

# **Sustainable Indigenous Education, Community Re-Vitalization and Indigenous Science**

## **Abstract**

There is a crisis of “sustainability” which has evolved as a result of the global application of the Western development paradigm of “progress” through unfettered capitalism with little regard for social, cultural and ecological consequences. The Western development paradigm and its focus on material economic indicators as the sole measure of development perpetuates a distorted vision of what is in fact a multi-dimensional and multi-contextual process.

Indigenous communities have experienced the most negative aspects of the application of this ideology in terms of continued economic disparity, environmental degradation and socio-cultural issues. As a result of such negative manifestations many Indigenous peoples have begun to actively search for alternatives and new paradigms of “development” which are sustainable and more in-line with their cultural and spiritual ethos. Even the word “development” may be defined, from an Indigenous perspective as an extension of colonialism. Therefore for the purposes of this presentation the word “revitalization” will be used instead of “development” to describe the much broader and more inclusive process which occurs in the indigenous context.

The key goals of this search have been efforts to find sustainable, culturally responsive, and community based models that help to “build Indigenous communities” rather than continue to perpetuate their long standing social or cultural issues. Over the last two decades various programs in the United States have evolved which attempt to “rebuild Native nations from the inside out.” That is, to build an infrastructure that serves a broader spectrum of the community, find local resources and solutions, advocate local rather than federal control of community development and most importantly evolve from the cultural knowledge foundations of the communities themselves.

All of these efforts might be termed an Indigenized approach to applying “sustainable - environmental education for community revitalization and renewal.” This process oriented approach to education can form a contemporary context for the application and even evolution of Indigenous Science.

A working definition of “Indigenous science” is that body of traditional environmental and cultural knowledge unique to a group of people which has served to sustain that people through generations of living within a distinct bioregion. All of this is founded on a body of practical environmental knowledge which is learned and transferred through generations of a people through a form of environmental and cultural education unique to them. Indigenous science is really Indigenous knowledge and may also be termed “traditional environmental knowledge” (TEK) since a large proportion of this knowledge

served to sustain Indigenous communities and insure their survivability within in the environmental contexts in which Indigenous communities were situated.

Indigenous science in its expression as traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) integrated with appropriate combined with insights and models from the evolving field of “sustainability” provides possibilities for creative models for Indigenous communities to sustain themselves and their cultural ways of life in the 21st century.