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## COMMENTARY

### Returning to Fields

KEVIN LEE LÓPEZ

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In the field of conservation, discussion has increased about the need to restore environmentally safe lifestyles that not long ago described indigenous cultural livelihood and values. A consumptive economy, along with extracting land and water policies and the depletion of nonrenewable resources caused by industrialization, have motivated environmentalists, politicians, and other officials to advocate for a more conserving approach to human subsistence.

Whatever the origins of the "new" environmental movement, its advocates advise individuals and organizations that want to protect the environment to examine the ecological example of indigenous people. In an article entitled "The Ecologically Noble Savage," author Kent H. Redford utilizes modern European concepts and ideas about conservation to evaluate indigenous groups as ecological people.<sup>1</sup> He then unravels these ideas of ecology and separates the ecological idea from the indigenous character to reveal the danger and illusion of the "ecologically noble savage."

Redford prefaces his article with strong supportive statements about the need to study and preserve native cultures, but he is indignant that policymakers implement development plans in

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accordance with cultural sensitivities. According to Redford, there is no need to consider cultural values in anyone's plans for economic development, because the values that enshroud culture (as they are relevant to indigenous people) are only values that originate from Europe. He claims that the whole idea that Indian people are ecological is a "European ideal"; in this way, he attacks what some people regard as the "inherent superiority" of the indigenous way of life.<sup>2</sup> He overlooks some of the best examples that would support his argument, such as the clear-cutting of Chaco Canyon by the ancient Anasazi Indians, which is the typical case scenario set forth by other denouncers of Indian myth; instead, he attacks the ideological truisms that he says misguide the best intentions of today's development programmers.

While it is true that people immersed in truisms can scarcely pursue meaningful insights to culture, what Redford is positing is that indigenous cultures are merely truistic. For Redford, because the perceptions of European observers of yesterday and today are limited, the entire concept of Indian culture must, in the same sense, be limited. This is an erroneous and dangerous approach that I see plaguing other writers about indigenous culture and conservation. It disallows Indian nations as sovereign and independent entities confronted with the political, social, and ecological dilemmas of their own undertaking.

Redford attempts to refute the cultural and political sovereignty of indigenous people because he thinks that the substantiation of ecological Indians is derived from the idealized observations of such romantic chroniclers as Jean Jacques Rousseau and Thomas More.<sup>3</sup> As his major point, he says outright that, since an Indian can be forced or seduced into a Western livelihood, Indians are not inherently ecological. He then cites a few examples to prove that Indians are actually just as inclined to ecotage as the Europeans. He concludes that indigenous cultures remain important to the extent that they can offer practical techniques to the European world-at-large, as if Indians are "good" only when put into a separate European context, the way the superior genetic and cultural material of Indian blue corn is extracted by scientists to produce European hybrid corn commercially.

There are several important points that Redford neglects. His argument is rhetorical, not journalistic, in the sense that it does not directly draw on others' field experience (or his own). He does not interview any indigenous people to learn more about their viewpoint or to adjust the context of his own cultural assumptions. He

does cite from Indian spokespersons at the United Nations in 1981, who, he says, only view the world in two systems: the Indian world (collective, communal, natural) and the Western world (greedy, individualistic, materialistic). He states, however, that such a view by the spokespersons is merely the outcome of the chronicles of early Europeans.<sup>4</sup>

What Redford does not comprehend is that the words of Indian spokespersons at the United Nations are words that come down the continuum of five hundred years of resistance to the political, social, and ecological encroachment of Europeans. These words are designed to polarize the issues emphatically, because, on one hand, we have the European bent on political dominance of indigenous people's land and values, and, on the other, we have the stubborn gadfly who calls Indian people to their own sovereignty (self-government) and demands Indian management of their own resources and education. This latter positive alternative to European control is what Indian spokespersons at the United Nations are so adamant about, and they use juxtapositions to clarify their stance.

Redford ignores the concept of indigenous resistance to the European invasion. Other concepts he ignores include cottage industry, sustainable agriculture, spirituality, grass roots development of economic subsistence, cultural diversity, and common sense based on cultural standards or ways of being.

What Redford infers instead is that any program or policy that grants Indian people the funds with which to administer cultural holdings (e.g., museums, wildlife preserves, resource management, folk medicine) is running the risk of losing this culture if ever the money is lost or misspent. Of course, he imposes his own society's standards in evaluating how money is handled and who should handle it. Redford's thesis, in short, is that the ideal of the "noble savage" works to place "dollar values on indigenous knowledge," which endangers that knowledge.<sup>5</sup> But this does not provide insight to the larger questions about the relationship between economic and cultural values.

