

Ecology and Spirituality: Traditional Ecological Knowledge



Overview

- What is Traditional Ecological Knowledge?
- Key themes: animacy, reciprocity, ceremony.
- What is the relation to science and the ‘spiritual’?
- Whitewashed Hope: Indigenous Perspectives of Regenerative Agriculture.
- Re-indiginisation.
- Conclusions.

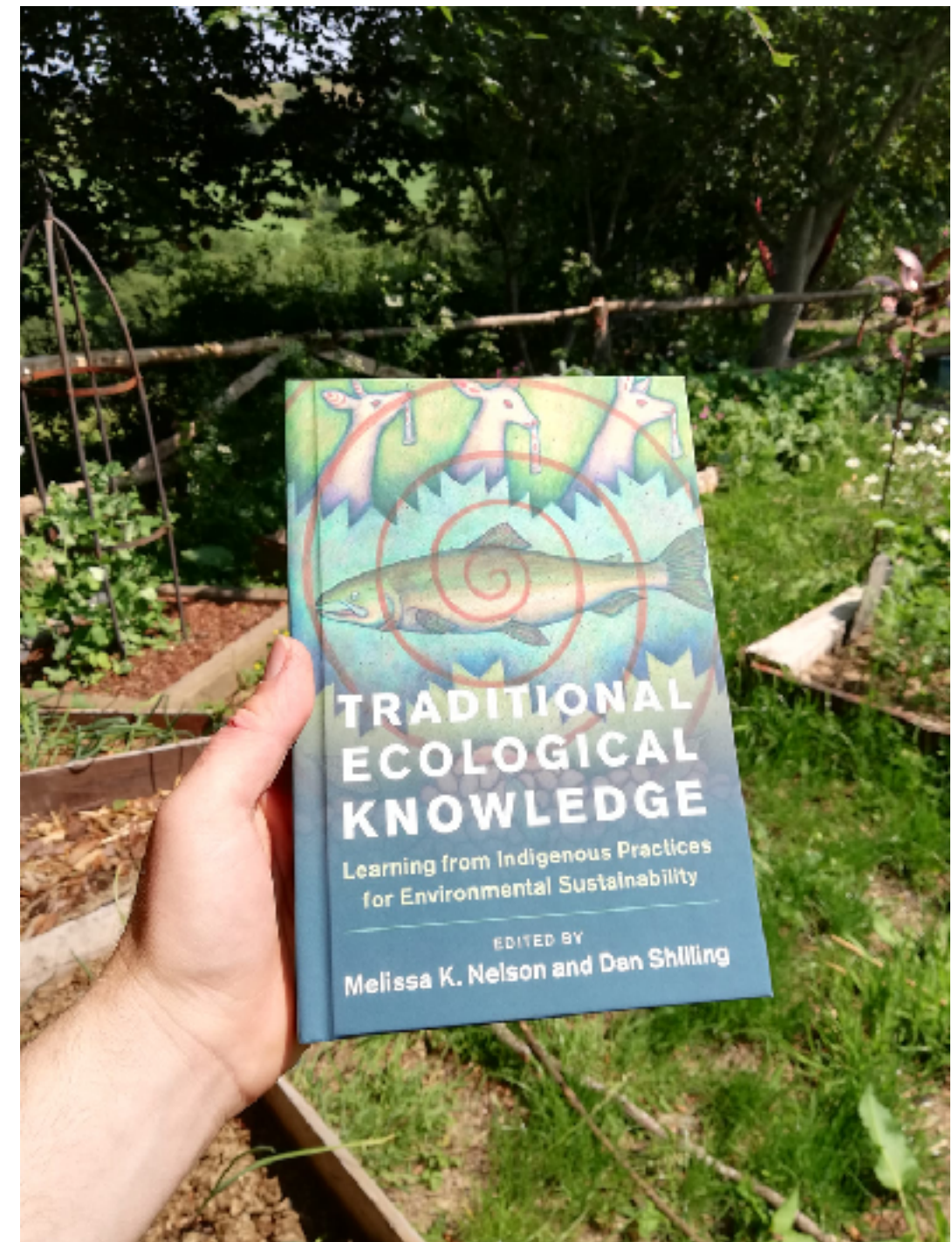
What is TEK?

