

Indigenous Knowledge and Wisdom: The Path to Survival
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<http://www.ecologia.org/news/30.IndigenousKnowledgeTEK.mp3>



Traditional Ecological Knowledge is a body of wisdom and practices, rooted in the Indigenous world view, transmitted among members of the nation, and continually refined by experience ¹

Segment One

Randy Kritkauský: Greetings, or may I say Bozho in Potawatomi, to those joining us for today's Indigenous Perspectives show. I'm Randy Kritkauský, an enrolled Potawatomi tribal member, and the co-host of Indigenous Perspectives.

Carolyn Schmidt: And I'm Carolyn Schmidt, the other co-host. Indigenous Perspectives is recorded in Vermont, which is part of N'dakinna, the land that is the unceded traditional territory of the Abenaki people. We start each show with this Land Acknowledgement to signal our respect for the Abenaki, the Indigenous people of our region, who have survived over the centuries and are now experiencing renewal and new growth.

¹ Photo credit: public domain - CCO 1.0 Universal license <https://pxhere.com/en/photo/792566>

Today's show is titled "Indigenous Knowledge and Wisdom, the Path to Survival". And it directly addresses a question that Randy and I are often asked because of our decades of work on international environmental problems - such as desertification in China, the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the disappearing Aral Sea, and climate change. It's a question that seems to be on the tip of the tongue for more and more people in all walks of life. The question is, are we going to make it?

And as we put our N 95 Covid -era masks back on because of air pollution blowing in from Canadian wildfires, we might feel that Mother Nature is abandoning us or even assaulting us. However, if we can find our way through the smog of recent news, we can find reason for hope and examples of humans working with Mother Earth to heal the planet and let it be the healthy place it wants to be.

Randy: So, picking up on that positive theme I want to bring to your attention, in case you haven't read about it, a really quite remarkable story with a happy ending. The story begins with a tragedy, a plane crash on May 1st in Colombia in South America, in the jungle. A small plane with four kids, a pilot and their mother crashed in the jungle. Pilot died; mother was severely injured and did not survive for long. This left four young children from the Huitoto Indigenous community. It left Leslie Jacobo Bonbaire, who is 13, Solecni Ranoque Mucutuy, 9, Tien Noriel Ronoque Mucutuy who is four, and Cristian Neryman Ranoque Mucutuy, who was not yet quite one year old, on their own. As their mother lay dying, she said, you must go and try to find your way to safety.

Sounds like a scary and a grim story, but something really quite remarkable happened. For 40 days and nights, they walked through the jungle and by themselves, alone, they managed to find edible fruits. They found water. They avoided dangerous plants and animals and humans and reptiles. And they did quite well. They had insect bites when they were found finally; they were slightly dehydrated; but they were not as many of us from this part of the world would be after 40 days in the jungle - you know, absolutely wasted.

And the reason is they had been taught by their grandmother who is Indigenous. Her name is Fatima Valencia. They had been taught how to survive in the jungle, how to find food, how to protect themselves, and how to live in harmony with the jungle, which we might find very frightening, and we might think of as an adversary.

Carolyn: And to quote from the Guardian²: “The education the children got from their grandmother, a respected elder in the Araracuara indigenous territory, was almost certainly vital to their survival. ‘This is a virgin forest, thick and dangerous,’ John Moreno, an Indigenous leader from nearby Vaupés, told the local media outlet Cambio. ‘They would’ve needed to draw on ancestral knowledge in order to survive.’ ” End of quote.

Randy: So this is a story that’s been presented in the media as something extraordinary, truly remarkable, truly out of the ordinary. On the one hand, the story does seem to fall into that category of tales. We tell ourselves tales of heroism like Shackleton returning from near certain death after he failed in his attempt at exploring Antarctica. Or tales of individual heroism as someone accomplishes an extraordinary physical feat like human endurance climbing Mount Everest.

Carolyn: Well, rather than just adding to the storehouse of stories about humans triumphing over the dangers that nature poses, we need to dig more deeply into these stories and ask some questions. Mainly, is nature overwhelmingly threatening and a challenge waiting to be overcome by triumphant humans? Or is the world of nature a place where both the human spirit and human physical wellbeing can find sustenance and survival?

