

A return to tribes

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
17 November 2005

Culture Change Letter #114

Petrocollapse and sustainable culture

The native American peoples had incredibly rich cultures to match the incredibly rich natural environment in which they flourished. The European invaders justified land-grab and genocide by claiming the "Indians" were lazy sinners because they were not "productive" in clearing the forests. The culture that soon dominated the continent is traced to the present, giving us global climate change. The problem is intractable when technological "progress" bamboozles the mind and we lose touch with nature.

What has been lost in human life and by snuffing out hundreds of indigenous languages and cultures is barely fathomed, as is the extinction of three species each hour nowadays. The sheer ignorance and greed of the white invaders also decimated oral histories, customs, knowledge and a spiritual love of the Earth. Some kind and reasonable white immigrants came as well, but could not stop the overall thrust of the conquering society.

This disaster and stealing of the native Americans' land is still going on, my friend, as Buffy Sainte-Marie sang in "Now that the Buffalo's Gone." Now much of what remains for the descendants of the traditional tribal Indians is sad, scattered and betrayed -- a "minority" of Americans that the majority writes off as failed losers. Like an aged, weathered buffalo hide with holes that barely affords protection from the rain, the Indians (herein so termed) have been pushed toward degradation and major suffering because they have been deprived of their lands and culture.

More casinos are a solution to cash flow problems, but Mother Earth is paved over with huge parking lots, and grid electricity usage is another strain on the environment. Gambling is an old tradition, but when it's a business it's a poor substitute for sustainable projects.

However, Indian culture (to include all remaining indigenous, traditional cultures) has two things going for it: (1) much of it is still known, either from extant examples such as tribes in the Southwestern U.S. or from books and stories, and (2) the future belongs to those who will surmount petrocollapse and adopt time-proven ways of relating to the land and fellow humans.

Shamans and basket-weavers never went away entirely. They will come back strongly as soon as petrochemical medicines and plastic bags, for example, go by the wayside. Because the timetable is really a lot shorter than the typical oblivious modern shopper suspects, a return to tribal organization is indicated and should be strongly encouraged. The only model of sustainability the world has is native, traditional cultures. The dominant culture of commercialism calls them "primitive." Would you rather be part of a tribe that lives for ten thousand years or more, or be part of a technological consumer culture that appears to have a limited span of perhaps 150 years at most? The Oil Age has been going for about a century. No one knowledgeable puts the oil age past the middle of the 21st century. Some of us see it ending much sooner.

Are DVD machines, strip mines, automobiles and other weapons of mass destruction worth the brief gratification brought by reductionist science? People see some convenience, but conveniently ignore that it's mostly to the benefit of greedy corporations. The common assumption of those who do not accept voluntary conservation and who believe in endless economic growth cannot visualize anything but a continued resource-extractive society. The overtly materialistic culture is utterly lacking in respect for our fellow creatures and other peoples' cultures. Instead, extermination and firepower are revered, especially by the U.S. power structure and many myopic citizens.

The U.S. and other consumer societies are barren of historical perspective and feeling for life around us. The land, air and water are alive. We cannot cut off a part of our whole organism and expect to endure, let alone become better off through faith in technology and more "growth";

People agree that more community is a good thing, but they often draw the line at supporting the idea of commune or tribe -- even though those concepts are the essence of community. It is no accident that communes (communists?) and tribes usually have a bad name, because they are the opposite of capitalism. And today, Iraqi insurgents are sometimes said to be of tribes -- and the corporate media are of course anti-insurgency.

Were the hippies neo-Indians?

The hippies of the 1960s onward were an advance force of a larger movement that has yet to come into full view and triumph. The hippies -- although not a monolithic, homogeneous segment of the population -- embodied many of the values of the Indians: respect for nature, tribalism, spiritual connection to the Earth and Universe, and disdain for materialism. At least it can be said that the hippies questioned the technological and statist trends that stultified the masses of consumers.