- Term that has become popular since the 1980s - initially the domain of anthropologists.
- TEK itself 'represents experience acquired over thousands of years of direct human contact with the environment' (Berkes, 1993, p. 1).
- 'It includes an intimate and detailed knowledge of plants, animals, and natural phenomena, the development and use of appropriate technologies for hunting, fishing, trapping, agriculture, and forestry, and a holistic knowledge, or "world view" which parallels the scientific discipline of ecology' (Bourque, Inglis & LeBlanc, 1993, p. vii).
- '...traditional ecological knowledge refers to the knowledge, practice, and belief concerning the relationship of living beings to one another and to the physical environment, which is held by peoples in relatively nontechnological societies with a direct dependence upon local resources...' (Kimmerer, 2002, p. 432-433).
- Although there is an emphasis on Indigenous American perspectives in many books (e.g. Nelson & Shilling, 2018), it "exists all over the world, independent of ethnicity. It is born of long intimacy and attentiveness to a homeland and can arise wherever people are materially and spiritually integrated with their landscape..." (Kimmerer, 2002, p. 433).
- TEK has historically been threatened by colonialism.



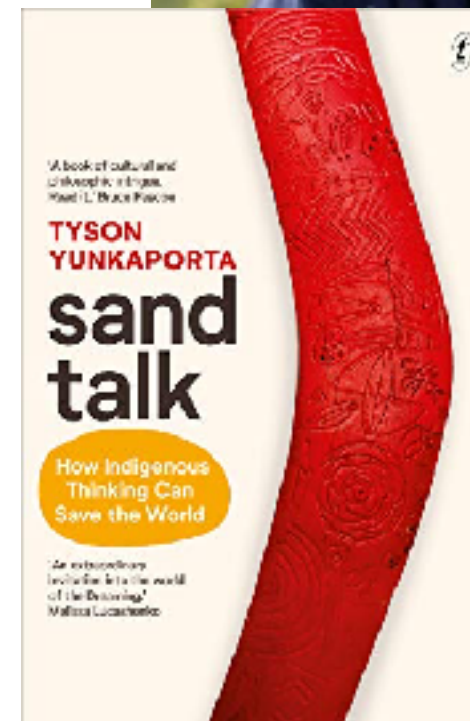
What is TEK?

- In his introduction to *Traditional Ecological Knowledge* (2018), Dan Shilling highlights five key elements of systems of TEK:
- “Reciprocity and respect define the bond between all members of the land family...”
- Reverence toward nature plays a critical role in religious ceremonies, hunting rituals, arts and craft, agricultural techniques, and other day-to-day activities...
- One’s relationship to the land is shaped by something other than economic profit...
- To speak of an individual owning land is anathema, not unlike owning another person, akin to slavery...
- Each generation has responsibility to leave a healthy world to future generations” (Shilling, 2018, p. 12).
- “These are not Romantic myths, New Age manifestos, or fables or a pre-historic Noble Savage, as detractors claim...”



How to Apply TEK?

- Tyson Yunkaporta:
- “I have been to many conferences and talks about Indigenous Knowledge and sustainability, and have read numerous papers on the topic. Most carry the same simplistic message: First Peoples have been here for x-thousand years, they know how to live in balance with this place and we should learn from them to find solutions to sustainability issues today...”
- “They then offer some isolated examples of sustainable practices pre-colonisation, and that’s it. The audience is left wondering, ‘Yes, but how? What insight does this offer today, for the problems we are experiencing now?’” (Yunkaporta, 2019, pp. 18-19).
- “I want to use an Indigenous pattern-thinking process to critique contemporary systems, and to impart an impression of the pattern of creation itself...” (pp. 19-20).
- Rather than applying specific practices that have developed in a particular socio-cultural-ecological context to other locations, we should instead look for the key themes and patterns.



