

Sacred Sites and the Environment from an Indigenous Perspective – 19 May 2006

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They are Wakan

They are two things which most indigenous people share in terms of sacred sites and the environment:

1. A historical connection to a particular place and
2. A belief system which ascribes a spirit to everything in their environment

To indigenous people sacred sites are:

1. places of ancestral burials,
2. places to commune with God, or
3. places of significant historical events (e.g., stories, legends),
4. our relationships with the universe.

All people at one time believed in spirituality and had sacred sites.

But as man has found scientific reasons for many things which were once inexplicable, man drifts further away from the idea of spirituality.

And yet, the more human beings discover the more we find unexplainable.

For example, we have traveled into space – stepped on the moon but may never truly grasp the concept of infinite space !!!

Yet, even though many people may not believe in spirituality, they still have reverence for the burial sites for their own relatives. And in the time of great distress, they often turn to prayer.

Also, as mankind has become more mobile and settles in places where he has no ancestral ties, he fails to understand, and therefore acknowledge, the indigenous peoples he contacts and displaces, and likewise doesn't believe in the sacred sites on which he trammels.

There are not his ancestors, nor the places where he worships. He has no connection with them, is not bound to them by history, and therefore, feels no loss or remorse when they are exploited or destroyed.

We, as indigenous people, still maintain these connections with our sacred sites; with our ancestors, and the Creator.

But even more important than our ancestral connection to sacred sites is indigenous people's belief that *everything* in the environment has a spirit, and a divine purpose.

You see, we believe that the Creator made everything, and since the Creator is a spiritual being then everything made by the Creator likewise has a spirit.

It is this one belief that keeps us as Indigenous people from exploiting anything to the point of extinction or permanent damage.

Not only would we be causing irreparable damage to the environment that surrounds us, and upon which we are dependent, but to do so would be to disrespect the Creator.

Indigenous people must today endure the insatiable appetites of faceless corporate giants.

Managed by people who may never set foot in our country, who will never witness the havoc they bring to the environment. As long as it's not in their own back yard, they care little for anything other than their bottom-line profits.

There are some sacred sites, such as the Mound builders of the Southeast USA in Macon, Georgia, which exist in the heart of large cities. These sites are symbols of a people and must be revered and honored as some would respect the artifacts in a museum.

Let me put it this way.

In my language, we refer to the Creator as "Wakan Tanka".

The Greatest Spiritual Being.

The word "Tanka" meaning "large" or "great".

The word "Wakan" meaning "Spiritual" or "Holy".

"Wakan" is formed by two root words...

"wa" meaning "snow" or "purity".

"kan" meaning "aged", "old", or "timeless".

Together they describe what we believe is spiritual or holy; that is

"to be of ancient or timeless purity".

Therefore, we believe that sacred sites and the environment are "Wakan".

- They are sacred
- They are holy
- They are of timeless purity
- "They are Wakan".