The hippies never went away. Some "sold out," others died, and many were born after the heyday of the 1960s. They are here and there, of all ages, and some congregate at concerts and other gatherings such as at the Rainbow Family's. So we have today a fringe population of hippies or a close approximation of that stereotype. Many of these people are in an underclass or are anarchists living tribally and somewhat separately from mainstream

society. Many live in cooperative housing of various types including co-housing communities, communes or other cooperative arrangements, where they pool resources to buy in bulk. They may support Food Not Bombs charitable assistance and offer hospitality to visiting activists and other friends.

Many of today's quasi-tribal citizens are back-to-the-land nature-lovers who do not trust complex, distant, unaccountable systems that control the citizenry. Some are totally outraged by the war machine and the ravages of globalization, prompting these folk to seek alternative social sustenance -- ideally, far from urban blight. Whether rural or urban, local, anti-corporate economics are lauded as supremely preferable, although pursuing it purely is quite difficult.

To paint a balanced picture: many hippies today are poorly informed on sustainable living, while a middle-class or wealthy person of conventional habits may be much more aware of critical issues and may even be well skilled for the post-petroleum future.

I am convinced that a revival of American Indian tribes will begin to occur as soon as the trappings of Western Civilization break down and start to dissolve. This is because the Indians' culture came out of this land. Despite the destruction of so much of the biosphere, the basic patterns of nature and the landscapes are still here to give rise anew to lifestyles, stories and reverence that relate directly to the rocks, critters, sky, stars, weather and everything around us.

Climate change and the loss of over 95% of the old growth forests to date, and the disappearance of species in their former glory, will make for different cultures that evolve. But after the balance of nature is mostly restored -- if people have survived because they have not been too ecocidal -- there will eventually be a similar utilization of the land that the Indians employed and enjoyed for millennia.

The wealth of knowledge and skill the Indians used was not deficient for their success and longevity. In fact, it was artful and totally sustainable.

Today's activists are more advanced than the hippies in terms of sexual equality and fairness, and so have embraced on the land the concept of The Three Sisters. Culture Change editor moth explains:

"The three sisters, corn (maize), beans and squash were and are a symbiotic partnership that provides an ecologically sustainable alternative to petrochemically derived pesticides and fertilizers. These three annual food crops were grown by many indigenous tribes throughout north/meso america with little need for extra supplements or massive irrigation systems like dams, water diversions and canals. Seasonal flooding of riparian floodplains also renewed the water table and deposited needed mineral nutrients in the fine silt sediment of the floodwaters."

Denial of Indians' success

Apologists for the disaster known as the U.S., i.e., fanatics for Western Civilization, are fond of defending their culture and history by pointing out that some practices of the Indians were objectionable and savage. It is as if the heads put on stakes in Pacific Northwest Indian villages after raids are just as bad as the European and U.S. assault on the whole planet. Some practices of some Indian tribes were indeed unjust and barbaric by most others' standards, and these included instances of slavery, bloodshed, bigotry, sexism, extreme superstition and waste of animal life. It is thought by many that the Indians killed off all the mammoths and other megafauna, although climate change played some role as well. But none of these practices threatened the ecosphere or even decreased the overall diversity of cultures.

The more I have studied the American Indians and other "primitive" cultures, the more respect I have for their systems of living and organizing their knowledge and activities. Initially I was simply envious, decades ago, of the intact ecosystem they dwelled in without decreasing carrying capacity. But as a canoeist, dweller of the forest, gatherer of wild herbs and foods, and student of sustainability, my heart weeps for the fabulous methods, materials and ceremonies that have been mostly erased from the world. It is easier for me than for some to appreciate the Indians and their traditional ways of living close to the land, because I have personally abandoned desires of owning property and defining security as material wealth protected by armed force (usually the state).

