Indigenous Knowledge:

Research, Benefits and Indigenous Communities

RDK Herman,
Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian
Knowledge in Indigenous Contexts
Indigenous Knowledge

- is not “unscientific” but is derived through millennia of careful attention, consideration and experimentation;
- is intimately tied and finely tuned to the conditions of the local environment;
- is interwoven with cultural practices and values;
- these practices make for a sustainable lifestyle in a balanced community;
- survival depended on the accuracy of this information.
Western Knowledge…

- Derives from different historical, geographic, social and cultural circumstances;
- Was largely imposed through colonial processes;
- Has its own internal logic: the Scientific Method—a powerful tool;
- Is not ultimately “true,” but is often presented as such;
- Tends to over-write or ignore other ways of knowing;
- Has its own blinders that limit its understanding of the world;
- Is not sensitive to the conditions of local communities and environments.
Indigenous Knowledge: Overall Principles:

(1) Epistemology
**Hawaiian Spiritual Ecology**

**PO: SPIRITUAL WORLD**
Beyond the senses, not experienced, but deduced from understanding the manifest world.

**AKUA**
- "departmental gods" removed, distant deities

**'AUMAKUA**
- "familiar spirit," "guardian god";
- functions in the physical world

**MANA**
- 'Uhane soul, spiritual aspect of human beings;
  - always in contact with spiritual world

**ETERNAL LIFE**
- 'Aumakua (deified spirit)

**AO: PHYSICAL WORLD**
"World which is perceived because there is light." It is substantive because it is perceived.

**KINOLAU**
- (manifestations)
  - Plants
  - Animals
  - Phenomena

**KUPUA**
- demigods
- shape-shifters

**HUMAN BEING:**
- 'Uhane returns (deification)
- 'Unihipili (captured souls, used for sorcery)
- Lapu (ghosts)
- Kupapa’u (corpse)

- ‘Uhane wailua mana'o/no'ono'o na'au kino (body)
- Enters spirit world during dreams

- Chiefs
Nations
Indigenous Geography: Overall Principles:

(1) **Epistemology**

(2) **Ontology**
Indigenous Knowledge: Overall Principles:

(1) Epistemology
(2) Ontology
(3) Native Science
(4) Language
Born was the Ekaha coral living in the sea…

guarded by the Ekahakaha fern living on land

Born was the Kauila eel living in the sea…

guarded by the Kauila tree living on the land

Born was the ‘A’awa fish living in the sea…

guarded by the ‘Awa plant living on the land
Ownership of Knowledge:

Who has access to it?
Gender
Ownership of Knowledge:

Who has access to it?
When does one get access to it?
Age / Initiation
Ownership of Knowledge:

Who has access to it?

When does one get access to it?

Where is knowledge shared?
Ownership of Knowledge:
Who has access to it?
When does one get access to it?
Where is knowledge shared?
Knowledge ⇔ Responsibility
Marginal and Vulnerable position of Native Communities
Nations without States

- “Domestic, Dependent Nations” (USA)
- Drastic reduction of land base
- Minority Populations
  - “Indigenous,” not “ethnic”
- No official political voice
  - not members of Congress
  - not members of the UN
American Indian & Alaska Native Demographics

A. Population:
   1. 1.5% of US population, 2000 Census --3.8 % of the Canadian population.
   2. 1/3 live on reservations or designated American Indian areas;
   3. Many of the rest are in or near cities
   4. Average income is about 2/3s National average, USA & Canada.
      --twice the poverty rate

B. Tribal land holdings
   1. 48 contiguous states: 56 million acres, or about 3%
      --approximately the size of the state of Minnesota.
      -- Alaska Native corporations: 44 million acres (9.6%)
   3. Most individual reservations are small: < 2,000.
   4. Rights of tribes to fish, hunt, and gather off-reservation
   5. Legacies of broken treaties
   6. Conflicts with dominant society over resource use, access
Legacies of colonialism and Contemporary Research Issues:

“Data Mining”

Biopiracy and Patents

Epistemological Conflicts

Threats to persons, communities

Intra-community Conflicts
Who owns the data?

- Increasing role of Tribal IRB’s
- Need for good design from the start
VALUES
BENEFIT
OPENNESS
PARTNERSHIP
RESPECT
CONSENT
CONFIDENTIALITY
PROTECTION
RECIPROCITY

Front row, from the left: Maelich, Raegmwaay, Maeliisow, King Weeg, Yefaeng, Peeyal', Bicchilmwar.

Back row, from the left: Sarof, Yol'wa, Tahach, Yaepes, Wuuflaeg, Taengelmwar, Digiliyoal'.
Please walk softly on the Earth.

Thank you.