

Multicultural Moments

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Indigenous Sustainability Practices

Since the first [Earth Day](#) in 1970, almost 200 nations have engaged in initiatives that take steps to protect and better the environment; however, Indigenous communities around the globe have engaged in such practices for thousands of years. This issue of Multicultural Moments features examples of those practices and how we can draw from Indigenous knowledge today to support sustainability.

What We Can Learn from Indigenous Practices. In a statement on [Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations](#), the United Nations identifies Indigenous Peoples as “inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and the environment.” If caring for the environment is inherent to Indigenous cultures, what are some practices that we can learn from these cultures?

- In the video, [3000-Year-Old Solutions to Modern Problems](#), Indigenous cultural historian Lyla June proposes returning some of the lands to the Indigenous community in addition to the following strategies to support sustainability:
 - Align yourself with nature vs. trying to control nature
 - Engage in intentional habitat expansion that makes space for plants and animals
 - De-center humans by not hoarding; instead provide for the species around you so that they, in turn, provide for you
 - Create designs that consider and plan for multiple generations to come
- A 2021 article, [How Aboriginal Culture Can Teach Us How to Live with Less and Tread More Lightly](#), highlights the work of a local Indigenous organization in Australia called Wayapa Wuurrk. The group focuses on taking care of the environment using ancient Indigenous principles that emphasize connecting oneself with the environment. Here are a few examples:
 - Observe nature
 - Purchase fewer things
 - Examine how your daily life connects with the land
 - Every day, think about how you can be a better caretaker of the earth
- Indigenous land management strategies, such as those outlined in this [Indigenous Land Management in Australia](#) fact sheet, involves collaborative and consultive strategies. Among them are involving Indigenous leaders in decisions, investing in systems that protect both the environment and Indigenous culture, and recognition of Indigenous land rights.

Indigenous Sustainability as a Social Justice Issue. Indigenous peoples manage, care for, or own almost half of the world's land mass, according to the 2020 The Guardian article, [Why Protecting Indigenous Communities Can Also Help Save the Earth](#). Given what many would describe as a current climate crisis, enlisting the support and knowledge of the Indigenous community and their knowledge is a matter of social justice.

- In her TED Talk, [The Sustainable Future Lies in Indigenous Tradition](#), Yasmeen Majalli shares examples of indigenous groups using native spices, dyes, and techniques to grow, create, and dye fibers for textiles as a way to sustainably make clothing. She challenges consumers to get to know where their clothing is produced and learn about the lives of those who produce them. According to Majalli, “true sustainability is inherently intersectional,” and involves addressing not only the environment but also human rights and the lives of indigenous people.
- The infographic, [Sustainable Use of Wild Species by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities](#) outlines how policy makers can support the human-nature relationship among Indigenous groups, particularly in relation to wild life.
- According to Eriel Deranger, Executive Director of Indigenous Climate Action, “Real climate solutions are rooted in...a return to and of the land and are rooted in decolonization” in the video [Indigenous Climate Action: Community-based solutions rooted in Decolonization](#). Deranger calls for solutions that are not focused on capitalism, which stems from colonization. Instead, she advocates for Indigenous people to speak up for the injustices against the land as they fight for other issues and calls for recognition for what Indigenous groups are already doing to alleviate climate change.

Indigenous Traditions Sharing Space with Modern. Researcher Victoria Reyes calls for collaborative efforts that involve research, indigenous knowledge, and local knowledge to support work on climate change (see [How Does Indigenous Knowledge Inform Sustainability?](#)). Here are a few examples of what happens when we involve Indigenous knowledge in our efforts.

- A CBS News segment, [Using Indigenous Knowledge to Tackle Climate Change](#), reports First Nation efforts in Saskatchewan that use of modern technology in combination with Indigenous knowledge from local elders. The indigenous value of considering both short-term and long-term impact on the land is helping those communities better tackle the climate crisis with Native populations playing a leadership role.
- In his TED Talk, [The Sustainable Brilliance of Indigenous Design](#), human rights activist Manu Peni, shares the story of returning to his village in Papua New Guinea after studying abroad. Peni build his home using modern materials despite the advice of the elders. His home did not withstand bad weather while other homes in the village, which were made of naturally and traditionally designed materials, did. He shares that “communities closest to climate crisis are also communities closest to some solutions” and calls for us to look to indigenous wisdom passed down for tens of thousands of years by those closely tied to natural resources.

- The pandemic saw a rise in the use of technology as we adapted to learning, working, and socializing virtually. This was also the method used for the [1st National Sustainable Favela Network Exchange](#), a 2023 event that brought together virtually more than 150 Indigenous and community members from several Brazilian states to engage in cultural exchanges and to debate issues such as climate change, sustainable housing, and food insecurity.
- Agroforestry is defined as the practice of growing plants, vegetables, and shrubs together to simulate what happens naturally in a forest. This ancient Indigenous practice is done to help the different plants live in harmony with and benefit from each other. To learn more about this technique and how it is used to support modern economies around the world, read the commentary [Agroforestry: An ancient 'Indigenous Technology' with Wide Modern Appeal](#).

May we avoid blaming or bias based on our circumstance and continue to be grateful for the gifts of the global community.

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