What surprises me after twenty years studying the Indians and trying to remedy the ravages of modern industrial society, I have only lately begun to glimpse how little I know about traditional Indian ways, beliefs and skills. For example, the kind of canoe most modern Americans can identify is only one style, that of the Ojibwa, of several kinds. In my role as an activist and critic of the dominant paradigm, I have had little opportunity to learn what I would like to know. I know that acorns must have the tannin leached out before they can be eaten, but I have yet to make any acorn dish.

When I was trying to stop urban sprawl and convince people to use bicycles and grow their own food, I was not going all out to learn Indian ways as a daily routine without computers, publishing, motorized travel, etc. But in my observing petroleum civilization and anticipating changes afoot, I am now able to say that our inevitable direction would appear to be a reinvention of Indian cultures. After some millennia, the "younger white brother," as some Indian tribes termed the European invaders and today's commercial culture, will represent a short phase of history in this hemisphere. Whether the future tribes are mostly white-skinned in much of north America is of little importance. A mixing of the "races" (there is only one race) can eventually prove better for resisting some diseases.

The hapless Unknown Consumer would be more inclined to enhance tribalism centered around natural living if there is (1) a chance of survival, and (2) there are advantages over today's hierarchical and regimented society. For example, open discussion and consensus are hallmarks of Indian tribes. Day to day living is a revelation for freedom and flexibility, when we consider that "primitive" peoples only spend a few hours a day, perhaps every other day, engaged in what can be called work: obtaining food, shelter, clothing, etc. There is much time for stories, dancing, and teaching children to live -- sustainably, ecologically and cooperatively.

Tribalism or technofixism?

Lest I be vilified for not appreciating modern amenities and discoveries, I wish to clarify that I don't advocate doing away with anything useful and sustainable.

Because the technofix is intellectually bankrupt and has no proven ability to serve as the hoped-for linchpin of a continued consumer economy, tribalism is at least as valid as the technofix. Most likely, anyone who dismisses tribalism is an adherent of the unproven technofix.

I should clarify that I don't believe it is possible or advisable to give up all technology. There is relatively simple, sustainable technology. Of the less sustainable varieties, they are relied upon today and members of modern society are hopelessly wedded to them. We will be weaned from them.

Technofixers are really would-be technofixers, because there is no experience where they have been put to the test without abundant petroleum. They will fail, just as technology has thus far failed to substitute for healthy nature. But the religion of techno-worship is pervasive today, especially among those able to swing their weight around. The business-as-usual Establishment relies on priests of technogrowth and quantity, otherwise known as economists. The feeling of self-worth among these unsuccessful but well-paid priests and planners are such that anyone not parroting the party line of technogrowth and conventional economics is attacked as a dreamer, charlatan, or worse. One reason for this is that deep down these priests and wannabes often suspect that their reforms are hopelessly lacking. When challenged with the need for fundamental change, they can only embrace the "doable" even when it is woefully insufficient for our seemingly dying planet.

The failed priests are having their last day. They have nothing to recommend them professionally in a post-petroleum future after the collapse of the global corporate economy.

The Indians of past success over their millennia have been interrupted by the growth mongers who invaded from Europe.

The return of tribes will feature no techno-worship, mostly because it will no longer provide the basics for human life.

Tribalism and other mitigations for petrocollapse

This column, having coined the term "petrocollapse," ought to provide a remedy to what many believe is tantamount to doomsday or apocalypse. So let us see how the re-forming of tribes can offer a solution to the utter breakdown of consumer culture and the corporate economy.

Tools for sustainability are essential for tribalism to take hold again across the landscape. Sixteen buffalo (American bison) have just been released in a new preserve in north-central Montana. This is hoped to be a beginning for a "buffalo commons," to help restore the ecosystem and eventually provide people what the buffalo provided so well for dozens of major tribes in food, clothing, shelter, fuel (dung), and implements. However, ranchers in the area are wary of buffalo ("disease-bearing") and so are ready to kill any animals who stray -- as happens when Yellowstone Park buffalo roam onto private property.