Key Themes: Animacy

- Robin Wall Kimmerer talks about the Anishinaabe word Puhpowee - “the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth over night” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 49).
- ‘Western science has no such term, no words to hold this mystery. You’d think that biologists, of all people, would have words for life...’
- ‘...in scientific language our terminology is used to define the boundaries of our knowing. What lies beyond our grasp remains unnamed...’
- ‘The makers of this word understood a world of being, full of unseen energies that animate everything...’ (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 49).



Key Themes: Reciprocity

- ‘The idea of reciprocity with land is fundamental to many indigenous belief systems. Indeed, such beliefs serve as the foundation for what have been described as “cultures of gratitude”...’
- ‘In such cultures, people have a responsibility not only to be grateful for the gifts provided by Mother Earth, they are also responsible for playing a positive and active role in the well-being of the land. They are called not to be passive consumers, but to sustain the land that sustains them’ (Kimmerer, 2011, p. 257).



Key Themes: Ceremony

- “Ceremonies are a form of reciprocity that renews bonds between land and people and focuses intention, attention, and action on behalf of the natural world, which is inclusive of the spiritual world...” (Kimmerer, 2018, p. 31).
- Ritual interaction with the living world in order to establish relationships.



TEK and Western Science

- Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) makes use of the analogy of ‘braiding’ to understand how different knowledge systems can sustain and enhance one another.
- One way in which TEK and science can be braided is through what Kimmerer calls Restoration Ecology.
- ‘This approach arises from a creative symbiosis between traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and restoration science, which honors and uses the distinctive contributions of both intellectual traditions. Reciprocal restoration recognizes that it is not just the land that is broken, but our relationship to it...’ (Kimmerer, 2011, p. 258).
- ‘Reciprocal restoration is the mutually reinforcing restoration of land and culture such that repair of ecosystem services contributes to cultural revitalization, and re- newal of culture promotes restoration of ecological integrity...’ (Kimmerer, 2011, p. 258).



What is the relation to 'spirituality'?

- Indigenous worldviews tend to collapse the binary distinctions that Western societies are built on - spirituality is not something separate from other domains of life, but is fundamentally braided.
- “The arguments of different indigenous peoples based on spiritual relationships to the universe, to the landscape, to stones, rocks, insects, and other things, seen and unseen, have been difficult arguments for Western systems of knowledge to deal with or accept...” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 78).
- “These arguments give a partial indication of the different world views and alternative ways of coming to know, and of being, which still endure within the indigenous world...” (p. 78).
- “It is one of the few parts of ourselves which the West cannot decipher, cannot understand and cannot control...yet” (p. 78).



Spirits

- ‘You don’t need to believe in ghosts to balance spirit and live the right way in this world. You can use any metaphor you like... Whatever stories your cultural experience offers you, you can still perceive spirit through metaphor and bring it into balance’ (Yunkaporta, 2019, p. 109)
- ‘We have to be careful of the metaphors we use to make meaning, because metaphors are the language of spirit and that’s how we operate in or deeds of existence either to increase or decrease connectedness within creation...’
- ‘We are the custodians uniquely gifted to do this work, so we need to do it consciously and with mastery, within cultural frameworks aligned with the patterns of creation’ (Yunkaporta, 2019, p. 119).



Whitewashed Hope?

- Remarkable document created by 10+ indigenous leaders and organisations.
- Arguing that Western Permaculture and Regenerative Agriculture perspectives do not go far enough, and may be reproducing colonial attitudes.
- Open-Access document:

<https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/whitewashed-hope-message-10-indigenous-leaders-and-organizations>



"It's just a name. We are talking about the same thing." *No, we're not.*

Regenerative agriculture & permaculture claim to be the solutions to our ecological crises. While they both borrow practices from Indigenous cultures, critically, they leave out our world views and continue the pattern of erasing our history and contributions to the modern world.

