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Natural History and Indigenous Worldviews

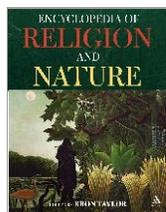
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Oxford Reference



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Natural History and Indigenous Worldviews

Beliefs about the relationship between humans and the natural environment are expressed through worldviews. A worldview is a mechanism *system or complex of ideas* through which the world makes cultural sense. As deeply seated belief systems, worldviews illuminate the ecological priorities and concepts of various peoples.

All traditional societies that have managed resources well over time have done so in part through religion and worldview – by the use of cultural symbols that reinforce particular management strategies. Many of these religious beliefs and cultural practices, while seeming unscientific, are based in part on long and careful observation of nature.

Natural history is the integrated study of the relationships between the biological, the physical, and the sensual (personal). It integrates keen observation of the natural world with an acknowledgement – indeed, an affirmation – that humans are sentient beings. Hence, natural history mixes the scientific perspective with elegant, heartfelt and intelligent responses to science. It mixes the social sciences and humanities with ecology, and it entails a breaking down of the normative barriers between the scientific and the poetic. It blends tradition with innovation and engages us in informed discussions of conservation efforts to reveal useful approaches to our environmental crises. Natural history personalizes science and enlivens it with meaning; a naturalist is one who has the eyes of a scientist and the vision of a poet; one who confronts evocative ideas, and is respectful of both facts and mysteries. By taking an ecological approach to the study of worldviews, we can gain greater understanding of critical interactions between humans and the natural world.

Worldviews are situated in the landscape, and indigenous cosmologies function as storehouses of critical knowledge of the natural world. At the heart of research on worldviews and natural history is an exploration of creation stories and how they inform and explain cultural understanding of the more-than-human world. Such research strives to result in ethnographic information and theoretical explication of some cultural understandings of ecological relations.

Mythologies provide explanation as to why the physical world is the way it is. The Cahuilla people of the Sonoran Desert in southern California, as one example among thousands, have elaborate myths detailing how the landscape of their territory came to be. In Cahuilla stories, Coyote is held in esteem because he is said to have brought mesquite seeds down from the mountains. Mesquite seedpods were a staple food for traditional Cahuilla, and continue to be an important plant, and because of Coyote's actions Cahuilla held coyotes sacred and never killed them. The Cahuilla version of how mesquite colonized the arid valleys is likely a literal one; because coyotes feed on mesquite beans but do not digest the seeds, it is likely that the plant was spread from the higher elevations to the lowlands in coyote scat.

All traditional societies have myths that explain why things are the ways they are. Ingeniously encoded in these symbolic systems are often profound understandings of ecological relationships. Indigenous worldviews, as explicated through myths, are often extremely sophisticated and of considerable practical value.

Numerous scholars have overlooked the ecological dimension of cosmologies or worldviews, while writing at length about native understandings of “supernatural” entities. We can attribute much of this oversight to a modern worldview that holds that natural world is largely determinate and mechanical, and that that which is regarded as mysterious, powerful, and beyond human ken must therefore be of some other, non-physical realm above nature (i.e., supernatural). But in oral indigenous cultures, the physical world itself is the dwelling place of the gods, of the numinous powers that can sustain or extinguish life.

Worldviews reflect, among other things, attitudes toward nature. These attitudes are expressed through conceptions, uses, and manipulations of the land. Aspects of cultural ecology are expressed through belief systems, and investigations of the intersection between the external world and cultural constructions of that world are providing fruitful insights into the relationship between nature and the human mind.

Further Reading

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Find this resource:

See also: COSMOLOGY; MAGIC; MAGIC, ANIMISM, AND THE SHAMAN'S CRAFT; NATIVE AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY; NATURAL HISTORY AS NATURAL RELIGION; SHEPARD, PAUL; STORYTELLING AND WONDER; TRICKSTER.

WAS THIS USEFUL? Yes No

