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The Way of the Earth: Native America and the Environment. By John Bierhorst.

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already outdated. For example, the discussion of textiles on pages 175 and 176 contains no references to the recent work of Penelope Drooker (for example, *Mississippian Village Textiles at Wickliffe*, University of Alabama Press, 1992)—a significant oversight, since both her knowledge of weaving and her work on Mississippian textiles themselves have fundamentally transformed our understanding of the manufacture and social contexts of these items. Similarly, the discussion of what has been interpreted as an earth lodge at the site contains no mention of Lewis Larson's recent critique ("The Case for Earth Lodges in the Southeast," in *Ocmulgee Archaeology*, ed. D. Hally, University of Georgia Press, 1994) of the idea that earth lodges existed in the Southeast at all. This is a particularly unfortunate oversight, since the Town Creek earth lodge was not included in Larson's analyses and may provide an example to counter Larson's argument.

The question of earth lodges in the prehistoric Southeast is just one of many questions that could be informed by data from the Town Creek site. Unfortunately, because this is not a scholarly report, few data are presented. Indeed, many of the findings in *Town Creek Indian Mound* are presented with too little supporting evidence even to evaluate them adequately. In the case of the earth lodge, for example, photos and sections of the earth lodge remains are presented, but no details are given of differential artifact content, of soil types and changes, or of any other information that would allow the critical reader to assess the likelihood that a pre-mound earth lodge in fact existed. One hopes those of us interested in answering questions like this do not have to wait another fifty years for the comprehensive scholarly publication on Town Creek to be produced.

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**The Way of the Earth: Native America and the Environment.** By John Bierhorst. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994. 329 pages. \$15.00 cloth; \$14.00 paper.

This is one of those books that can be classified as necessary reading for all who wish to study Native Americans. Comprehension of how traditional native people related to their environment is essential in understanding what is termed Indian thought. The

author provides not only a picture of the relationship between the people and their environment but, by necessity, includes a great deal of philosophy, social relationships, and spiritual beliefs. That overflow into other realms of traditional native cultures is unavoidable, because our world was one in which every aspect of life was interwoven into a holistic mosaic. Thus, this book could also be classified as one on ecology, ethics, morality, or native spiritualism.

In his preface, the author promotes a closer examination of the themes and practices of native people, because the protection or destruction of our environment may depend more on how we perceive the relationship between humans and the natural world than on the techniques we use to mend it. In the introduction, which is somewhat extended, the author correctly declares that the information presented is only "one branch of Indian knowledge" (p. 4) but one of worldwide importance. For centuries Indian knowledge has been either misinterpreted by non-Indians or dismissed as myths, legends, and quaint folklore. This can be verified by looking in most libraries, where books containing Indian knowledge are usually classified under "myths."

It is particularly difficult, at the end of the twentieth century, to convince people to consider accepting Indian knowledge, because most of us reside in urban areas where we believe ourselves to be insulated from the natural world. David W. Orr, in his book *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect*, calls this "Biophobia" (Island Press, 1994). That false sense of protection is complemented by our reliance on science to explain every minute detail of nature and on technology to repair the damage that we have done. To counter those concepts, Bierhorst stresses the importance of our changing our view of the natural world from merely a "reservoir of energy and resources" (p. 6) to a balance sheet where there are payments and withdrawals, or debits and credits (p. 211).

This book exposes native concepts that correspond to evolution, environmental science, biology, Christianity, natural science, and demography. The idea of humans and animals having, at some time in the distant past, been the same (pp. 38–40) is advanced in evolutionary theory and taught in schools. All life developed from microbes in the seas, and humans emerged in the evolutionary process through apes to the human form; thus humans and apes have common distant ancestors. A theme that is basic to environmental science is that plants directly and

indirectly provide food for humans, who are on the upper end of the food chain; and biology tells us that nutrients from plants become part of human beings, though changed in form (pp. 58–59). For most people the confusing factor in native thought is the reversal of this view, wherein human beings are used to produce crops (pp. 56–58).

