

Shepard Krech's *The Ecological Indian*: One Indian's Perspective

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I was raised between reservation and urban Indian communities where I learned through repeated storytelling that our culture(s) were inarguably superior to what we have been taught to think of as a wasteland of Euro-American culture. I was taught that frugal use of a natural resource was part of our undeniable spiritual understanding of resource use. Therefore, I might have found it difficult to read Shepard Krech III's 1999 book, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (W.W. Norton), in which he describes some of the historical hunting practices of tribes as non-conservationist. I might have found the graphic depictions of a buffalo kill and citations about wastefulness (according to a contemporary definition of "wastefulness") troubling given my perceptions of superior tribal cultural morality. This particular presentation of evidence was provocative, but my over-riding feeling in reading this book was to feel just a little vindicated.

Too often non-Indians have been disappointed by my contemporary manner of dress and my inability to spout mystical-sounding ecological wisdom. I've also been expected to know the entire histories and cultural practices of every tribe that occupied this land and have been greeted with suspicion when sometimes I know less than my inquisitor about the historical migratory patterns of a particular tribe. *The Ecological Indian* is a reminder that historical knowledge is not genetically mapped in one's blood (although I have seen this debated). Events and cultural practices are documented and handed down through time in stories, songs, poetry, through regular cultural practice, and even on paper. Many tribal cultural advocates insist on the necessity of continuing cultural practice in order to maintain cultural knowledge and we have resisted attempts to constrain such practice (i.e. through the American Indian Religious Freedom Act). Indeed, many of our cultural practices were expressly forbidden or otherwise inhibited in the European and American colonization that resulted in our losing land and the freedom to practice our cultures in their totality. Specific practices were lost or degraded and this threat is acknowledged when cultural advocates among us express concern with institutionalizing the transfer of present cultural knowledge to younger generations.

Yet, when Shepard Krech discusses loss (due to European and American policies and cultural inhibitions on tribal practice) of tribal cultural knowledge and sets this within his interpretation of historic tribal resource use as observed and documented by anthropologists, traders, and other non-Indians, he is automatically accused by some Indian critics and our advocates of distorting the facts and being anti-Indian. I caution us to remember that just because our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were forbidden the cultural autonomy and resources to engage in the cultural practices discussed in Krech's book, that anthropological and historical accounts are not therefore fabricated. We native critics can certainly argue about the contemporary interpretation of the evidence by White anthropologists such as Krech. We can also argue, as one review in *Indian Country Today* does, about the cultural biases imbedded in the observation, documentation, and interpretation of the cultural practices of our ancestors.¹ However, glossing over the painstaking research evident in this book in order to accuse the author of *concocting* rather than examining and interpreting facts shows considerable denial about the significant cultural autonomy and knowledge that we have been denied. For example, the esteemed Indian historian, Vine Deloria, has charged Shepard Krech with writing revisionist history that distorts the facts and that is anti-Indian:

It's nonsense. . .The Indians did not make any appreciable dent in buffalo numbers in the Northern Plains. It's anti-Indian stuff.²

[Scholars such as Mr. Krech] cook the facts to reach conclusions. . .I'm sure some Indians did over hunt, etc. –but dragging up some ancient incident does not cancel out what happened to this continent since the whites appeared.³

Shepard Krech does not try to “cancel out” White atrocities. Part of what is admirable about this book is the author's careful discussion of specific historical practices within a context of *tribal* spiritual beliefs about nature and how nature regenerates itself. Krech argues that tribal beliefs (as they were, not as they are) established moral standards that underlie tribal natural resource use in the past even if some practices were interpreted as wasteful and destructive within different historical value systems and within contemporary ecological, conservationist, and preservationist values. This is an understanding imbedded in every chapter of *The Ecological Indian* and one not grasped in most of the reviews I have read.⁴ Krech's attempts to interpret and describe without a hint of moralizing and judgment the religious beliefs that were at the root of tribal practice is a reason to find this book pro-human and within that, pro-Indian:

If buffaloes did not return when they were expected or in the numbers anticipated, it was not because too many were being killed but because they had not yet left their lake-bottom prairies. If buffaloes returned each year from the earth because they were of the earth, how could they possibly go extinct? How could one kill too many if one held to this belief?