Understanding our carrying capacity improves from today's scientific research. For example, so severe was the effect of European diseases on the Indians from around 1500 that the Indian population was rapidly decimated. This resulted in less burning of grasslands and forest understory which were hallmarks of Indian hunting. Population of the Indians dropped to only about 5 million in the whole hemisphere from a level of 50-100 million Indians. The information of the "glut of greenhouse gases" prior to a "dramatic reduction" was developed by New Zealand's National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (source: Discover magazine, Dec. 2005).

However, a lesson is staring us in the face: 100 million in the hemisphere may be the maximum number of people that the Earth and climate can handle without industrialization.

One can philosophically pass off our historic climax of the cancer-like march of civilization -- with its overpopulation, car-traffic, fraying social fabric, acid rain, etc. -- as inevitable, to be superseded by a new culture of sustainability. But our ecological decline and socioeconomic vulnerability are so great that we need to carefully nurture our transition. The upheaval and chaos to come are going to test everyone's ability to quickly adapt to unfamiliar conditions.

Peak oil leaves no choice

For many of us, the transition will be like an immersion in the ocean of life after dabbling in a wading pool. There are many observers of society who look forward to the end of petrosociety and the undoing of the U.S. empire. However, whether we actually want the trucks to one day stop rolling into the supermarkets and Walmart, as petrocivilization peaks and falls off its own manufactured cliff, we are all going to have to deal with the impacts of peak oil.

A new study by Robert L. Hirsch indicates that global peaking of oil will be sudden, unpredictable in arriving, sharp like a tip rather than a bell curve, and the post-peak extraction decline will be steep rather than gradual. Hirsch suggests this might be the case if past peaks in various countries' and regions' oil extraction are any guide for the world as a whole (source: World Oil magazine, Oct. 2005).

There will be a sudden, shocking deficit of energy and materials from petroleum: Rather than a slow decline of global oil extraction that implies an across-the-board lessening of consumer demand matched by an ever-functioning corporate industrial economy, much oil pumping, refining and distribution will stop. This will be mainly because the market will take over as the main force and result in a virtual, complete shortage. (See previous Culture Change Letters including my speech for the Petrocollapse Conference, Oct. 5, 2005, #111) Much as a person deprived of oxygen can live only so

many minutes, an economy based on oil cannot go dry for long.

The main challenge the consumer/growth economy is faced with is that it is not designed to shrink in an orderly fashion. And, today's individual and national use of credit (living off debt) has outstripped actual income. (All these ideas are foreign to not just traditional Indian tribes but to the Jeffersonian democracy that once held sway.) Therefore, impossible demands for payment will exacerbate real deprivation, which will throw the whole system into a sudden paralysis.

In such a social environment, people will try to come together on a haphazard basis, first as couples and then gangs or families. They will quickly realize that they can do better as a team than on their own. The animal response to extreme hunger and lack of resources will be to seize whatever is available and defend it with violence if necessary.

However, those who have seen petrocollapse coming will have in many cases already considered who their band or tribe is, and will have tried to prepare for functioning without the artificial abundance of petrosociety. The percentage of U.S. citizens who have done this may be .001% at best. Upon die-off of a significant portion of the petroleum-addicted population, the percentage may turn around to 100 for survivors.

The crucial question is how well any band or tribe can start planning and acting for the future (as in a harvest of a planting in soil to be uncovered from pavement). This behavior is in sharp distinction to the momentary or short-term pursuits day to day. The stronger a tribe is, the more likely common defense and preparations for common survival will be undertaken successfully.

Whether these participants wear feathers and worship the moon or try to keep following the Judeo-Christian-Moslem sky god is irrelevant, as our evolution accelerates and we enter a new age. The cultures of the native Americans have mostly been destroyed, but enough is remembered and revered for them to come back in some form to predominate.*****

Santa Barbara county forest (Chumash land) November 18, 2005