Randy: So if we take a moment and reflect, I think we find the story about four very young children surviving in the jungles of Columbia is about more than a struggle. It is actually a parable pointing to the wisdom and benefits of working with, rather than against, Mother Earth. It turns out that these young children survived in part because their grandmother taught them how to live in the jungle by finding nourishment it offers, but as importantly, it is also a story about what I call TEK - excuse me, Traditional Ecological Knowledge/Wisdom - which is taught to them and instructs them to respect nature and to seek its embrace and not just fear nature and try to overcome it.

² ‘Miracle, miracle’: lone children survive 40 days in Amazon jungle, by Mat Youkee in Bogotá, and Emma Graham-Harrison <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/10/colombian-children-found-alive-five-weeks-after-amazon-jungle-plane-crash>

See also from The Guardian online: “Indigenous knowledge, bravery, vigilance: how young siblings survived in Colombia’s perilous jungle” by Mat Youkee in Bogotá <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/12/colombia-plane-crash-how-four-siblings-survived-jungle>

Carolyn: This attitude of working with and engaging the natural world as an animate world of kin is the essence of this concept we've discussed multiple times already on our podcasts. The concept is T.E.K. - capital "T" capital "E" capital "K" - or Traditional Ecological Knowledge. T.E.K. is a modern acronym for a millennia-old method of seeing, listening, learning about, and engaging in a reciprocal manner with nature. There is a definition, quite comprehensive, that is used by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Here it is:

"Traditional Ecological Knowledge, also called by other names, including indigenous knowledge or native science, refers to the evolving knowledge acquired by indigenous and local peoples over hundreds or thousands of years through direct contact with the environment. This knowledge is specific to a location and includes the relationships between plants, animals, natural phenomena, landscapes, and timing of events that are used for lifeways, including, but not limited to, hunting, fishing, trapping, agriculture and forestry."³ End of definition.

Randy: So Carolyn introduced this by saying it's quite comprehensive. I'm going to back up because we're going to disagree with ourselves or between ourselves for a moment here, and we'll do this repeatedly, returning to a theme. Which is that T.E.K. "TEK", as it's called, is more than mere native science. It is a spiritual attitude and posture toward nature, which goes beyond mere science. We'll come back to that theme.

Generally speaking, T.E.K. "TEK" is compared with mainstream science, which employs a vast array of technical instruments to measure and explore the natural world. In this sense, TEK is sort of playful wordplay: TEK – "tech". T.E.K. is playfully claiming to be the equivalent of a more technically based means of understanding the world. It's becoming increasingly common, as in the quotation that Carolyn read from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; it's becoming increasingly common to hear about mainstream scientists who are opening their minds to knowledge and information that Indigenous people have about the places where they have lived for centuries or even millennia.

³ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service <https://www.fws.gov/media/traditional-ecological-knowledge-fact-sheet>

Such intensely place-based knowledge often captures insights that several years of investigation with scientific instruments miss. So when the U.S. Forest Service [*Randy mis-spoke; he meant "U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service"*] definition reduces T.E.K. to native science, it is viewed as a way of managing resources, managing resources to increase their yield and economic benefits to benefit us humans, but not necessarily to benefit those living in these wildlife areas.

Carolyn: Point very well made, very well taken, Randy, that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service definition captures a lot of individual criteria, but misses the bigger framework of the Indigenous worldview.

Randy: And this, I think is just passing most people by who are, you know, excited about T.E.K. It's all a buzz, you know, in the Indigenous world. But let me give you an example of how T.E.K. actually plays out. And if we go back to one of our earlier shows, number 25 on Land Back and Rematriation, we discussed how the Heiltsuk First Nations in Canada used centuries of information based on observing their Pacific coastal territory, which provided them with an ever deepening understanding of how to sustainably manage fisheries that the Canadian regulatory agency seemed really quite unable or unwilling to apply.

Or on another show we've referred to the use of forest fires by the U.S. National Forest Service as they tried to control the forest fires that we mentioned at the beginning of the show by applying what they understood in a somewhat shallow understanding of T.E.K. Which is, gee, Native Americans used to let fires burn in the forest, unlike Smokey the Bear who viewed every forest fire as an evil which must be stopped. And because Native Americans allowed this to happen, they burned the brush in the forest. And the result was very often that when forest fires did happen, they were less intense and less damaging.