Perhaps conservation and waste should be construed in other than narrowly utilitarian terms. It may be that wasting one's total relationship with buffaloes—a relationship expressed in religious and kinship idiom as well as in other ways—was far more risky than wasting a hide or an entire herd.⁵

He is also careful to mention the equally or greater destructive practices of Whites:

[White] Hunters flooded in; unskilled, they wasted three to five times the numbers they killed. The carnage defied description: four to five million killed in three years alone. Hunters went farther afield. Indian complaints of white hunters fell on deaf ears; their “guardians” in the Department of Interior linked the disappearance of the bison to the civilization and eventual assimilation of Indian tribes.⁶

Krech does not go into extensive detail about destructive White natural resource practice unless it is immediately relevant to the transformation of tribal practice. However, I don't take this as an indication that Krech is in denial about the culpability of Whites. This book is, after all, about debunking the stereotype of the ecological Indian, not about adding to the literature that discusses White degradation of land and natural resources.

Perhaps we weren't ecological “saints” (and Krech does an excellent job of pointing out how tribes could not have possibly adhered to ecological standards not constructed until this century). Nonetheless, this does not lessen the cruel colonial history of White America. It isn't only saints that are massacred, dislocated, and systematically oppressed. I don't see that it is necessary to demonize Krech for challenging a stereotype that, while it may be healing to an extent, helps perpetuate divisive identity politics underway in Indian Country, and de-legitimizes the efforts of tribes to govern ourselves if we are not perceived as *traditional* according to a narrow, generic, and romanticized view of what is traditional.

While skepticism is certainly warranted in light of several hundred years of systematic cultural denigration by Euro-American policies, religions, and scholarship, we should take care with our own scholarly integrity and refrain from making accusations that are difficult to defend. Like other Indians, I have always sensed the racism and power inequities inherent in the field of anthropology. The idea of spending one's life studying some other people seems voyeuristic. When study is undertaken by someone enjoying White skin privilege over their brown subjects, the situation is ripe for power inequities. But, that doesn't mean that some White anthropologists don't continuously battle with this inherent power inequity. In my mind, this is what it is to be a White person of consciousness: That one continuously battles with the ease with which he or she can use and abuse White skin privilege. I don't know if Krech follows this model, but I did find his examination of the evidence to be consistently non-judging, non-inflammatory, and respectful of the humanity of Indian people. We native people should diligently monitor for power inequities, but we should not reject as worthless the knowledge to be had from scholarship undertaken by non-Indians. In fact, the examination of theses such as Krech's would be an ideal research project for Indian graduate students. The cultural biases of tribal people would then be brought to bear in evaluating the questions Krech addressed and the sources used in his analysis.

Most reviews I have read base both criticisms and praise on assumptions that Euro-American perspectives on natural resource use are normative. Even Mr. Deloria's response to this book indicates the extent to which we Indians have assumed Judeo-Christian ideals of morality: There is good and there is evil. People are truth-tellers or they are liars. Morality is absolute; it is never ambiguous, not flexible, and it does not change over time. So, tribes could not have possibly killed buffalo in "appreciable numbers" and without using all of the buffalo—for whatever reason—because that would mean we were *wanton* and *wasteful* according to the Euro-American ideal we have assumed.

One reviewer that seems to have wholly misinterpreted Krech's line of argument wrote a particularly scathing review for *Indian Country Today*. That reviewer made a good point that Krech should have addressed the underlying motives of observers responsible for accounts that reflect unflattering (at least today) tribal natural resource practices. However, she missed in the introduction of the book the importance Krech places on defining *ecology*. The definition demonstrates how the contemporary concept of the word is laden with cultural understandings and definitions about "humanity, nature, animate, inanimate, system, balance, and harmony" that were not necessarily understood in exactly the same way in tribal philosophies about nature.⁷ The reviewer accuses Krech of using "twisted logic [to] absolve non-Indian commercial buffalo hunters from all guilt." As clarified earlier, at no point does Krech absolve Whites of all guilt. There are several statements in the review that indicate that the reviewer neglected to read significant sections of text. She accuses Krech of omitting references to "the impact of European metal traps on the beaver population [and of] the insatiable non-Indian demand for more and more pelts." Krech describes in detailed prose in the chapters "Beaver" and "Deer" the great extent to which Europeans desired beaver pelts and deerskin. He also discusses the wide distribution by merchants of steel traps—a method of killing that he says hastened the decimation of beavers. A particularly outrageous misreading is evident in the following quote:

