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# Honoring Indigenous Sacred Places and Spirit in Environmental Health

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**ABSTRACT:** Indigenous Peoples and their deep knowledges offer a fundamentally important way of seeing the world and the environment. Through relationships to distinct ancestral homelands, Indigenous Peoples have developed unique ways of surviving, adapting, connecting, and relating to their respective environments. Indigenous Sacred Places themselves are connections to ancestors, to all beings on the planet, and to different planes of existence. Sacred Places serve an important environmental role in many Indigenous Nations around the globe. Yet, Indigenous Sacred Places, and in particular understandings of spirit that connect Sacred Places, have been historically and contemporarily marginalized and excluded from environmental health academic discourse and spaces. This despite concrete calls for the amplification of Indigenous traditional knowledges—that of which does not separate spirit from knowledge, or spirit from action—they are intertwined. With this, we sought to amplify in this Perspective, understandings and connectivity between Sacred Places, spirit, and environmental health through the stories from Indigenous Elders, processes of ceremony, and personal synthesis.

**KEYWORDS:** Indigenous knowledges, spirituality, environmental health, planetary health, spirit, traditional knowledge, Indigenous Peoples

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## Introduction

*“Sacred places are the foundation of all other beliefs and practices because they represent the presence of the sacred in our lives. They properly inform us that we are not larger than nature and that we have responsibilities to the rest of the natural world that transcend our own personal desire and wishes.”<sup>1</sup> ~ Vine Deloria Jr.*

Indigenous Peoples and their deep knowledges offer a fundamentally important way of seeing the world and the environment around us. Currently, there are more than 476 million Indigenous People globally,<sup>2</sup> each with unique cultural, economic, political, and societal norms that are rooted within their Lands and Waters. Indigenous knowledge systems and their embedded spiritual practices are therefore directly tied to ancestral and traditional homelands<sup>3</sup> that embody within them Sacred Places of connection to varied planes of existence (eg, spirit world). Through these distinct ancestral homelands and over thousands of years, Indigenous Peoples have developed unique ways of surviving, adapting, connecting, and relating to their respective environments. Indigenous Sacred Places are connections to the ancestors, to all beings on the planet and within the solar system, and to different planes of existence. Sacred Places are a foundational root to environmental and planetary health as they elicit and engage reciprocal responsibility within Indigenous Nations who currently host and are in relationship with 80% of the remaining biodiversity on the planet despite living on only 22% of the world’s surface.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, Indigenous Sacred Places are currently under threat in many locations around the globe. With colonialization, forced evictions and removals from traditional homelands for

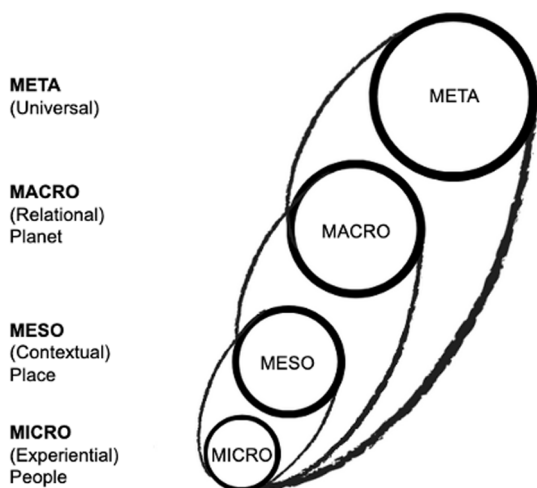
conservation or resource extraction, and agricultural and urban encroachment onto traditional territories, Indigenous Sacred Places that embody millennia of traditional ecological and spiritual knowledges have been or are being lost. As “spirit” in many Indigenous Nations is embodied in everything (eg, rocks, animals, plants, etc.), spiritual knowledge is environment knowledge and vice versa. This notion is most often lost within Western environmental circles. You can’t have environmental health without an appreciation and understanding of spirit and how spirit connects all things in the Indigenous context. In Indigenous philosophy, according to the writings of Elder and scholar Leroy Little Bear,