Carolyn: Okay, let's switch from real world disconnects or possible partial connects between people and nature and different world views to real world encounters between humans and Mother Earth. They keep on delivering important messages about cooperation, respect, reciprocity, and humility.

But mainstream culture keeps responding with fiction, which generally reaffirms domination. And it reaffirms a worldview of constant competitive struggle, not only for survival, but also for control over others. And this domination model is portrayed in the 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*, which Randy wants to talk about.

Randy: So what Carolyn just said is something that it has taken us a while to tease out of the messaging that's floating around out there and may help you, the listener. It's helped us as people who create this podcast to understand why there is so much misunderstanding and confusion about what T.E.K. is. So to go back to the *Lord of the Flies* - again, we're talking for a moment here not about a real world event like *[the Colombian]* children in the jungle. We're talking about a novel that was written by William Golding and this very famous novel, which is a part of the high school curriculum *[and]* has been for decades, was written to reject another novel written for children in the 19th century that was immensely popular.

This other novel that offended Golding was called "The Coral Island." And it was written by R.M. Ballantyne, who was quite a prolific author of children's books. So in the *Lord of the Flies*, we once again have something similar to the real world of event we mentioned of these four children. And in this case it's a bunch of children from basically upper class British private school, boarding school probably, who crash on an island in the South Pacific. And they struggled to stay alive. However, unlike the four children who had been taught by an elder to cooperate and take care of one another, they immediately do what their school and their education and their society and their parents sought for them to do. By being educated in a sometimes brutal abusive boarding school environment, they became hyper competitive. They became hierarchical. They turned on one another, and the novel has many gruesome turns and a not very pleasant ending before they're finally rescued.

It's almost the exact opposite fiction narration of how young people placed in a natural environment will respond.

Carolyn: Well, I mean, I want to point out about *Lord of the Flies*, the only character who has any amount of empathy or sense of connection with the natural world or any effort to let his own judgment and feelings take priority over the brutal struggle with the others is someone who ends up getting killed by the others.

So it's a really grim novel and it's at the end - first time I read it at the end, you think, oh goodness, because an adult shows up like the adults are coming to rescue the kids before they finish attacking and turning on, killing each other. But of course, the adult shows up from a larger world in the middle of Cold War, threats of nuclear holocaust, everything else.

So the obvious question is, who is going to rescue the adults on the rest of the planet? Again, it's grim. Randy, do you have anything more you want to say about Lord of the Flies?

Randy: No just, we're going to explore this in a moment. The book that Ballantyne wrote, *Lord of the Flies*, actually -

Carolyn: - you mean Golding -

Randy: I'm sorry, Golding -wrote, refers to another novel that was extremely popular called *The Coral Island* which has a positive ending, again, based on people cooperating to survive. So Golding, you know, really had it in for people who wanted to deliver a message about cooperation amongst humans and cooperation with nature.

Carolyn: Yes, well, I think *Lord of the Flies*, this whole worldview of brutal struggle for domination, won by the most brutal and least empathic, least cooperative, shows the cultural force of adults' fears that their children won't be prepared to survive in the real world unless they are prepared for constant struggle to be top dog.

And by contrast, the worldview of Ballantyne, the young adult author that Golding was trying to supplant, emphasizes survival through cooperation. And Ballantyne's first book, one that made him most famous at the start, *The Young Fur Traders*, 1856, is based on the author's first hand experience in Northern Canadian forests. The theme is cooperation between fur traders and Indians and the view of the natural world as filled with different beings that people can understand and get along with.

So here's one example. There's Charley; he's a teenage protagonist. He's spending his first time in the wilderness; he's canoeing with the fur traders. He's sitting around the evening fire and his hair gets burned. He's admonished by one of the experienced voyageurs, quote, "Oh, monsieur, you will learn to observe things before you have been long in the wilderness. If you will edge round to leeward (downwind) of the fire, you can't expect it to respect you." ⁴

^{4 4} Ballantyne, R.M.: *The Young Fur Traders*, page 77. Originally published in Edinburgh, 1856. Available as e-book through Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6357/6357-h/6357-h.htm>

So note that the fire is seen as a natural object, which also has some volition. And the whole thought process of you have to do things to show that you respect and understand the fire, and then it will respect you.

