

INDIAN TRIBES AND CLIMATE CHANGE: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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When this land was Indian land life for the people of the plains and for the people who lived in the river valleys was hard and full of danger. For all, the loss of life and property occasioned by war and raids by neighboring bands was an ongoing concern. Grasshoppers like a plague could descend on the fields of the Mandans and Arikaras and leave in their wake a winter of hunger and death. Wild fire could destroy Sioux and Cheyenne encampments and drive the buffalo herds and the life-giving meat and hides those herds represented miles away from the arrows and spears of the Indian hunters. Floods that originated in mountains hundreds of miles away from the plains could sweep quickly down watercourses and just as quickly, brush the Indian farmer, his crops and his home from fertile river valleys.

Yet despite these hardships Indian people not only survived, they flourished. They flourished because they understood the dangers and they prepared ourselves to meet those dangers. They organized ourselves and developed and used new technologies such as the compound bow and the horse to meet natural and human challenges to our survival.

The dangers of winter were minimized by planning and organization. In the autumn the farmers harvested and stored their crops and the hunters hunted seriously so that the supply of meat might be adequate for the demands of winter. Women gathered vegetables and nuts and dried meat in anticipation of the snows.

When the buffalo did not appear or when fire or flood ruined hunting the Sioux moved on to more fruitful hunting grounds to avoid famine. These moves were neither spontaneous nor haphazard occurrences, but rather were extremely well organized undertakings which involved the coordination of the entire band. The Nacas, the civil authorities of the tribe made the decision of when and where to go. The Wakincuzas, "The One Who Decide," having chosen from among the several soldier societies one to act as police, would officially lead the procession. The pattern of movement was not haphazard; each family had a more or less permanent position, so that in moving, those whose lodge site was nearest to the direction of march started first.

The plan of march was likewise systematically determined. Far in the lead were three or four scouts, fanned out to the flanks to protect the body from ambush. To the sides and rear were the police, whose duty was to keep the people in order and at the rear of the caravan were additional scouts protecting against attack from that quarter.

Those dangers which confronted our ancestors were palpable, more manifest and in a sense, more susceptible to successful challenge. The risks of a surprise attack by raiders could be lessened by aggressive patrolling. Vigilance protected against fire and flood. Caches of food and seed protected against famine.

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But this is not pre-Columbian America. This is 2007 and the dangers Indian people face today are not nearly so obvious as those faced by our ancestors. The risks are more subtle and more invidious, much like the breath of the white traders that decimated the Mandan. The factories that dot our lands, the railroad lines and highways that lie on the same routes our ancestors trod bring to our lands, to our air, to our water, our food, and to our people unseen substances we call greenhouse gases that are as potentially devastating as was small pox and measles in an earlier time. But now as in the past, vigilance can protect us.

And that brings us finally to the question of what we should be doing about climate change. Tribal legal, scientific, and technical staff have the task of helping tribal leaders to prepare and to be vigilant and to protect Indian lands and Indian people from new and unseen dangers. Two hundred years ago tribal lawyers, scientists and technicians might have one of the 44 chiefs of the Cheyenne or one of the Wakincuzas of the Sioux, or they might have been dog soldiers or members of a warrior society or they might have been scouts or Akicitas charged with the protection of the people. Their titles today are different. Today they are GIS technicians, hydrologists, fisheries biologists, tribal planners, tribal council members or tribal chairmen—yet their underlying responsibilities today are really no different than they were two hundred years ago—the protection of the tribal resource and the people of the tribe.

Workshops, symposia, and conferences are the vehicles we use today to learn how to do exactly that—to protect the tribal resource and the people of the tribe. The context is different, but the thread that winds past the centuries and the miles and that binds the tribal scientists and technicians to the leaders of old is unbroken.