Themes of Christian dogma also occur, particularly the concept of death and resurrection, though presented from a different viewpoint. This is insinuated in the human and plant transformations in the chapter “The Organic Alternative” (pp. 54–68) and in the section “Paying the Earth,” where a person is buried and plants emerge from the location (pp. 220–23). The idea of the earth as a planet possessing life is substantiated by natural sciences. Lakes and oceans are “alive” or “dead,” trees and plants breathe, and even coral reproduces and grows. The extension of the belief by native people that rocks also possess life is in contest (pp. 94–98). Earth as mother thrives in contemporary, colloquial thought as “Mother Earth”; thus the feminine mystique of earth.

Ideas and themes of demographic studies, including the conscious control of populations through restraint, birth control, and infanticide, are found in the chapter “Control over Life” (pp. 156–72). This is one of the few weak sections of the book, but the author explains that such steps emerged from a group knowledge of limited resources, and perhaps from the guilt of human exploitation of the earth (pp. 56–57).

The arrangement of material sometimes is repetitive and somewhat disjointed, but that is understandable since, in the Indian world, things move in circles, not along a convenient line of progression. The author did succeed in collecting information, analyzing the concepts and ideas, and explaining their significance. The most important error in organization was relegating the section “World Essence” to pages 113–19. This concept, often called the “Great Mystery” or “Great Spirit” by native people, should have been placed toward the front of the book. That arrangement would have served to explain the chapters “Inner Forms” and “Former Lives” (pp. 21–37, pp. 38–53), as well as serving as the central theme in part II, “Kinship” (pp. 71–88).

Regardless of the weakness of structure, the reader can comprehend the overriding theme—that human beings are part of the natural world, not somehow detached and immune to it. Besides this major theme, two significant ethical considerations are connected with the relationship between human beings and the

universe: restraint and responsibility. These are essential ingredients in interactions. Restraint results from kinship with all of nature and from the associated guilt, while responsibility emanates from guilt and fear of retribution by the "Animal Master" and/or "Mother Earth" (part II "Kinship," pp. 71–88, 223–27; chapter "The Angry Earth," pp. 231–46).

There are three major themes that are instrumental in understanding Indian knowledge but that the author does not effectively explain. The first is the belief that physical life is merely form, while spiritual life is reality (pp. 21–26). This is the basis for understanding the concept of the transformation of humans as separate from animals (pp. 38–53) and for the idea of shape-shifting, which Bierhorst does not cover. The second theme is the idea of time. Most native people believed that time moved in a circular, not a linear, fashion; there is no past, present, or future, but only one time—now. "Now" is composed of all time, because what happened in the past is part of now and what is done now will affect the future. For example, for native people, instead of the act of creation having been performed at a specified time in the distant past, it is a continuing process. Perhaps this concept, which contradicts the Judeo-Christian Bible, and the concept of restraint, which conflicts with the ideals of a capitalistic economy, create the largest chasm between Western and Indian thought. The third theme is "balance"—the basis for numerous native concepts including the idea of give-and-take. Although the author alludes to balance a number of times, he does not explain its importance.

There are few books in print that could be compared with *The Way of the Earth*. One book, *Sacred Earth: The Spiritual Landscape of Native America*, by Arthur Versluis (Inner Traditions International, 1992), is actually supplementary. Although Bierhorst addresses the subject topically using parables and proverbs, Versluis approaches the same subject from a metaphysical, symbolic, and spiritual perspective. I designed a course called "Native Americans and Their Environment" for presentation here at Fort Peck Community College, and the above two books are the only texts used.

Few quality books address the same subjects, but there are those more specifically focused on historical ecology. A recent one is *Ecocide of Native America: Environmental Destruction of Indian Lands and People*, by Donald A. Grinde and Bruce E. Johansen (Clear Light Publishers, 1995). In their first chapter

"Native Americans: America's First Ecologists?" Grinde and Johansen utilize encapsulated versions of many of the concepts used by Bierhorst. The rest of the book is primarily concerned with the historical and contemporary destruction of the environments on Indian reservations.

When readers finish the last page of *The Way of the Earth*, they should possess a clearer comprehension of the necessity for human beings to look at the natural world from the inside rather than as spectators and to change their reference point from "the" environment to "our" environment. In addition, they may understand the complexity of the relationship between Native Americans and their environment.

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