Randy: So the fire is actually viewed as an animate force, which is a discussion that has come out in interviews with Indigenous people, First Nations people in Canada fighting the forest fires. They refer to it in animate terms as the “mother fire”, or “escapee.” And like the children in the jungle, they are respectful of this, but they also view it as some thing, not just a thing to be fought.

Carolyn: So we'll pick up on this essential challenge, the difference between the world of competition and the world of cooperation. When we return in just a minute with segment two, stay tuned.

Segment Two:

Carolyn: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives. And we're talking about the whole theme of competition or cooperation when it comes to humans dealing with each other and with the world of nature.

Randy: So before the break, we left the fictitious character, young Charley, in the northwest wilderness, in this book, *The Young Fur Traders*. And he had just singed his hair and he was learning about the wilderness. Now, you might get the impression from the quote that somehow, you know, Charley is a little intimidated. In fact, if you read this children's book, it's absolutely astounding because it very respectfully honors this young man's desire to get out into the wild. He finds it intriguing and inviting, not at all scary, not at all intimidating or to use the expression we often hear in modern society, “It's a jungle out there.” Charley doesn't view the wilderness as a jungle or as a threat, but a place that beckons.

So in many ways, he's on the same wavelength as these young children in the jungle in Colombia.

Carolyn: And also Charley as a character in the book, he's - he loves physical activity. He loves, he breaks a - gets a very untamed violent horse to be willing to carry him and not buck him off, after a number of incidents. He just loves these challenges, but it's the challenge for the sake of the excitement and the camaraderie between himself and the other people, and himself and the forces of nature. So it's - it's a very different view of the world, actually profoundly different view.

Randy: And although he views the world of nature as challenging - as certainly these four young children were taught by their grandmother to view the jungle - it's a respectful view of the challenge, not a terrifying view of the challenge. It's an opportunity to grow and to connect, but also to learn from the lessons that the wilderness and that the wild bring to us.

Carolyn: Okay. So picking up on this dominant mainstream society in the United States pushing both adults and children in the process of socialization to be able to compete: there was an incredible example that happened just this year of a pushback by advocates of competition. It was a baseball coach of kids in some sort of league - against advocates of cooperation. And it occurred when a baseball coach took offense. He overheard one of the children on his team - they're talking to the other kids, talking about how trees communicate with each other. This child had heard about Suzanne Simard's research on the Mother Tree. There are a number of children's books out now that have nice pictures and talk about, you know, how the trees send messages to each other and help each other out.⁵ The coach was angered, and let his opinion be known, contacted the parents.

He didn't like the idea of trees cooperating with each other. He didn't want the children to talk about trees cooperating with each other! He felt that was undercutting the ethic of competition that he wanted his team to have in order to win their baseball games. And when I first heard this, I thought this, this just was sort of crazy because what's the connection between trees and kids in a baseball game, baseball league? But then I realized it's the whole - if you have a deep view of the world as being cooperative, it's going to give you a different mindset. And that, I guess, was what the coach was seeing as a real threat to his team winning.

Randy: So lest our listeners misunderstand us, we're not opposed to anyone - and certainly young children - being involved in competition.

Carolyn: It's fun!

Randy: We both spent much of our youth involved in sports. The problem is then, when it's, as Carolyn was saying, when it's competition such that the winner takes

⁵ For example, Tara Kelley (Author) and Marie Hermansson (Illustrator): Listen to the Language of the Trees: A Story of How Forests Communicate Underground. Dawn Publications, 2022.

all, and you're either a winner triumphant over the adversary, which is your fellow man, or our other than human kin or nature, or you're not.

And nobody wants to be a loser in this world.

So this circles us back to the ethic, the values that underlay what we refer to as capital T, capital E, capital K – T.E.K. And it's the values that are being neglected in much of the literature that's written about and celebrating T.E.K.

