



## **The Role of Wilderness in Indigenous Cultures**

For the most part, there are no specific words for “wilderness” in American Indian languages. The primary reason for this is that Indian People have always lived close to the land, and what today we call “wilderness” was literally their home.

As was stated earlier in the “Keys” section, in the past the natural environs provided everything necessary for Indian People to develop and maintain a beautiful life- full of wonder and challenge- in the outdoors. Homes were made of natural materials, food was-either hunted, gathered, or grown and clothing was made of animal hides and/or various plant materials.

The celebrated Horse and Buffalo cultures of the Great Plains relied heavily on the Buffalo as their principal mainstay. Hides were used for lodges and clothing, body parts such as bones and ligaments were used for everything from spoons to sewing thread. The meat was cooked and enjoyed in the summer and dried and jerked for the winter.

When an animal was killed a prayer was said or sung in exchange for that life. Tobacco was in some instances offered as a show of respect for the animal that gave its life for the good of the People. Game was never killed unnecessarily, and when it was killed, every part of the animal was used and nothing was wasted. It is said that Indian People have a Spiritual connection with all things on this Earth. They understood very well that by polluting their own water sources or hunting out an area that this would be detrimental to their very existence.

Natural limits for game and the gathering of foodstuffs were set so that relatively small-groups of People could live, not off the land but with the land, in a way that was both productive and sustainable. American Indian People were truly the original land managers if you will, perfecting skills such as the natural use of fire, water and erosion control and wildlife management. Sacred sites were managed in a way that protected their physical and Spiritual virtues, and people who violated these sites were disciplined accordingly- not unlike today’s wilderness law enforcement strategies.

As stated earlier, the same reverence towards the land is present within many Indian People today, especially traditional People. Unfortunately, many of the outside variables have changed. For example, many Reservations or Rancherias are so small and/or checker-boarded by encroaching non-Indian development that there is simply no unspoiled land left to enjoy in a wild or natural state.

Some of the larger Reservations do have more open-pace that could possibly be set aside with a natural or wild designation, but how does the very concept of “designated wilderness” fit into the modern day agendas of Tribal Councils faced with the same real-life dilemmas of all modern societies?

First off we must explore Tribal Governmental Systems and how these infrastructures make it difficult for Tribes to make decisions on issues such as designating wilderness.

Most Tribal Councils are based on a system that calls for a Tribal Chairman or Governor, and then for representation from each geographic District of a particular Reservation.

Sub-committees are then assembled to deal with particular issues such as water and land management or cultural resource preservation. Things can get difficult when you consider the fact that there might be three or four separate Tribal factions, within any one particular Tribe alone.

For example, first, you have the grass-root traditionalists who live in the most remote sectors of the Rez and who speak their old language and practice the religion of their Grandfathers. Next you have the People who live on the Reservation, who only speak English and who practice European religions. Then there are the people who live off the Reserve and work in the adjacent towns and cities, but who come home frequently for family doings and for ceremony. And finally you have Card Carrying Tribal members who live far away from the Reservation but who still have some social and/or religious ties to their homeland. Each of these factions carries distinct perspectives on subjects such as designating and or managing wilderness. So one can begin to see the difficulties with not only the question of where wilderness fits into a Tribe's cultural beliefs, but how will it benefit or not benefit- all parties involved.

Despite the fact that the role of "modern-wilderness" in American Indian cultures is an ambiguous one, an effort has been made to transcend cultural barriers and philosophical differences in a way that allows for both traditional and progressive Tribal people to establish and enjoy wild places within their Tribal jurisdiction. Read on to find out more about how the legislation of Tribally designated wilderness differs from that of Federally established wilderness.