While the practices 'sustainable farming' promote are important, they do not encompass the deep cultural and relational changes needed to realize our collective healing.



WHERE IS 'NATURE'?

COLONIZED

Regen Ag & Permaculture often talk about what's happening 'in nature': "In nature, soil is always covered." "In nature, there are no monocultures." Nature is viewed as separate, outside, ideal, perfect. Human beings must practice "biomimicry" (the mimicking of life) because we exist outside of the life of Nature.

INDIGENOUS

Indigenous peoples speak of our role AS Nature. (Actually, Indigenous languages often don't have a word for Nature, only a name for Earth and our Universe.) As cells and organs of Earth, we strive to fulfill our roles as her caregivers and caretakers. We often describe ourselves as "weavers", strengthening the bonds between all beings.

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DEATH DOESN'T MEAN DEAD

COLONIZED

Regen Ag & Permaculture often maintain the "dead" worldview of Western culture and science: Rocks, mountains, soil, water, wind, and light all start as "dead". (E.g., "Let's bring life back to the soil!" – implying soil, without microbes, is dead.) This worldview believes that life only happens when these elements are brought together in some specific and special way.

INDIGENOUS

Indigenous cultures view the Earth as a communion of beings and not objects: All matter and energy is alive and conscious. Mountains, stones, water, and air are relatives and ancestors. Earth is a living being whose body we are all a part of. Life does not only occur when these elements are brought together; Life always is. No "thing" is ever dead; Life forms and transforms.

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FROM JUDGEMENTAL TO RELATIONAL

COLONIZED

Regen Ag & Permaculture maintain overly simplistic binaries through subscribing to good and bad. Tilling is bad; not tilling is good. Mulch is good; not mulching is bad. We must do only the 'good' things to reach the idealized, 99.9% biomimicked farm/garden, though we will never be as pure or good "as Nature", because we are separate from her.

INDIGENOUS

Indigenous cultures often share the view that there is no good, bad, or ideal—it is not our role to judge. Our role is to tend, care, and weave to maintain relationships of balance. We give ourselves to the land: Our breath and hands uplift her gardens, binding our life force together. No one is tainted by our touch, and we have the ability to heal as much as any other lifeform.

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OUR WORDS SHAPE US

COLONIZED

Regen Ag & Permaculture use English as their preferred language no matter the geography or culture: You must first learn English to learn from the godFATHERS of this movement. The English language judges and objectifies, including words most Indigenous languages do not: 'natural, criminal, waste, dead, wild, pure...' English also utilizes language like "things" and "its" when referring to "non-living, subhuman entities".

INDIGENOUS

Among Indigenous cultures, every language emerges from and is therefore intricately tied to place. Inuit people have dozens of words for snow and her movement; Polynesian languages have dozens of words for water's ripples. To know a place, you must speak her language. There is no one-size-fits-all, and no words for non-living or sub-human beings, because all life has equal value.

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COLONIZED

PEOPLE ARE LAND. HOLISTIC INCLUDES HISTORY.

Regen Ag and Permaculture claim to be holistic in approach. When regenerating a landscape, 'everything' is considered: soil health, water cycles, local 'wildlife', income & profit. 'Everything', however, tends to EXCLUDE history: Why were Indigenous homelands steal-able and why were our peoples & lands rape-able? Why were our cultures erased? Why does our knowledge need to be validated by 'Science'? Why are we still excluded from your 'healing' of our land?

INDIGENOUS

Among Indigenous cultures, people belong to land rather than land belonging to people. Healing of land MUST include healing of people and vice versa. Recognizing and processing the emotional traumas held in our bodies as descendants of assaulted, enslaved, and displaced peoples is necessary to the healing of land. Returning our rights to care for, harvest from, and relate to the land that birthed us is part of this recognition.

