



How Does Culture Enable Environmental Sustainability?

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How does culture enable environmental sustainability?

I will address the question at hand from what can be described broadly as a North American Aboriginal perspective. From this perspective “culture” and the “environment” do not constitute separate spheres that can be thought of autonomously from each other with some degree of mutual influence. Instead, they form integrated systems that are best thought of as cultural landscapes in which culture and the environment are co-created through sustained interaction.

- A cultural landscape represents a new form – at once cultural and natural, tangible and intangible, experienced and imagined – that is greater than the sum of its parts.

It follows that from this perspective cultural and environmental sustainability cannot be considered in separate terms.

I thought I would try to illustrate this point with these quotes from a recent Canadian nomination for inscription on the WH list which was prepared by a partnership of First Nations communities. As they describe it for us, Pimachiowin Aki - a large Aboriginal cultural landscape in central Canada - is sustained by the inextricable relationship between culture and the environment.

“Pimachiowin Aki (the land that gives life) is an ancient, continuous and living cultural landscape in which the Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe people), the forest, waters, fish and wildlife, and all other beings, are understood and safeguarded as one living entity.”

“The Anishinaabeg modify the landscape to sustain their lives and culture, while also sustaining the boreal shield ecosystem. The Anishinaabeg and the land are inseparable.”

When applied more broadly, the Aboriginal perspective implies that international dialogues on environmental sustainability should be integrated with parallel conversations on cultural sustainability, rather than simply consider how culture can complement science or established protected area strategies toward the overriding



objective of environmental sustainability. In other words, marrying the goals of environmental and cultural sustainability means considering the full “ecology” of place in both human and natural terms.

- For example, one of the conclusions to come out of this month’s US/ICOMOS International Symposium is the need to promulgate the integration of cultural and natural resources in historic urban landscapes toward a sustainable future

In the case of Aboriginal cultural landscapes, sustainability depends on the continuation of a dynamic engagement between culture and the environment that underscores collective identity, social structures, livelihoods, economic activities and even land based politics.

- This dynamic engagement is composed of a wide range of practices, many of which can be routine and unremarkable. They include hunting and fishing (top picture), traditional harvesting, building seasonal camps, travelling on the land (middle picture), storytelling, ceremonial events, passing on traditional knowledge and skills (bottom picture), commercial activities and, increasingly, claiming rights based on historical ties to place. All of these practices renew and reinforce the cultural landscape.

In other words, sustainability is tied to the ongoing renewal and relevance of the relationship between culture and the environment, which fosters a deep sense of responsibility and stewardship on the part of Aboriginal groups for their traditional lands (and a common sense that the land too is a nurturing force for the people that inhabit it).

- The perspective is that the people are caretakers of their traditional lands and that the lands themselves also take care of the people.

Conversely, the culture and environment become vulnerable when the relationship is diminished or becomes progressively less relevant to one or more aspects of life.



- The main threat, as one elder in central Canada described it, is essentially if the survival of the people becomes divorced from the survival of the land.

To quote again from the Pimachiowin Aki nomination...

“Anishinaabe traditional knowledge, language, spirituality and customary governance are central to sustaining this living cultural landscape and fulfilling an Anishinaabe sacred duty to protect the land for future generations.”

Again, applying this idea more broadly, environmental and cultural sustainability can be productively fostered if the fate of the two are linked within a given place or landscape. This means not only considering how culture or cultural practices can enable environmental sustainability, but also how the environment and interactions with it can foster cultural sustainability and continuity. This can be promoted by an integrated discourse between the natural and cultural heritage fields around the idea of ‘living’ cultural landscapes (which can be rural, seemingly ‘wild’ or urban) that are evolving and adaptive systems in which cultural and environmental sustainability is a combined objective.