The values are that we respect nature and that we want to cooperate in a reciprocal manner with nature. And we both - or we all - win in that cooperation. That's an entirely different message than *Lord of the Flies*, where you either win or you lose, or in some cases you die. So we keep returning to this notion of what is T.E.K., and as I keep saying, Traditional Ecological Wisdom combined, what are these values trying to teach us about surviving in the modern world? So this - this cultural struggle goes pretty deep. And as Carolyn has been discovering in some of her reading, it has some rather strange manifestations.

Carolyn: Okay, sounds like my cue. I've read a couple of books recently by an American author, Ty Gagne. He lives in New Hampshire. He's an outdoorsman, a survival specialist, and he participates in mountain rescue squads. So he has written several books about people who have either survived or died climbing the White Mountains in New Hampshire. And one book in particular, I found deeply moving. It's called *Where You'll Find Me: Risk, Decisions, and the Last Climb of Kate Matrosova*.⁶

And Matrosova was a vibrant, super fit, very intelligent young woman who died making - trying to make her traverse over the tops of a couple of these mountains in wintertime. And she is the kind of person who loved pitting her strength and her willpower against odds. She was very successful in her business life. She was successful in her outdoor activities. She did tons of stuff, but she developed the whole mindset that I can do it as long as I have enough strength and enough willpower; I can just push on through and win.

⁶ Gagne, Ty: *Where You'll Find Me: Risk, Decisions, and the Last Climb of Kate Matrosova*. Conway, New Hampshire: TMC Books LLC, 2017. Also see Ty Gagne's *The Last Traverse: Tragedy and Resilience in the Winter Whites*. Conway, NH: TMC Books LLC, 2020.

And she lost her life. Lost in her last climb because she totally underestimated the violence of the winds, the power of the winter world. And she did not know the specific mountain terrain as well as someone who would've - who's a native, who had frequently knew the area really well. The contrast with the four Colombian children is again, evident. The children did not panic and they did not give up. And when adults who are very fit don't make it in extreme climbing conditions, quite often it's panic, it's disorientation. They lose their ability to make good decisions. They suffer hypothermia. They don't make it. So this is always a risk in any extreme situation. But the children problem-solved, they obviously cooperated together. The 13 year old apparently gets tremendous credit for caring for the others and using her wits and her knowledge and in cooperation with the forest. If they had panicked, they would have not made it. They didn't panic. And that's crucial.

Randy: Yes. On the other hand, you know, between panic and indifference and overestimating your abilities is the very essence of T.E.K. , which is learn to listen to the world around you, the signals it's sending. Learn to listen to yourself. And the tragedy of what happened to this mountain climber Carolyn is talking about is that she didn't listen. She didn't see what was before her very eyes.

Carolyn: Okay. Time for another break, back in a minute.

Segment Three

Carolyn: Welcome back to the third segment of Indigenous Perspectives. And we'll just pick it right up.

Randy: Let's return to this theme of truly listening, truly seeing and observing in the world, particularly the natural world around us. It's easier said than done. And as we've been emphasizing in this show, these young children who survived, and Indigenous people from millennia, had to listen and learn and see and smell and taste and feel in order to survive. To not listen, to not taste, to not remember which food you know, and which bitterness is safe and which one is danger, is an absolute threat to your existence. So what we're asking of people in the modern world is to slow down and to look at the signals that are being sent to us by Mother Earth. Took us a long time to catch up to the signals that were being sent about climate change, about plummeting fisheries, about the extinction of species.

And it's no surprise to many of our listeners to realize that long before scientists concluded with all of their measurements that things were headed in the wrong direction, people at the North Pole who are Indigenous, were saying, the ice is melting, the ice is melting, come and see it, please. Or, you know, our animals upon which we depend, the food that we forage, is beginning to vanish; the fish that we need for our survival. They're declining. But modern science was slow to observe and to listen and see the obvious.

So what T.E.K. - "TEK" - is insisting is that we slow down, wake up, listen, become reconnected to the natural world, and that then we take the appropriate reciprocal activity of supporting those systems. We don't just drive them to the breaking point or engage in some sustainable activity so that we can extract a little more from the fishery or a little more from the forest. And I think this is a theme that's dear to you, Carolyn is the economic driver behind turning off the listening device.