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COMPOSTING.

COLONIZED

Regen Ag & Permaculture often share the environmentalist message that the world is dying and we must "save" it. Humans are toxic, but if we try, we can create a "new Nature" of harmony, though one that is not as harmonious as the "old Nature" that existed before humanity. Towards this mission, we must put Nature first and sacrifice ourselves for "the cause".

INDIGENOUS

Indigenous cultures often see Earth as going through cycles of continuous transition. We currently find ourselves in a cycle of great decomposition. Like in any process of composting there is discomfort and a knowing that death always brings us into rebirth. Within this great cycle, we all have a role to play. Recognizing and healing all of our own traumas IS healing Earth's traumas, because we are ONE.

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Making up only 6.2% of our global population, Indigenous peoples steward 80% of Earth's biodiversity while managing over 25% of her land. Indigenous worldviews are the bedrocks that our agricultural practices and lifeways arise from.

We invite you to ground your daily practices in these ancestral ways, as we jointly work towards collective healing.

1. Learn whose lands you live on (native-land.ca), their history, and how you can support their causes and cultural revitalization.
2. Watch @GatherFilm and Aluna.
3. Amplify the voices and stories of Indigenous peoples and organizations.
4. Follow, support, and learn from the contributors to this post (see next slide).
5. To republish this open-source post:
<https://bit.ly/IndigenousWorldViews>

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Re-Indigenising?

- Rather than appropriating the indigenous perspectives of other societies, we should instead be looking to reclaim our own indigenous heritages.
- “This looking within both for what we have been and for what what we have become is done in prospect of an immanent transformation in order to realize what we might yet become here on Earth. It is founded on the view that our diverse, necessary and good group identities here on Earth now also constitute membership of a common Indigenous humanity that is itself deeply enmeshed with, dependent upon and part of the natural fabric of a living Earth...” (Mackinon, Williams & Waller, 2017).
- Lots of ways that we can do this - getting to know the place in which we live, the other-than-humans that inhabit the space, re-connecting with traditional folklore and narratives of place...



Conclusions

- There are many different varieties of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, each system intimately tied to the unique socio-cultural-ecological niches in which they have emerged.
- These systems have been challenged, damaged, lost or destroyed through colonialism.
- There are key themes that emerge from a cross-cultural perspective on TEK - animacy, reciprocity, ceremony, etc.
- Western science and TEK are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and may be compatible - they can enhance one another.
- TEK and 'spirituality' are often fundamentally entwined.
- TEK understand that human societies are a part of ecology.
- Re-Indigenisation - discovering our own indigenous philosophies of life and place could have positive socio-cultural-ecological impacts.

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Ecology and Spirituality: Welsh Traditional Ecological Knowledge?



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Other Indigenous Knowledge Systems

- Dr. Julia Wright - 'Subtle Agro-ecologies.'
- Welsh traditional ecological knowledge?
- Look for traditional ecological knowledge in Druidry?
- Could there be traditional ecological knowledge encoded in the Mabinogion?





Twrch Trwyth

- Culhwch and Olwen.
- Culhwch wants to marry Olwen, but her father Ysbddaden Pencawr says he must perform impossible tasks.
- One of the tasks is to retrieve a magical golden comb, razor and scissors from the mane of Twrch Trwyth.
- Chase the boar all over Wales - they have to get King Arthur to help.
- They drive the boar into the sea.



Remnants of Animism?

- Working with Welsh labourers (mid-late 70s) in Mid-Wales.
- Building stone walls - stones are referred to as 'him' - 'pass him over here.'
- Cutting trees for fence posts - 'Oh, he's a good one.'
- Sitting having a cup of tea and the wind blows - 'Oh, Morus y Gwynt!'



Conclusions?

- Could these be remnants of a Welsh traditional ecological knowledge?
- Re-indigenisation will require re-connecting with the knowledge and ideas of our ancestors.
- What are the stories and philosophies that have grown out of this place?