Krech concludes by painting a terrifying picture of how American Indians continue to mismanage resources with terrifying results. . . Raising the threat of ecological or worse yet, nuclear holocaust, this anthropologist tries to scare his readers into the conclusion that American Indians must be stopped from controlling their own resources at all costs.⁸

This quote is in reference to Krech's discussion in the epilogue about tribes often favoring resource and other development projects *if* tribes are in control rather than at the mercy of the

Bureau of Indian Affairs with its history of negotiating bad financial deals. However, any terror expressed about tribal control of resource development belongs solely to the *Indian Country Today* reviewer. Krech conveys no such emotion. The reviewer's mention of "nuclear holocaust" is ludicrous. Shepard Krech does indeed discuss tribal consideration of radioactive waste facilities (along with opposition by other tribes), but in no way does he judge this to be *nuclear holocaust*. Again, that is the reviewer's judgment. Since such an event would involve an incident akin to the bomb-dropping in Hiroshima or a scenario such as depicted in the television film *The Day After* (and these are hardly the same as a spent nuclear fuel facility), I seriously doubt that Krech intended to convey any notion of tribes causing a nuclear holocaust.

A non-Indian reviewer writing for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* commented, "More than one tribe turned to reincarnation as an explanation (for slaughtering more buffalo than could be eaten)."⁹ The arrogance of this comment is probably not noticeable to a non-Indian reader, but it reveals to me how clueless the reviewer is about how fundamentally imbedded in some tribal spiritualities is the concept of reincarnation. Rather, than *turning to* the concept to "justify slaughter," tribes *came from* this basic understanding of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and would not be justifying but acting out of a profound cultural understanding of life and death. Why would tribes be trying to justify what they did not perceive as wrong? This is a subtle point, but very important in understanding why much of the positive commentary about Krech's book is offensive to Indian people and does the book itself little justice.

The reviewer for the *Brown [University] Alumni Magazine* seemed to think that *The Ecological Indian* supports that reviewer's notion that "The wholesale destruction that accompanied the exploration and colonization of the New World was not an entirely European affair."¹⁰ This is a relatively meaningless, yet inflammatory, comment that seems to be looking to share the blame for colonization itself with Indians. It also does not accurately sum up Krech's thesis. For, if we are speaking about colonization (and this is not chiefly the topic that Krech addresses except as it has created the image of us he debates), we are indeed talking about an *entirely* European and Euro-American affair. We tribes, after all, did not colonize ourselves. The fundamental difference between natives and Euro-Americans lies not in being ecological saints versus being the ecological anti-Christ. In my mind, the principle difference between us lies in the difference between grappling with and throwing off the yoke of colonization versus coming from a culture that was born of and grew from the fruits of colonization. This is a distinction that Krech does not substantively address in this book. That does not mean he does not understand the distinction.

I do agree with another reviewer's comment that Shepard Krech seems to assume that his audience has significant knowledge about the history of Indian/White relations and many of us should. I will further add that he seems to assume that his audience already *accepts* that European and U.S. colonial policy towards tribes contributed mightily to the destruction or degradation of tribal peoples, tribal lands, tribal natural resources, and tribal cultures. This is the understanding with which I came to this book, but it may not be shared by all. Still, I did not expect Krech to also summarize White colonization (this is done elsewhere) as he assessed the fiction and reality of the particular stereotype in which he is interested. In the end, I am pleased with the even-handedness of this book. I advise reading it with the usual healthy skepticism that should be reserved for anthropologists writing about Indians, but also with a fair mind to consider the evidence presented and the manner in which it is presented. My take on this book is that Shepard Krech has one axe to grind: The evidence should be considered.

¹ K.Marie Porterfield, "Krech's 'Ecological Indian' Propaganda, Pure and Simple," *Indian Country Today* (11-18 October 1999).

² Jim Robbins, "Bison Slaughters Questioned," *The Daily Camera* (30 January 2000).

³ Jeff Sharlett, "An Anthropologist Finds Indians Lived in Less-Than-Perfect Harmony With Nature," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (19 September 1999).

⁴ In addition to other reviews cited, see Mindy Pennybacker, "The First Environmentalists," *The Nation* (7 February 2000).

⁵ Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1999), p. 149.

⁶ Krech, p. 141.

⁷ Krech, p 22.

⁸ Porterfield.

⁹ Sharlett.

¹⁰ Chad Galts, "A Trail of Myths: Do We Idealize Native Americans' Relationship to the Environment?" *Brown Alumni Magazine* (September – October 1999).