Indeed, the threat to indigenous knowledge is the pervading acculturation of multinational lumber, mineral, and agribusiness corporations. But this is the threat that indigenous people have resisted since the Europeans appeared in 1492 with their colonization and mercantilism.

Economic value is important, in terms of fair play and compensation, in creating a marketplace that can offer a diverse range of

indigenous products and ideas. This is an approach that extracts economic value as an expression of particular communities and cultures. If the communities are encouraged and allowed to contribute to the marketplace in a fashion that does not undermine their own cultural sovereignty, the potential for their true prosperity is increased. Redford misinterprets this and says that such an opportunity for indigenous marketing is already lost, that such an approach depends on "culturally encoded mores" that are now nonexistent or can thrive only under "conditions of low population diversity, abundant land and limited involvement with a market economy."<sup>6</sup> What he denies is the possibility that indigenous cultures can approach the marketplace in a straightforward way and still remain indigenous. It is a mistake, however, to purport that indigenous communities must respond to and rely solely on the cash economy, discounting their own historic struggle to reestablish intact the much-needed innovative, cultural values of a respectful economic relationship to Mother Earth.

That Europeans have overglorified the open spaces of indigenous life does not mean that indigenous people have regarded themselves this way. The underlying recognition of biological diversity and of the symbiotic relationships among animals, humans, and plants in place was an unquestioned, living reality of indigenous subsistence, and it gave spiritual assurance to Indian people. Pre-Columbian humans regarded themselves as dependent on and part of nature (*Maka*) and did not artificially alter the character of their dependency. Mistakes were made at various sites of development, but these mistakes did not sprawl over the face of the continent. Witness the scope of extant unpolluted waters and clean air, the broad access to plants and animals, the self-reliance and cooperation among tribes before the Europeans arrived. After the European conquest, witness the loss of 50 percent of crop varieties, the ravishing of the four-footed nation, the loss of 70 percent of the trees in the United States, the loss of 90 percent of human communities rooted in place, the noise of urban technology, the pollution of water, air, and earth. Scholars now believe that only 1 to 10 percent of Native Americans survived between 1492 and 1592.<sup>7</sup>

Lakota people refer to a white person as *wasichu* (one who takes the fat, the best). This term is an ecological accusation—that Europeans were so greedy or ignorant that they took and devoured the best of the animal and plant species they could find. Taking away the best of a species robs the reproductive quality of

that species. Indigenous people had learned this and had installed traditions to preserve the best, because it was the best surviving species that assured subsistence for future generations. This saving the best of a species is an ecological concept that Europeans have not exercised as a people, although I am sure some, especially livestock breeders, can understand its importance.

Europeans have failed to comprehend their own history—largely having destroyed their own indigenous cultures by proselytizing, by force, and by imposing the abstraction of Christian dualisms and patriarchal nobility. Actually, the term *noble savage* is more aptly applied to the aristocracy and clergy of European history than it is to indigenous people. The exploitation of land by Europeans can be traced historically and philosophically to the doctrines of John Locke, that land is not valuable until it is used, and to the utilitarian tenets of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. In his article, Redford wrongly attributes the beginnings of land exploitation to Thomas More and Jean Jacques Rousseau, but Redford is abusing his own history on this subject. After all, John Locke introduced the concept that a human being at birth is a *tabula rasa*, an open tablet, and can be completely altered in personality by his/her own environment. This belief had its consequences; it laid the groundwork for the educational, psychological, and communications systems that developed later. Because the environment of the western hemisphere prior to European contact was fertile and diverse (regardless of the few examples of abuse), when Rousseau applied Locke's theory, he concluded that indigenous people were as close to being open tablets as a people should be. This was not an illusion of a Garden of Eden. Direct observation of the environment revealed, clearly, that this continent resembled a garden more than did the European continent.

One example that Redford cites of "ecological abuse" is the intentional burning of land in Amazonia by pre-Columbian Indians. He accounts for this by claiming that all people put their own subsistence needs first, regardless of the consequences to the environment. I am not an anthropologist, but I know that some wildlife park officials, anthropologists, and other authorities believe burning can be a healthy occurrence for overgrown forest floors. This method of cleaning the forest floors was used all across the North and South American continents for centuries to provide room for plants to grow. Redford does not discuss this.