Carolyn: Well, we're back into the short-term benefit, short-term profit and long-term survival. And humans, just in terms of so many decisions, we tend - at least culturally influenced by mainstream culture, where at least I am right now, - the focus is on your own short-term gratification or your own short-term profit. And it's really hard to say, well, if I don't do this bad thing today, it will benefit me in the long run. It's hard. And this is why with Traditional Ecological Knowledge, T.E.K., the decision making is in a framework of respect, views of the rest of the natural world as related to us, and a framework of people having to cooperate and think of the impact on others and on the future generations.

And I wanted to pick up on Randy's point about people needing to look at the warning signs, listen. And the really - the haunting story of Kate Matrosova is that she did have, she would've had warning signs on her body because when she was found, she was dehydrated. I mean, you know, plenty of warning signs physically if she had been able to act on them. Warning signs, literally in terms of warning signs that were posted on the trail about people die here in the wind, die along this trail in the winter, proceed at your own risk. And warning signs from the natural world as well as obvious like weather forecast warning signs - which she did not pay attention to. So it's easy to say, I'm going to be tough, forge ahead and ignore the warning signs. But we do so at our peril, and I think we're seeing that more and more.

Randy: Yes. We - we don't have sometimes printed signs posted along the highway other than, you know, speed limit and traffic warnings saying, slow down. Slow down the heating of the environment. But, perhaps we should, because we aren't getting the message, because we aren't listening, we aren't tuned in. And, again, to return to the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, our televisions are now loaded with examples of what they call "Reality TV" where a group of people go off and live on an island and see who can last the longest -

Carolyn: - with video cameras all over the place - very realistic!

Randy: But, the point is it's about human domination - human triumphing over this adversarial environment. Is that really the message that we want to be delivering to the next generation about how to survive in the current world and current circumstances?

The younger generation is very often pushing back, but they're getting mixed messages. They're utterly confused, as are many of us.

Carolyn: Yes. And the messages people get, like there are a lot of books about cooperation for little kids, then you move into the teenage books and the adult, and the whole framework is what you have to do to succeed. It's brutal."It's a jungle out there" - struggle, you know, "look out for number one".

And then you see the decisions being made by the people with tremendous power - the heads of banks, the heads of fossil fuel corporations, the politicians. They're making decisions based on their short-term gain and they are ignoring the warning signs for the whole planet because it doesn't affect them personally in the here and now. Or they feel they'll somehow escape it. So it is, it is quite a mess.

Randy: So, we'll, we'll see in time whether this wonderful story of the four young children in the Colombian jungle becomes something more than a fleeting passing wonderful story, or whether it becomes something capable of being written about.

I'm sure there'll be a movie made about it, but will it endure and will it be able to hold its own against the *Lord of the Flies* as a required text reading in high schools for young people? The answer is not in the literary merits. The answer is in our own culture and the question we have to ask ourselves, which message do we want to deliver: one of absolute brutal competition and domination, or one of cooperation and engaging the natural world?

Carolyn: And I'd also add, do we want to deliver a message of dependence on authority figures? Or, trust in your own judgment of what appears like the right thing to do for you with your own values that most people, again, grow up, they're born, in their family hopefully experiencing cooperation and helping each other out. So how do they lose that?

Randy: So we'll take a break and be back for the wrap up.

Segment Four

Carolyn: Welcome back to the final segment of Indigenous Perspectives, our show on Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge, T.E.K. And we're going to pick up the discussion of the relationship between T.E.K. and mainstream culture. We've been saying this is a story of competing values, which is differences in reasons why people act in the ways they do, specifically looking at impacts on the environment. So T.E.K. - Traditional Ecological Knowledge, "TEK" - is based on a radically different mindset than mainstream culture.



The Traditional Ecological Knowledge Elders Group of the Mississaugi First Nation in Ontario, Canada, speaks out in favor of plants and against aerial spraying of the chemical herbicide glyphosate⁷

And it fundamentally challenges the accepted mainstream motivations behind people's actions. And here we come to a problem that Randy and I have been working for quite some time to sort of tease out and understand: when mainstream groups try to pick and choose what aspects of T.E.K. they want to use. In other

⁷ Photo credit: Gerry Kingsley for Sudbury working-group of The Media Coop
<https://sudbury.mediacoop.ca/story/tek-elder-demonstration-august-2815/34013>



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words: do this to help the salmon? or, do this to make sure that the earth will stay more fertile for next year's crops?