*“Existence consists of energy. All things are animate, imbued with spirit, and in constant motion. In this realm of energy and spirit, interrelationships between all entities are of paramount importance, and space is a more important reference than time. The idea of all things being in constant motion or flux leads to a holistic and cyclical view of the world. If everything is constantly moving and changing, then one has to look at the whole to begin to see patterns.”<sup>5</sup>*

With this, Indigenous spiritual and relational understandings and connections to the environment open the mind, heart, and body to appreciating the whole (ie, everything that has ever existed and will ever exist). Indigenous spiritual and relational understandings also connect us as people to place (or space), planet, and the universe. Therefore, the ability to understand and appreciate the constant moving and changing that occurs in the environment from the micro to the meta level (see Figure 1) allows for clearer visions on the realities of



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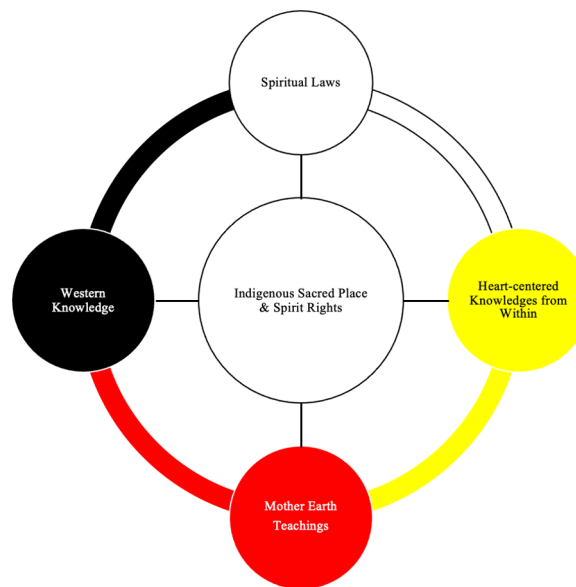


**Figure 1.** Patterns of interconnections within our planetary home (from Redvers et al<sup>7</sup>).

the world (ie, the “gift of multiple perspectives” as per Elder Albert Marshall<sup>6</sup>). The appreciation of various scales of influence (ie, micro to meta) also better ensures more informed recognition of our most pressing challenges, in addition to potential solutions for these challenges when we can scale up and scale down in practice. We can essentially embody understandings of spirit by expanding in to sacred places and ourselves, and then expand out to the cosmos to examine “the whole to begin to see patterns.”<sup>5</sup>

Indigenous ways of knowing are clearly expressed through how we see and relate with the world, whether that is through songs, ceremonies, traditional medicines, or the ways in which we tell our stories. Through traditional storytelling we learn much about our environment and how to respect it. We learn that everything in Nature is a gift. We are constantly in a reciprocal relationship where when we are gifted or take something from the environment, we also give back more than what we take. This reciprocal relationship involves a spiritual binding and deep understanding of reciprocity, and is not a mere transaction of give and take. When you request to take something (eg, a plant medicine), you are bound by the spirit of that with which you ask to take (eg, plant medicine). In some Indigenous Nations on Turtle Island, giving tobacco or performing ceremonies is considered paramount to maintaining dynamic flux where you understand that asking for something (eg, a plant medicine) involves an understanding of environmental sacrifice and balance.

In the Lakota culture, dynamic balance is seen through the use of the Čangleška Wakaŋ or Medicine Wheel. The Čangleška Wakaŋ, “Sacred Circle” or “Hoop of the World,” is based on an age-old concept that everything in the universe is related.<sup>8</sup> It is the belief that all things that exist in the universe are interconnected, and that all true power comes and goes in a circle. With this concept and knowledge, a framework that may start to inform collaborations between Indigenous communities and Western environmental practitioners and researchers on Turtle Island is shown below that centers the active rights of Indigenous sacred places and spirit as integral to collaborative



**Figure 2.** Circular and interconnected framework demonstrating interconnected elements of environmental practice that is centered on Sacred Place rights.

efforts (see Figure 2). We seek in this Perspective to examine *briefly*, some of the components of this Sacred Circle whose application may be detailed in future work.

