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Living in harmony with the land

By Jeff Davidson

Archeologists find that since the dawn of civilization, no society has fully grasped what is necessary to live in harmony with its environment and for its people to live in peace with one another. In the last 10,000 years of civilization, for example, remarkably little has changed in the way in which people treat their surroundings.

Before human occupation, forests, not deserts and barren plain, covered the uplands of Arizona and New Mexico. Seven hundred years before Columbus' arrival in the Western Hemisphere, the mighty Mayan civilization, with a population of 200,000 in what is now Mexico and Central America, fell into ruin following human-caused depletion of the rainforests, heavy soil erosion and poor agricultural methods, and internal warfare.

Misinformation about how societies developed and how their people lived often leads to erroneous conclusions about how present-day society ought to be managed.

Many Americans today, for example, believe that, historically, Native American cultures were superior in interacting with one another and maintaining a fine balance with the environment. However, this view is naive at best and classically demonstrative of the perils of misinformation.

That Native Americans per se did not represent a unified, homogeneous people is often overlooked. Well more than 1000 nations occupied North America from at least the middle of the first millennium, including hundreds of tribes still in existence through the 19th century. As with people everywhere, some nations -- referred to as tribes -- were peace-loving. Some were warring. Some respected the land; some did not.

Masters of Agriculture?

Dr. William K. Tabb, one of my economics professors in college, remarked to our class that economics in essence was the "allocation of scarce resources." Only when a society has to manage limited resources is it an "economic" society. Let's apply this to the case at hand. Some Native American nations starved during harsh winters. Some could not care for all their members.

On a continent as large as North America, most of the Native American nations were blessed with vast stretches of land, in some cases more than they could ever use. In that sense they were not "economic" societies. Natural resources, certainly in comparison to today, were plentiful. Because they did not live in economic societies, it is hard to determine to what degree many Native American nations practiced sound environmental policy.

It is known that vast sections of the southwestern United States, for example, were completely decimated by over-cutting. Dr. Charles L. Redman, an anthropologist at Arizona State University, says, "The idea of the primordial paradise, that pre-European societies were somehow great environmentalists, is romantic history." The cliff-dwellers, with their elaborate wooden structures, may have sealed the ecological fate of their region for all the centuries that have followed. In the Eastern U.S., the Cherokee removed such large swaths of forest along riverbanks that Europeans entering some areas thought there were no trees.

Still, many Native Americans loved the earth, lived in harmony with it, and lived in harmony with each other. Their poetry and chants often reveal the kinship they felt with the earth. Let us avoid the trap, however, of sanctifying those who were here before us because some of them, in some respects, embodied environmentally and socially redeeming virtues needed today.

Let's not paint in our minds and post in our literature exalted, vague notions of environmentally and morally superior peoples whose ageless wisdom is somehow quintessential to our survival today. It is important that we draw what we can from the knowledge of earlier cultures and be respectful of their heritage. Let's learn what we can from their actual lessons and experiences, and let's forsake the counterproductive mythology that seeks to rewrite history to match the flawed ideology of a few.

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