role of humor in native cultures is meaningful when attempting to better understand American Indian people, as well as other native groups. They say "the more one is liked, the more that person gets teased." In other words, native people seem to fully comprehend the fact that life is hard and humor is a means of reducing stress and breaking up the solemn realities of the world around them. For this reason many tribes have individuals whose divine calling is to serve as ceremonial clowns who play instrumental roles in certain ceremonial, and sometimes, social gatherings. Although humor may not have any direct relevance when it comes to the physical management of wilderness, it certainly must be understood when attempting to develop any type of affiliation with either American Indian Tribes or other native groups.

Connection to the Land

Many of the books written about American Indian cultures convey the strong connection that all native people have with their environment. At one time, the people were totally dependent on the land for food, lodging, and clothing. Earth Mother was their church and the birds, the animals, and all things were their relations. Today, for traditional people especially, this same connection is still present. But, it is this very adoration for the land that can also create a difficult balancing act in regards to managing natural resources. An example of this would be when a tribal group is offered money to extract coal or timber from their land; many of the traditionalists are against the proposal, because they feel this would literally be like cutting the arm off their revered Mother. This is one reason why many tribes find managing natural resources like wilderness, in the way that land management agencies are accustomed to, to be very complex and confusing. However, many native groups not only completely comprehend how to manage their biological resources, as the examples below will point out, but also know how to maintain the Spiritual integrity of wild places as well. Thus, understanding the “all-encompassing connection” that native people have with the land is vital when trying to get a sense of how these communities look at the modern concept of wilderness. So, it is the author’s intention that these insights help managers better realize why, in many instances, tribal governments are challenged by not only having to look at the decisions they make from a resource utilization standpoint, but from their age-old Spiritual perspectives also.

The six keys outlined above should begin to help managers gain a better feel for indigenous people and their ways of doing things. Of course, these are just a few of the many exceptional traits that make our native cultures so exquisitely unique, beautiful, and complex. Now that the reader has a clearer understanding of how indigenous cultures still draw upon the ancient traditions and philosophies of their forefathers in relation to managing natural resources, and how these beliefs and practices may or may not influence contemporary wilderness management decisions and practices, let’s take a look at some field-proven strategies and techniques for developing a successful wilderness-related indigenous partnership.

Indigenous Partnership Development Tools

Building Trust and Rapport

Developing quality working relations with indigenous groups will obviously take patience and commitment. It will be crucial for managers to establish a solid trust with the native community they are communicating with before any type of cooperative work can be accomplished. However, “general” partnership goals should be shared right up front when first meeting with the group to make clear the managing agency’s intent for the relationship and to reduce the possibility of any unnecessary misunderstandings later on during the partnership. Meeting with tribal elders or leaders in their own home surroundings is helpful in building a positive rapport with the community as this will help tribal leaders feel more comfortable and open to speak freely. Having someone from the tribal community who knows and

trusts the agency/organization representative introduce the manager to community leaders can greatly assist in opening up communications more quickly. Then, if needed, this community contact can also serve as interpreter if any type of language barrier exists. Starting communications with a local community member will also serve to build that all-important trust factor with community leaders, a key that will be essential to the long-term success of the program.

Avoid “pushing too hard or trying to move ahead too fast” in terms of advancing your partnership and/or management objectives as this will often-times be strongly frowned upon and seen as a typical non-native self-serving tactic. But, do humbly accept invitations to visit the native community you work with, and take every opportunity to attend community activities that are open to the public, such as dances, feeds, and celebrations; this most certainly will help to send a positive message that your agency or organization is sincerely interested in learning more about their culture.

Look at offers from traditional elders and community leaders to share meals or to speak at meetings as a positive sign that the manager is beginning to be accepted by the community, thus helping to construct a positive and trustworthy reputation over time with the people.

Consider Tribal Politics

Take careful note that in some instances the “official governing body” of any one community may not always represent the philosophies, beliefs, or wishes of all community members. An example of this is a community that has a Tribal Council made up of primarily “progressive or contemporary-oriented leaders” as compared to traditional or old-style thinking tribal representatives. Be sure that the faction you are working with has the best interest of all community members in mind, as best can be denoted; undercutting any one tribal group for the benefit of another is a sure way to kill any chance for a lasting working relationship.

Be cognizant that certain community members might open up to the agency representative more quickly than others, and that some may never be completely comfortable with the affiliation. Try not to purposely avoid the people who seem resistant; everyone in the community must be involved at some level in the partnership. Embrace the openness of the leaders who are most receptive, and work closely with the more-approachable leaders. Once again, carefully and sensitively research if those receptive leaders do in fact legally and “traditionally” speak for the entire community, and NEVER get in between community divisions and/or tribal politics.

