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Ethnoecology

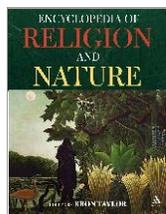
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Ethnoecology

Ethnoecology – the study of cultural explications of nature – generates insights into the interface between peoples and the more-than-human world. Ecology is the scientific study of the interrelationships between plants, animals, and the environment, and it has developed into the study of interdependent communities of organisms and their environments. But while most ecologists have been trained to seek knowledge solely from scholarly books or nonhuman nature, tremendous environmental information is stored in the minds, cultures, and arts of indigenous peoples. Ethnoecologists combine ecology and ethnology to shed light on diverse cultural ways of understanding the natural world and the supranatural cosmos. They strive to formulate theories about how people perceive, organize knowledge about, and then act upon the environment.

We are human, in good part, because of the discrete ways we affiliate, not only with each other, but also with the natural world. Ethnoecology entails focused research on what is termed “traditional ecological knowledge,” “indigenous knowledge,” or “local knowledge.” Such knowledge is being lost rapidly as elders die and their cultures undergo tremendous change. Ethnoecology – the recording, understanding, and appreciation of this knowledge – is thus a pressing matter. Traditional ecological knowledge includes those aspects of culture that relate to environmental concerns directly (such as resource exploitation) and indirectly (for example, totemic proscriptions and religious beliefs). Thus, a culture's ecological knowledge affects subsistence, adaptation, cosmology, and aesthetics, and these things in turn affect the knowledge base. Ethnoecology offers a way to record and analyze human interactions with the natural world. Emphasizing local understandings of environments, it focuses on the importance of cognition in shaping behavior. By pursuing ethnoecology, we are able to gain understanding of the interactions between humans and the natural world.

Ethnoecology entails investigation of systems of perception, cognition, belief, symbols, and uses of the natural environment. It illuminates cultural interactions with the environment, thereby giving us greater appreciation of the depth and scope of knowledge systems as they relate to the more-than-human world. Vignettes of ecological knowledge are precious in their own right, but they also provide grist for a new environmental ethic that we so urgently need. In this light, some of the goals of ethnoecology are to help us:

1) be exposed to the diversity of indigenous perceptions of “natural” divisions in the biological world; **2)** understand and appreciate the origins and uses of ecological knowledge and resource management practices; **3)** appreciate the connections between aesthetics, religion, and human ecology; **4)** develop the tools to acquire effective ways of recording, analyzing, and applying traditional ecological knowledge; **5)** discern the variant approaches that peoples have developed cognitively to understand the world around them; **6)** recognize the intersections and disjunctions between knowledge and practice; and **7)** explore ecological beliefs about relationships between humans and the environment that are shared by Western sciences and Native cosmologies.

Ethnoecology shows us that indigenous practices of land use and resource management are not only adapted to local ecosystems, but have sometimes shaped those ecosystems in ways that have made them more diverse and stable. Examples of such mutualism are found more often among indigenous groups that have lived in particular places a long time than among recent arrivals. In most indigenous cosmologies, the human and the nonhuman are interdependent, and ecological limits, restraints, and responsibilities are readily apparent and cannot be externalized. The norm is that indigenous religions and cultural ecologies are based on beliefs in the intrinsic value of the land and all that it contains. Romanticized notions of traditional ecological knowledge, however, will help neither the people themselves nor the lands they inhabit, and a realistic assessment of environmental knowledge is essential for appropriate and effective conservation.

Indigenous perceptions of nature, as expressed through social and cultural processes, enrich our collective environmental understanding by providing regional specificity to global issues. Likewise, the application of ethnoecological research can benefit indigenous peoples by helping them gain greater political and economic control over their lands through articulating and exercising their unique environmental knowledge. Ethnoecology provides insight into environmental ideologies and management practices, and gives us greater appreciation of the options available in addressing contemporary concerns. Understanding ethnoecologies can also enable us to grasp more fully our collective humanity while revealing cultural differences.

Indigenous religious ideologies and ecological knowledge often translate into resource management practices, including such activities as performing ceremonies to ensure the well-being of the land, enacting restrictions to ease the strain of resource exploitation, and prescribing burns to “clean up the country.” Understanding the environmental knowledge of diverse cultures is beneficial in our consideration of issues of development, human rights, and ecological integrity. The application of ethnoecological research to conservation management and cultural survival thus warrants intensive exploration.

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Further Reading

Anderson, E. N. *Ecologies of the Heart: Emotion, Belief, and the Environment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Find this resource:

Berkes, Fikret. *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management*. Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis, 1999.

Find this resource:

Berlin, Brent. *Ethnobiological Classification: Principles of Categorization of Plants and Animals in Traditional Societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Find this resource:

Nazarea, Virginia D. *Ethnoecology: Situated Knowledge/ Located Lives*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999.

Find this resource:

See also: ENTHEOGENS; ETHNOBOTANY; TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE.

WAS THIS USEFUL? Yes No