The Amazon is one of the more plush and species-rich areas in

the world. Famous naturalist and author Gary Nabhan states, "Field studies in the Amazon suggest that the entire basin can be likened to a garden subtly tended, transplanted and periodically burned to favor the growth of hundreds of useful species. Rather than clearing the natural cover and converting land to exotic species, indigenous cultivators carefully shifted the floral composition over many years so that it prospered with their sustainable harvests."<sup>8</sup> This kind of folk knowledge has been acquired over centuries and remains the possession of scores of forest peoples.

Did the indigenous people destroy the entirety of their own subsistence? No. This kind of total destruction comes with the Europeans. In establishing protection of these regions, we need to examine whether burning is a useful agricultural method for influencing seed production. An ecological approach is the recovery, preservation, and analysis of this biological data, which is also known to be folk science.<sup>9</sup> In an article entitled "Language, Culture and Genetic Diversity," Bernard Dixon refers to this folk knowledge: "Increasingly, native peoples, especially in Latin America, are aware that this oral knowledge may be their main, if not their only, saleable national resource. And they are becoming very hostile to entrepreneurial ethnobiologists who fly into the jungle to 'discover' what the native peoples see as their cultural property, and who then fly out North to feed this knowledge into highly profitable biotechnological enterprises."<sup>10</sup>

It is not the indigenous people who jet back and forth "discovering" folk knowledge; rather the exploiters (largely of European descent) are unrestrained in their corporate connections and do not offer compensation for the cultural property they have pirated. The pleas should be for international restraints on these jet-set entrepreneurs rather than on the indigenous people. Scholars need to seek the root and explore the import of their arguments, their history, and their words before they wield them to prove anthropological points.

One of Redford's claims is that "there is no cultural barrier to the Indians' adoptions of means to 'improve' their lives (i.e., make them more like Western lives)."<sup>11</sup> He then points at indigenous officials who have sold their timber and mining rights, as if these officials represent the concerns of indigenous people. I know that I am one of the cultural barriers to becoming Western. As an indigenous person, I look at my people's resistance to the Western detriments (alcohol, drugs, urbanization, hopelessness, violence), and I listen to the words of my elders and medicine people. They

tell me not to be materialistic, to respect Mother Earth, to work for the improved lives of future generations, to respect women, to pray, to restore indigenous traditions and values. Of course, some Indian officials “sell out,” but that is because these officials are subject to the laws and policies of the conquerors—bureaucrats who recognize only the system they themselves have imposed. The corruption of tribal officials comes about because these officials do not respect the traditional systems of the elders, of their own people. As an indigenous person, I *rely* on the cultural barriers my ancestors established and died for, to give me self-determination and cultural pride.

Scholars and others should learn that the views held by indigenous people are complex and do not exclude Europeans on the basis of their skin color. I do not assert that Indians are “ecologically noble stewards” (a ridiculous and simplistic assertion), but I do assert that Redford and others are not the ones who should set the international standards of land and resource management. It is not up to them to tell us if we are ecologically noble or not, as if this is the critical point. Indian people should have their own sovereignty and should not come under the scrutiny of European apologists and policymakers, who certainly have not proven themselves to be wise caretakers but have been exploiters of both the land and the indigenous people on the land, ever since they invaded. The fact that some indigenous people also exploit land resources does not discount the traditions and principles of Earth relationship bound up in the indigenous culture.

As a simple, contrasting approach, I propose that the land management programs that indigenous people use now be measured by their consequences to the land, the resources, and the culture. When Indian spokespersons support the adoption of “Indian ways” to improve “the ignorant ways of the non-Indians,”<sup>12</sup> what they mean is that the idea of Earth stewardship as a living relationship has to be reintroduced into the inner structures of indigenous societies. The European way does not value elders, women, indigenous cultures, or future generations. Indigenous societies should not have to rely on cash in order to prosper. Instead, Earth people of all colors and persuasions (even if they are European or Euro-American) collectively must insist on the virtues of the past and not give them up to convenience or greed. An example can be taken from the White Mountain Apache of the American Southwest, who are now contained on their reservation but who continue to explore traditional agriculture as a way of



maintaining a relationship to the land they now have. As nomadic people in the past, they used to establish gardens wherever they camped, and, when they left a campsite, they would leave elders and sick people behind to tend these gardens for themselves.<sup>13</sup> Now that the Apaches are forcibly sedentary, they are seeking out this tradition of gardening and applying it not just to the elders and the sick but to the whole tribe.