Program Development and Technological Capabilities

Generally speaking, indigenous groups do not share the same perception of time that other non-native cultures do. Practice patience and sensitivity when trying to communicate with native groups and realize that a manager’s sincerity and motives could be undermined by pushing ideas too quickly, or in an overbearing manner. Indigenous cultures will undoubtedly host a wide spectrum of technological capabilities, ranging from Internet access to nothing more than

word-of-mouth. Take the time to identify the best means of communication that works for both parties and then strive to build on that form of communication as the partnership evolves.

Once a positive rapport has been established and respectful communications are occurring, the manager can begin to share the more in-depth partnership program elements with community leaders. At this point, initial partnership goals and objectives can be developed. Note that “respective traditional values, beliefs, and practices must be carefully integrated into the entire goal-setting and overall planning process” if the partnership can be expected to grow and continue successfully. As stated earlier, it is vital to let the people know what the honest intentions of the partnership are early on in the relationship, and to be consistent with those intentions throughout, as any form of deception, real or perceived, is by far the fastest means of disposing the relationship.

Developing a Partnership Work Plan

Once the goals and objectives of the partnership have been agreed upon, it is possible to move ahead in co-developing a partnership work plan. The work plan should include partnership goals and objectives, individual work action items, timeframes for completing action items, parties who will be responsible for implementing the actual work, and an all-encompassing budget. Most work plans are designed to cover a 1- to 2-year timeframe. After that, the plan is re-visited, updated, and modified as program actions are achieved and/or management issues change. All work plan components will need to meld cohesively with the cultural elements of the group the manager is partnering with, and if this can be accomplished, an effective indigenous wilderness partnership can become a reality.

Indigenous Wilderness Partnership Examples

Salish and Kootenai Tribes / U.S. Forest Service Wilderness Partnership

Wildlands have always been very important to the people of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, located in Western Montana, U.S.A., for the perpetuation of culture and traditional practices. However, after the U.S. Allotment Act, the once natural and primitive lands of the Flathead Reservation became congested by settlement and development. Many sacred, cultural sites were destroyed. The only wild and untamed areas that remained were away from so-called “civilization,” in the mountains where the bridge linking the past to present could still be found. When these mountain lands became threatened by such activities as logging and continued development, plans were made to preserve the remaining untouched areas in their natural state.

In 1979, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Central Montana set a national precedent by being the first American Indian Tribal group in the United States to establish what is recognized today as “designated wilderness” within lands surrendered to them, under governmentally

sanctioned Treaty decisions. The foresight of these tribal leaders to make such a controversial designation, and their abilities to accomplish this in a manner that meshes with their traditional ideology is nothing less than inspiring.

The Confederated Tribes worked closely with U.S. Forest Service wilderness managers to develop the designation language and also to develop a culturally sensitive wilderness management plan for the area. Although this precedent-setting designation of wilderness by the tribes describes their tribal wilderness land and its uses in similar fashion as the U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964, tribal authors looked to traditional leaders within their community for direction and to ensure that tribal beliefs, values, and practices were woven into both the designating language and management plan.

For the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, this wilderness designation provides hunting grounds and fishing waters, a sanctuary for cultural practices, recreation opportunities, scenic amenities, a place for educational and scientific study, and the economic benefits of various natural resources. The primary goals established by tribal wilderness managers were to preserve quiet and untamed areas for cultural and spiritual use; valuable goals for all wilderness managers around the globe to adhere to.

The Salish-Kootenais and U.S. Forest Service continue to communicate on a regular basis concerning their respective and joint wilderness management issues and activities. This is the first and longest running tribal/government agency wilderness partnership in existence, and shows exactly what can be accomplished if managers are open and willing to put in the time to develop a positive working relationship with native communities.

Imbewu Wilderness Education Partnership: South African National Parks Board / Rural Native Communities / Wilderness Leadership School

According to Andrew Muir, Executive Director of the Wilderness Foundation of South Africa, the word Imbewu is interpreted to mean “seed.” This African wilderness education partnership draws on the traditional knowledge of retired South African National Parks Board game guards, coming from various local tribal groups, who take indigenous youth into the wilderness bush to teach them both traditional and contemporary wilderness skills. Managed as a joint alliance between the Parks Board, the South African Wilderness Leadership School, and native rural communities, local tribal youth from underprivileged areas are encouraged to reclaim their birthright to a quality wilderness experience in their own world-renowned game reserves (Muir 1999).

Although many of the game guards cannot read or write, they teach the youth about the importance of the land and all that lives on it, using their native languages and traditional African-style storytelling. The key elements of cultural pride and preservation and the reasoning for wilderness being established for all Africans is conveyed. Muir goes on to point out “traditional knowledge links our wild lands, trees, animals, and birds to the hearts of our people. The insights of these black conservationists, born to South Africa, have for too long remained unshared.”