### Positionality

It is incredibly important within academic and other spaces to explicitly acknowledge positionality to community and place when speaking about Indigenous Peoples and anything that involves them (ie, “nothing about us without us”).<sup>9-11</sup> We present ourselves to readers for this purpose as identifying our relations also keeps us accountable within this work. The lead author Quannah Yellow Cloud, is a member of the Oglala Lakota Nation from the Pine Ridge Reservation near the Kʔe Sapa (Black Hills) and is working and living on the traditional homelands of the Seneca Nation a member of the Haudenosaunee/Six Nations Confederacy. The senior author is an Indigenous and Planetary Health scholar, and a member of the Deninu Kʔue First Nation from Denendeh (Treaty 8 Territory) in sub-Arctic Canada, working and living on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, and Chonnonton Peoples. We further contextualize our placement throughout this *Perspective*.

### Spiritual Laws and Uŋči Makħa (Grandmother Earth) Teachings

*“One of the teachings that was taught to me when I was younger was to make relatives with the winter and make offerings because it can take anyone at any time.” ~ Virgil Yellow Cloud*

*Hau mitakuyapi, aŋpétu ki le čaŋtė waštėya napė čhiyúzapi yeló. I am Quannah Yellow Cloud, son of Virgil Yellow Cloud of the Oglala Lakota people in Pine Ridge South Dakota near the Kʔe Sapa (Black Hills). As Lakota Peoples it is our custom to introduce ourselves by our full name, familial relation(s), place of birth,*

and Tribal affiliation. In doing so we are establishing a connection with the individual or group to whom we are speaking from. Likewise, this way of introduction translates into the way in which we see the environment around us through a more personal and intimate connection with Mother Earth.

Our Lakota traditional homelands cover the northern Nebraska areas, all the way to the K?e Sapa (Black Hills) and Rocky Mountains. Our teachings and stories tell us much about our surroundings, especially those of the Black Hills, which were and still are a Sacred Place for us. In the old days, many of our Wicasa Wakan (Holy Men) would go into the Black Hills to seek out visions or ask Wakan Tanka (The Great Spirit) for guidance. The Black Hills and many other places around us hold a spiritual significance that we were taught at a young age to respect. Respecting our Land means that we recognize the spirits around us, and thus our ceremonies honor those spirits that inhabited the Lands before us.<sup>8</sup> Our creation story and way of life are intimately tied to the Black Hills, and thus we derive our identity from this sacred place.

The Black Hills are so sacred to our communities, that we have refused over a 1.3 billion dollar payout that has been sitting in a trust fund despite the community's financial precarity.<sup>12</sup> The pressure from resource and mining companies and governments to buy the Land in a sales transaction is great; however, our communities and Elders have stood together strong to preserve the sacredness of this place as it has never been for sale. Due to the Black Hills being our source, we appreciate renewed energy and support from environmental researchers, practitioners, and allies to ensure our spiritual connection to our Sacred Place is maintained, as it is one of the sources of all the environmental knowledge of the world. The importance of Sacred Places like the K?e Sapa (Black Hills) to planetary health should not be underestimated.

*"The Black Hills itself is a terrestrial mirror of the heavens above and thus forms the basis of our ancient star maps and Lakota astronomy. The entirety of K?e Sapa is a sacred site. Our rituals observe the natural cycles of the planet and our Universe. There are ceremonies that we must conduct at specific locations within the Black Hills. These ancient ceremonies benefit the whole of humanity."*<sup>13</sup> ~ Ruth Hopkins

### Heart-Centered Knowledges From Within

*"Languages are spiritual and powerful. They are sacred, beautiful, pretty, and cute, especially when they are spoken from the heart. . . . We have to accept all languages because they are all creations of Mother Earth that gave us the words from the soil."*<sup>14</sup> ~ T?icho Elder Rosa Mantla

*My traditional name is Nadloghaze (N.R) and I was born and raised on the shores of Tu Nedhé (Great Slave Lake) in Denendeh ("Land of the People"). Sahtu Dene Elder Be'sha Blondin taught me that "language is the connection to the living beings."<sup>15</sup> Each word is embodied with a spirit and therefore a process as Indigenous languages are verb-based and not noun-based like most Western languages. For example, for our Mountain Dene relatives, the translation for the month of March is *det'onecho sab* or "Eagle Moon." The eagles return back to the north on*

the full moon in this moon cycle.<sup>16</sup> Traditional ecological knowledge is therefore built into the language name for the relevant moon cycle through the spirit of the Eagle relative.

