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# Review of Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management, by Fikret Berkes

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**Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management.**

Fikret Berkes. Taylor and Francis, Philadelphia. 1999. Pp. 209. \$29.95 (Paper) \$59.95 (Hardcover) ISBN 1-56032-694-8.

The title mixes so many contradictory signals that the static might, unfortunately, cause some to try another station. After all, resource managers typically characterize relationships between people and environment in economic and mechanistic terms. Under that rubric, the traditional must give way to the modern; the spiritual must yield to the scientific. But this title, on the one hand, seems to imply that traditional and scientific knowledge can merge into some sort of sacred, transcendental resource management for a New Age. On the other hand, contradicting that implied appreciation of non-Western knowledge, categorization as "traditional knowledge" suggests no more than a static residue of the premodern. And, if so, surely only selected fragments of such static knowledge, perhaps the pharmaceutical properties of a particular plant, not entire systems of belief as to why those properties occur, might usefully merge with Western science.

Those who do get past the unfortunate title will find that it belies a sophisticated consideration of just such complex issues by a pioneer in the study and application of non-Western ecologies. Part I (Concepts) defines basic terms and ideas such as traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), attempts to justify the use of "traditional" as an adjective, sketches the recent institutionalization of TEK's study and application, and describes the longer-term intellectual genesis of research on the ecologies of native peoples. Part II (Practice) presents case studies of native ecologies from around the globe, largely drawn from Berkes's own research and mostly focusing on the Cree of the Hudson Bay region. Part III (Issues) explores how local knowledge emerges, the challenges to maintaining and applying such knowledge, and the broader cultural implications of recognizing the validity of native ecological knowledges. While each part contributes certain insights, the case studies make for the richest reading. Berkes has spent three decades working among the Cree hunters and fishers of Chisasibi, and he cogently recounts what they have taught him about that particular place and how it has incubated more general insights about the dynamism and relevance of native ecologies.

The seeming intention to market this book as an undergraduate text, complete with "boxes" on such topics as A Cree Legend of the Flood, Zulu Herbalists, and others seems incompatible with the eclecticism necessary a cutting-edge book on "ethnoecology." Topics range from checking the fat content of a bear carcass to the cultural construction of Chief Seattle as an environmentalist icon. Successfully leading undergraduates through such an intellectual labyrinth might require better streamlining of such diversity -- and an extensive glossary.

With anthropologists, biologists, geographers and many others all contributing diverse perspectives, jargon, and phenomena, transdisciplinary unification remains a precarious goal. When considering cultural processes, for example, Berkes and other natural scientists seem drawn to organismic metaphors that persist as part of the myth of Western intellectual superiority that achieved global dominance during the colonial creation of the divide between the "developed"

and the "underdeveloped," between the "modern" and the "traditional." Such teleological thinking, involving concepts such as cultural adaptation and evolution, subsequently validated the belief that the postcolonial "Rests" simply need to emulate and catch up to the exceptional West. That myth and its conceptual residue cannot now provide a realistic basis for transcending itself, for addressing the social and environmental challenges that emerged together with that myth. Yet people who write books that begin to forge connections across disciplines and cultures, despite epistemological and other chasms, deserve great respect. Berkes has clearly made such a contribution based on sustained research in other cultures, broad reading across disciplines, and deep caring for lands and peoples.

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