If they do this, and ignore the T.E.K. mindset, this is cherry picking, “pick and choose” without the framework. The framework to make T.E.K. meaningful is the Indigenous mindset of respecting the other-than-human kin, cooperating with the natural world because humans are a part of it, not the dominating victorious creatures. Randy, can you explain more about this?

Randy: Yes. Let me loop back to an example that I alluded to but didn't fully develop, which is, as Carolyn said, people that we might consider to be enlightened and open-minded about the value of T.E.K. TEK and how they appropriate it in a piecemeal fashion. And by doing so, in a sense, pull it apart so that it doesn't really work. The example I alluded to was the US Forest Service reading about hearing about T. E. K. and how Indigenous people used to use fire to burn the understory, the brush in the forest.

Carolyn: Or they'd let it burn if there was there a lightning strike, they'd let the forest burn until it burned out.

Randy: Correct. And the idea very quickly was, oh gee, there were fewer forest fires where that understory was burned. The forest management people then jumped to the conclusion that Indigenous people did this in order to prevent forest fires, when in fact they did it because it gave them the kind of environment they needed to grow the berries and forage and rejuvenate certain trees.

Carolyn: Well, and the whole idea of the shifting cultivation, you clear an area in the woods, you plant your three sisters - your squash , beans and corn – and your other edibles. And then after the soil fertility wears out in that area, you relocate, you find another place, you clear another place, and *[in]* your original farm village area, the forest grows up around it. But you do this as part of a multi-year cycle.

Randy: Correct. So the problem here is that modern scientists who, as Carolyn said “cherry pick” , look at this technique, this literal physical activity of burning the understory and say, oh, let's do that just like Indigenous people did.