Another example are the Pima Indians, who have the highest rate of diabetes in the world—a direct result of changes in their diet that include Western fast foods containing high levels of fat and sugar. Their solution to this serious health problem is to return to their traditional foods.<sup>14</sup>

Other tribes are recovering also, seeking a return to the traditional subsistence and values from which Westerners have displaced them. Does this mean they want to become “ecologically noble savages?” No. They simply realize the depth of their traditional lifestyles and values developed over millennia, and they realize that their survival as people depends on their resolve not to succumb to the dictates of the monoculture. When Redford states that indigenous people have been “tempted, seduced and forced” into becoming Westernized, he is correct.<sup>15</sup> Indigenous people were “tempted” by the necessity of Western style health care and food commodities after their exposure to whites’ small-pox blankets and after losing access to the natural plants and wildlife that had sustained them over millennia before the Europeans came and destroyed the land. Indigenous people were “seduced” by treaties, not realizing that these promises would be broken because of the insidious attraction that gold, oil, and other resources held for the European systemizers. And indigenous people were “forced” into abject starvation, hopelessness, and death unless they assimilated. Many Indian hands were cut off for not accepting European religion. In the United States and other places, the degree of European manipulation has badly hurt indigenous people; we must stop it from happening again to Indians in South America’s Neotropics.

Redford agrees that some of the subsistence methods used by indigenous people are “to be sure . . . definitely superior” to those of non-Indians and that “occasionally, only occasionally . . . [indigenous societies offer] methods that, when modified, can be of use to inhabitants, native and non-native, in the modern Neotropics.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, only occasionally are indigenous people of use to themselves. This is an ignorant and patronizing

statement, perhaps racist (some would say definitely racist), yet these words are printed in *Orion Nature Quarterly* and reprinted in *Cultural Survival Quarterly*. Subscription solicitation letters now circulate exclaiming that *Orion's* editors have challenged truisms about the "ecologically noble savage" because they have published Redford's article.

Redford concludes that "when we dream of the ecologically noble Indian whose knowledge will save us from the consequences of modern development, we dream an old dream, whose roots stretch back to the Garden of Eden, and beyond."<sup>17</sup> I do not dream of this Garden of Eden. Nor do other indigenous people. But today we can look at existing native seeds, trace them back to ancient gardens, and identify social patterns and techniques that are still extant, albeit threatened by modern development. Our gardens are not a mythical subject. They are our heritage, our culture, our mothers and fathers, and our hope. They are at hand. Nothing is inherent or truistic about the indigenous character, or, for that matter, about anyone else's character. It is an openness to what the land, the animals, and the Creator impart that allows indigenous people—and all people, if they so choose—to remain ecologically harmonious. This might be called noble, but it also can be called survival.

## NOTES

1. Kent H. Redford, "The Ecologically Noble Savage," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 15:1, 46–48. See also *Orion Nature Quarterly* (Spring 1990).
2. Redford, "Ecologically Noble Savage, 46–47.
3. *Ibid.*, 46.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 47.
7. Personal correspondence with Gary Paul Nabhan, 7 September 1991. Nabhan is author of *Gathering the Desert* (University of Arizona Press, 1990) and *Enduring Seeds: Native American Agriculture and Wild Plant Conservation* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989). He is also president and cofounder of Native Seeds/SEARCH, a nonprofit agricultural-conservation organization that maintains seed banks of indigenous Southwestern plants.
8. Personal correspondence with Gary Paul Nabhan, 7 September 1991.
9. Max Schmidt, "Comments on Cultivated Plants and Agricultural Methods of South American Indians," and Robert L. Carneiro, "Slash-and-Burn Cultivation among the Kuikuru and Its Implications for Cultural Development in the Amazon Basin," in *Native South Americans: Ethnology of the Least Known*

*Continent*, ed. Patricia J. Lyon (Berkeley: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 64, 73–92.

10. Bernard Dixon, "Language, Culture, and Genetic Diversity," *Bio/Technology* 9 (August 1991): 683.

11. Redford, "Ecologically Noble Savage," 46.

12. *Ibid.*, 47.

13. Winifred Buskirk, "Western Apache Subsistence Economy" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 1949).

14. Michael Higgins, "Native Peoples Take on Diabetes," and Gary Paul Nabhan, "The Return of Native Crops," *East West* 21:5 (April 1991): 94–99.

15. Redford, "Ecologically Noble Savage," 46.

16. *Ibid.*, 48.

17. *Ibid.*