From Story to Stewardship: Indigenous Perspectives on Conservation

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December 11, 2024

"When the world was first created, Patsallht, First Born, thought he was the only one on Earth. He was given a medicine box. In the medicine box, there was a "mukw" (sacred medicine)....He traveled on foot to the head of South Bentinck, Ats'aax. Along the way, First Born met a beautiful woman wearing a red blanket. He fell in love with her. She proposed to him, asking him to get married. He agreed. She told him, 'close your eyes,' and she built him a beautiful home out of hemlock. He opened his eyes and was amazed at how quickly she was able to complete their home. First Born and his wife, the grizzly bear woman, raised a puppy as if it were a child. This puppy was very unique for his paws and his feet were like those of a human being. Sometimes, his wife would leave for three or four days and not tell First Born where she had gone. During those times, she reverted back to being a grizzly bear. When First Born found out that the woman that he married was really a grizzly bear, he left her for good. She became a grizzly bear and never returned to being the woman that First Born had married..." —*The Story of ISTA* [1]

This story is one part of The Story of ISTA, which has been passed down for generations of Nuxalk people along the Central Coast of British Columbia. The Nuxalk, also known as the Bella Coola, is an Indigenous First Nation of the Pacific Northwest Coast in what is now British Columbia, Canada. For millennia, they have maintained a profound connection and stewarded this land, with grizzly bears roaming the temperate rainforest. Like other stories of Indigenous peoples, Nuxalk's stories capture the deep interconnectedness between humans and other-than-human worlds. In this narrative, the grizzly bear is not merely an animal but a human kin with shared histories and relationships.

In the same rainforest where the Nuxalk people's tale originated, Henson and her colleagues conducted a study on grizzly bear populations [2]. By analyzing hair samples, three distinct genetic groups of grizzly bears were identified. The researchers expected that natural or human-made landscapes such as rivers, mountains, and roads would shape the genetic difference between bear populations, as physical barriers prevent bears from moving and mating. However, those factors could not explain the genetic difference. Instead, Henson and her team discovered a striking pattern: the boundaries of these three genetic groups aligned perfectly with the territorial ranges of three Indigenous language families: Tsimshian, Northern Wakashan, and Salishan Nuxalk [2]. These language families represent distinct but interconnected Indigenous cultural groups who have coexisted in the region for thousands of years. In British Columbia, Canada, the Tsimshian peoples traditionally lived on the northern coastal regions and islands, while Northern Wakashan peoples inhabited the central coastal areas, and Salishan Nuxalk or Nuxalk people developed their distinct culture in the inner coastal regions and valleys [2]. These groups maintained connections through trade and cultural exchange [3]. This unexpected finding between bear genetics and human language boundaries suggests a long-standing connection between cultural and ecological systems–a relationship that Western science is just beginning to understand.

In my work with the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community, located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, United States, I have witnessed firsthand the profound relationship between the Ojibwe people (also known as Anishinaabe, one of the largest Indigenous groups in North America) and nature. When introducing themselves, Tribal members often identify with their animal clans, such as Bear Clan, Crane Clan, or Fish Clan. These totems represent the qualities and values that their community aspires to embody [4]. The bear, for example, symbolizes strength, protection, healing, and leadership, guiding clan members to cultivate these traits in their own lives. Members of the Bear Clan, thus, serve as guardians and healers within their community [5]. The bond between Ojibwe and their clan animals is so sacred that eating a clan's animal is considered equivalent to consuming one's own flesh or that of their kin. Instead, they act as caretakers, ensuring the well-being of their animal relatives. This profound connection ties people to the land and the non-human relatives they share it with.

As an environmental social scientist, I find myself continually amazed by the depth and complexity of these relationships that resonate through the traditional stories and teachings of Indigenous peoples. In these narratives, the boundaries between humans and non-human beings are blurred and dissolved. Non-human beings can take human form, and the relationships between human and non-human beings are portrayed as equal, capable of

communication, and shared experiences, presenting a world where all species coexist in harmony and mutual care. These stories offer a perspective that views humans not as separate from or superior to nature but as part of a vast and intricate web of relationships with all living beings.

Illustration: Vietnamese folktales that transcend the boundaries between human and nature.

The lessons embedded in Indigenous stories and practices are not confined to North America. Vietnam, with its diversity of ethnic communities, rich biodiversity, and long tradition of oral storytelling, presents a strong potential for integrating traditional ecological knowledge into environmental preservation efforts. Like the First Born story of Nuxalk, Vietnamese folklore often features animals as central characters who embody wisdom and dreams [6,7]. The legend of the golden turtle and the magic sword is an example, highlighting the sacred role of turtles in Vietnamese culture and fostering their protection [8]. Similarly, the Xo Dang people's folktale of a young girl who married a python weaves together values of selflessness, the rewards of virtuous behavior, and sincere intentions [9]. These stories also emphasize the traditional connection between the Vietnamese people and the natural world.

Incorporating traditional knowledge and practices in environmental education can also

help younger generations view conservation as a cultural imperative, not just a scientific necessity [10]. As Tran et al. [9] suggest, embracing an Earth-centered kinship approach in education cultivates humility and responsibility, encouraging students to see themselves as interdependent with, rather than separate from, the natural world. This perspective can transform their ethical and ecological outlook. Over time, fostering eco-surplus cultural values, moving away from resource exploitation toward environmental connection and stewardship, thereby creating pathways toward ecological and social resilience [11].

In the way that First Born and the grizzly bear woman once shared a home, or the young girl who happily married the python man, perhaps conservation and preservation is about nurturing and sustaining relationships—relationships of reciprocity, respect, and shared existence with all living beings. Indigenous knowledge reminds us that humans are not separate from nature but integral to its fabric. As we are facing environmental crises like climate change and biodiversity loss, Indigenous knowledge and traditional practices offer a pathway toward a more sustainable and harmonious future founded on respect, reciprocity, and responsibility.

References

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