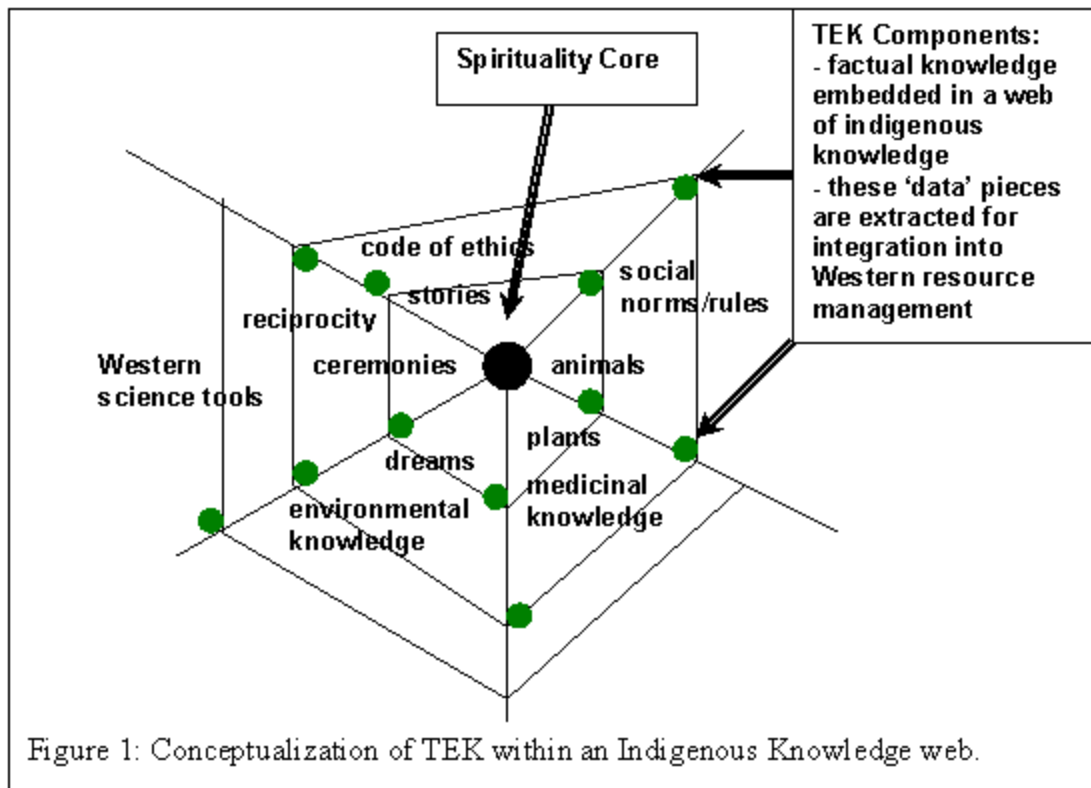


Forest fire⁸

So about a year and a half ago the U.S. Forest Service decided that it would push back against increasing forest fires in California, and they would have controlled burns and burn away the understory. Only they neglected to do what T.E.K., Traditional Ecological Knowledge, would require, which is think about the context and the conditions in which you do this. So the Forest Service decided to burn the understory in a year of intense climate change driven heat and drought and high winds. And guess what? They set one of the biggest forest fires in entire California history. They ended up doing exactly what they were trying to combat because they tore a mechanical process out of its historical and cultural context and applied it somewhat mindlessly.

So the point we're trying to make here is that you don't just shop and choose and pick some part of T.E.K. that you like and glom onto your forestry management or your farming management or your fisheries management scheme.

⁸ Image credit: Jean Beaufort, [CC0 Public Domain](https://www.publicdomainpictures.net/en/view-image.php?image=211826&picture=forest-fire) license.
<https://www.publicdomainpictures.net/en/view-image.php?image=211826&picture=forest-fire>



By G. Casimirri, Faculty of Forestry, Earth Sciences Centre, University of Toronto⁹

You have to think and feel like an Indigenous person. You have to ask the question, why am I doing this? Will it benefit those who live here? Will it benefit the trees? Will it benefit the other-than-human creatures? Or am I doing this just in the desperate hope that it's going to benefit humans? So again, I think, to go back to Indigenous culture, these values and these practices need to be adhered to with the ethic of Indigenous peoples, which is one of humility, not overestimating, understanding, a precautionary principle of trying not to do harm, and listening and respecting and loving our other-than-human kin.

Carolyn: Yes. I'd also add to have that same kind of inclusive respect and efforts to cooperate, to extend that also to our fellow humans because the root of a lot of decisions that we can see are taking our societies and our globe down the non-sustainable path of too much destruction of our ecosystem - a lot of the root of that

⁹ Image credit: Casimirri, G.: Problems with integrating traditional ecological knowledge into contemporary resource management. Paper submitted to the XII World Forestry Congress, 2003, Québec City, Canada. <https://www.fao.org/3/xii/0887-a3.htm> Author's note about Figure 1: "It is important to note that Figure 1 is the author's own representation of one way that TEK can be conceptualized and is based primarily on literature by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars and therefore could not and does not suppose to represent an Aboriginal perspective of indigenous knowledge".

is arrogance and wanting to get one's own way and not respecting the wishes of, and the ideas of others, human or non-human.

Randy: So if there's a message I guess we would want to leave our listeners with on this particular podcast, it's, we appreciate it when you tune in to what we're saying, but we urge you to listen more carefully and not think that reading one book or one article or seeing one TV documentary about how traditional people manage the environment and how gee easy it would be to do that. We're asking you to be humble. You know, not like the person who climbs a mountain in the winter and ignores the signs, but to act like people who've lived in the forest, in the wilderness for millennia.

Carolyn: Okay. Lots for us to think about and hopefully lots of things to try to act on as we move ahead.

Randy: So I hope this broadcast has given you time and space to reconnect with your roots in Mother Earth. Before your busy day distracts you from the moment, I encourage you to take a few minutes to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna, and perhaps even that of your ancestors. Allow yourself to touch and listen to their presence. Capture that moment and hold onto it. And also, if you will write to me and let me know about your experience, I can be contacted through my website, www.randykritkauskys.com where you can also find transcripts and supplemental materials for all Indigenous Perspectives shows, including today's.

Carolyn: Migwetch.

Randy: Thank you.

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