This is yet one more example of the positive consequence that native people can offer to wilderness managers and the general public: care for the land and eloquently and respectfully pass the values and ideals of wilderness on to the next generations.

Taos Pueblo / U.S. Forest Service Wilderness Partnership

In the United States, Federal re-classification and return of designated wilderness to tribal groups is rare, but has occurred. One example is the return of Blue Lake and the surrounding area to the Taos Pueblo, which was legislated through Bill - P.L. 91-550 on Dec. 15, 1970. The area, approximately 48,000 acres of U.S. Forest Service land located within the Wheeler Peak Wilderness, was returned to the Pueblo because it was one of their most important religious sites. However, legislation required the Pueblo to continue to manage the land as wilderness. The following excerpts from that legislation explain this unique wilderness management situation:

The lands held in trust pursuant to this section shall be a part of the Pueblo de Taos Reservation, and shall be administered under the laws and regulations applicable to other trust Indian lands, provided that the Pueblo de Taos Indians shall use the lands for traditional purposes only, such as religious ceremonials, hunting and fishing, a source of water, forage for their domestic livestock, and wood, timber, and other natural resources for their personal use, all subject to such regulations for conservation purposes as the Secretary of the Interior may prescribe.

Except for such uses, the lands shall remain forever wild and shall be maintained as a wilderness as defined in section 2 (c) of the Act of September 3, 1964 (78 Stat. 890). With the consent of the tribe, but not otherwise, non-members of the tribe may be permitted to enter the lands for purposes compatible with its preservation as a wilderness. The Secretary of the Interior shall be responsible for the establishment and maintenance of conservation measures for these lands, including, without limitation, protection of forests from fire, disease, insects or trespass; prevention or elimination of erosion, damaging land use, or stream pollution; and maintenance of streamflow and sanitary conditions; and the Secretary is authorized to contract with the Secretary of Agriculture for any services or materials deemed necessary to institute or carry out any of such measures. (Public Law 91-550, Section 4(b))

Note in the latter section of the legislation excerpt shown above, references to the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture's Offices, with respect to conservation management of the area. Even though the government has ceded this area back to the Pueblo, both the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture remain involved in the overall management and administration of the Blue Lake Area.

This wilderness-based indigenous partnership is an extremely unique example of how a native community and a Federal land managing agency have melded together traditional and contemporary land management objectives into a realistic programmatic scenario that works for all parties. By simply sitting down and discussing, agreeing upon, and implementing a coordinated work plan, it is possible for these types of partnerships to flourish, thus producing a lasting

value of the land and a myriad of benefits for the people who need, love, and enjoy this special wilderness.

Conclusions

Executive Director of the Northern Arapahoe/Shoshone Wind River Indian Reservation's Environmental Quality Commission, Don Aragon (2007), says "The World Wilderness Congress has always operated on the principle that indigenous knowledge and perspectives must be included in any wilderness discussion to ensure a full understanding of the wilderness concept." The Wilderness Congress has therefore formally recognized that indigenous people instinctively know and understand our natural world and must be included in the overall stewardship of wilderness. As wilderness managers, we must begin to look for ways to combine our passion for the land and our modern knowledge of managing wild places with traditional people's devotion to and knowledge of Earth Mother.

By bringing the best of both worlds together through indigenous wilderness partnerships, it is possible to mend the Sacred Hoop of Life that for generations has been broken by deceit, prejudice, and unmitigated resource manipulation. This can indeed be achieved by

- Making a sincere effort to better understand native groups and their respective natural resource issues;
- Working toward building a trusting rapport with native groups or communities;
- Using the partnership building tools outlined above to develop, implement and evaluate constructive/lasting indigenous-group wilderness partnerships;
- Being aware of and avoiding tribal politics whenever possible;
- Being patient and never moving too fast or pushing too hard when communicating with tribal groups; and
- Being up front about partnership objectives, and when the relationship has been effectively established, co-developing a comprehensive partnership work plan that includes traditional tribal beliefs, values and practices.

Tribal elders from all walks of life are telling us that by restoring the symbolic Circle of Life the seven generations and beyond will be free to live in a world where people can accept and care for one another, and where all people can once again, live in harmony with their natural surroundings. The time is NOW to heed such powerful guidance—by reaching out to our native communities in a sincere and sacred manner—that will result in a resolved life balance that all of mankind can accept, understand, and value, to the end of time. Weebtheha!!

References

- Aragon, D. 2007. The Wind River Indian Tribes. *International Journal of Wilderness*. 13 (2): 14-17.
- Muir, A. 1999. The Wilderness Leadership School of South Africa's Imbewu and Opinion Leader programmes. *International Journal of Wilderness*. 5(2): 41-43.

The content of this paper reflects the views of the authors, who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the information presented herein.
