

LISTENING TO NATURE

The Hollywood image of Native Americans – warlike people who lived in tepees and hunted bison on the American Plains – could only ever describe a small proportion of North America’s indigenous peoples. Native Americans were, and still are, an enormously diverse group with a wide variety of lifestyles, reflecting the different ecosystems in which they live and their understanding of how to live in harmony with them. Groups from the wooded northeast have adapted to their circumstances in different ways from their Great Plains counterparts; likewise, groups from the harsh southwestern deserts have lifestyles that are quite separate from the forest-dwelling fishers along the Pacific northwest.

Realizing that they are dependent on nature for their very survival, most Native Americans consider themselves part of the earth itself. Many consider the loss of tribal lands as a loss of indigenous identity as well, since historically their cultures, values and beliefs have centred on the environment around them.

For example, the Knife River group of North Dakota, consisting of the Hidatsas, Mandans and Arikaras, developed cultures that co-existed perfectly with their natural surroundings. When raising their four main crops of corn, beans, sunflowers and squash, they used

practices that worked together, such as growing beans up the taller corn stalks for support and protection from the elements. They also developed corn varieties that were specially adapted to the short growing season and low rainfall of the Northern Plains.

During the hunting season, the whole community played a part in preparing the catch for various practical uses. Almost every part of the dead animal was earmarked for some purpose as wasting any part of it would violate their basic spiritual values (see box).

Preparations for the long winter were extensive, and aimed towards preserving the welfare of the entire group, rather than focusing on individual families. Vegetables and

seeds were poured into pits dug in the ground (which were designed to keep out moisture), and meat was cut into strips and dried over a fire or in the sun. They learned how much to farm

Using Every Part of the Animal

- > **Meat** – eaten and preserved
- > **Bones** – awls/hoop punches, beads, dice for games
- > **Fat** – soap, dyes, conditioner for hides
- > **Heart lining and large intestine** – storage devices for liquids like fat and oil
- > **Skin/hides** – dwelling covers, boat hulls, later reused as moccasins
- > **Ribs** – sledge runners
- > **Hide scrapings/horns/hooves** – boiled to make glue
- > **Porous bones** – paintbrushes
- > **Sinew fibres (running down spine and legs)** – extremely strong thread
- > **Bladder** – buckets
- > **Leftover hide and hair** – dolls, balls for sports
- > **Teeth** – beads/decorations on dresses and robes
- > **Vertebrae** – playing pieces in games

THE ANASAZI

The Anasazi lived on the high plateau of the Four Corners region of the United States, which consists of rocky desert and mountain covered in scrub and small brush. Resources were scarce, and the Anasazi created their shelters from the natural protection of the area’s high cliffs, building cliff dwellings directly out of the stone walls. Their design shows how the people who built them were not imposing their own order on nature, but were listening to the natural order to find out how to construct their buildings.



Anasazi ‘cliff dwelling’ at Canyon de Chelly in New Mexico

photo: UNEP/Topham

KNIFE RIVER GROUP



map: www.motherplanet.com, modified by Deia Schlosberg



Hidatsa village earth-covered lodges on the Knife River, by George Catlin
 photo: Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of Mrs Joseph Harrison, Jr.

and hunt so that everyone would have enough to eat throughout the year, without the wasteful practices of many current methods of farming and food distribution.

Although considered Plains Indians, the Knife River peoples only used tipis for temporary shelter when on hunting trips. For the majority of the year, they lived in earthlodges, which were houses constructed on terraces above the river, and set into the ground to provide shelter from extreme conditions. These earthen dwellings were designed to insulate the people from cold in the winter and heat in the summer. To cope with very cold winter temperatures, groups would move into more sheltered forested areas and to smaller lodges, which retained heat more effectively, until the coldest months had passed.

THE PEQUOTS

The Pequot people lived in what is now eastern Connecticut, and their lifestyle was similar to other woodland groups. They lived in wigwams – small, oval homes made from bent saplings, covered with bark. They were skilled at fishing in both the rivers and the ocean, and hunted woodland animals like deer, elk and bear. They developed effective agricultural techniques for raising maize and beans. At their peak, there were nearly 8,000 Pequots, inhabiting 650 square kilometres.



photo: LCPS Photo Gallery



photo: Christian/UNEP/Topham

Living wealth

Forests are the living wealth of the world – the foundations for development, giving us the air we breathe, the food we eat, the materials we need... and our medicines.

Costa Rica's many species of trees prevent soil erosion by anchoring the soil with their roots, while the photosynthesis taking place in their leaves provides the oxygen that we breathe. The forest canopy is home to many bird species, while foxes, rabbits, mice and other animals burrow in the roots.

Each tree is a living community. Tropical rainforests, covering only 8 per cent of the land surface of the planet, harbour 50 per cent of the world's species. For 3,000 years, the indigenous peoples of Costa Rica have followed a lifestyle that enables them to live in harmony with this environment. They take what they need from the forest and want for nothing, finding the food and shelter they need to stay healthy.

But what about the rest of us? Ever since the Industrial Revolution, we have taken more than we really need, using up the forests' resources with barely a thought for future generations. Deforestation has largely denuded our planet and seriously endangered thousands of species. We must heighten awareness of these important issues, and must involve indigenous peoples, who have a deep respect for all living things, in the process. Conservation means caring for, understanding and using our natural resources sustainably.

Only a few countries in the world still have tropical forests. The production systems that we rely on are endangering life on earth. Indiscriminate exploitation has destroyed more of the planet in the last 100 years than in the whole of humankind's previous history.

It is everyone's responsibility to save our forests, for our survival on earth depends on them.

Paola Parra Cordero, 18, Costa Rica

Paola Parra Cordero's family has lived sustainably in Costa Rica's forests for generations, supporting themselves through farming and, more recently, leading expeditions of ecotourists.