Indigenous languages and worldviews are the conduit to heart work. Heart work, is the conduit to spirit. Heart work can be spoken *or felt* from within when in relation to the natural world and ourselves. Sometimes words get in the way of the spirit work that needs to be done with the environment. This is the barrier of Western academic processes that teach the feeling out of environmental research and scholarship. We therefore remind Western environmental allies to spend more time listening than talking, and more time feeling than thinking. This supports previous calls "for an inclusion of wisdom that is not mere knowledge or information but is an insight that comes from the heart—from the heart of Mother Earth."<sup>17</sup>

Why is this information important to share for my context? The sub-Arctic and Arctic regions are currently experiencing global warming at 4 times the global rate.<sup>18</sup> In addition to this, the sub-Arctic waterways in my region are under constant pressure from industry. Most recently, the federal government of Canada is actively considering making a change to allow partially treated tailings ponds toxic waste to be released into the Athabasca waterway as a risk mitigation measure for local communities living in close proximity to the Alberta Oil Sand operations<sup>19</sup>—the most destructive oil operation in the world.<sup>20</sup> The Athabasca waterway feeds into and drains into waterways that flow through my home community of Deninu K'ue in addition to many other Indigenous communities. Due to these industrial and climate pressures, and the consequent changing landscapes, our northern Sacred Places are at risk from slumping and collapsing into the grounds and lakes from melting permafrost, and are at risk of contamination from further exploration into previously undisturbed Land and Water sites for rare earth metals and other mining operations.

Previous gold exploration and mining in Denendeh (Northwest Territories [NT]) resulted in 237 000 tonnes of arsenic trioxide dust being currently stored in underground chambers in Yellowknife, NT.<sup>21</sup> As a result of this previous mining in the region, some areas in and around the city are inaccessible to wild berry, medicine, and mushroom picking, and small lakes have been contaminated. The spirit of the Land has been disturbed, and therefore the lives of community members have been disturbed. That wild berry that is now lost and locked to these contaminated places was a relative with a spirit and a blueprint of knowledge about the environment in the region. Each entity, including even just 1 plant or 1 animal is a microcosm to the larger world. Each loss of a plant or an animal on the planet therefore has a reverberating effect out to the cosmos. This is why it is so important to advocate and protect our Sacred Places including Mother Earth on whole.

### Conclusion

The United Nations states that "Indigenous Peoples are inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to



people and the environment.”<sup>22</sup> Indigenous relational worldviews are directly intertwined with Spiritual Laws and teachings from Mother Earth, incorporating not only the seen, but also the unseen, into traditional knowledge systems and traditional protocols. Indigenous Peoples are entitled to specific rights enshrined in international instruments (eg, UNDRIP<sup>23</sup>) to collectively use and manage their natural resources, predicated on their historical, social, and cultural connection to a particular area or territory.<sup>3</sup> This includes protection and access to their Sacred Places.

Indigenous Sacred Places, and in particular understandings of spirit from an Indigenous perspective, have been historically and contemporarily marginalized and excluded from environmental health academic discourse and spaces. This despite concrete calls for the amplification of Indigenous traditional knowledges (ITK) in regards to climate change and biodiversity loss—that of which (ie, ITK) does not separate spirit from knowledge, or spirit from action—they are intertwined. More open space and dialog is needed around the Indigenous lived experience and innate process issues surrounding current action within environmental justice spaces as it is applied to strategies, programs, and policies. With this we sought to amplify in this brief *Perspective*, understandings and connectivity between Sacred Places, spirit, and environmental health through the stories from our Elders, and processes of ceremony and personal synthesis. It is our hope to continue to amplify Indigenous Peoples, and their knowledges and scholarship for the integral need of the Mother Earth spirit—for all that has been, is, and will be on Mother Earth. We request allies to actively support Indigenous Nations around the globe in their leadership efforts to protect their Sacred Places as they are integral to the health of all in our common home.

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### Author Contributions

Conceptualization and methodology, Q.Y.C. and N.R.; data curation, writing—original draft preparation, Q.Y.C. and N.R.; review and editing, Q.Y.C. and N.R. All authors have read and approved the manuscript.

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