

[Tanner on Krech, 'The Ecological Indian. Myth and History'](#)

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Shepard Krech, III. *The Ecological Indian. Myth and History.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. vi + 318 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-04755-4.

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Indian History and Environmental Myth

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Recently a student told me he thought he was of aboriginal descent. I asked what group he was from, but he said he did not know, since none of his relatives identified themselves as aboriginal. However, he said he had always felt particularly close to nature, and so concluded he must be Native. As it happens, he could well have been since, starting about a century ago, some Newfoundland Mi'kmaq hid their ethnicity, even from their own children, to avoid discrimination. But what of his idea that being 'close to nature' is a mark of being of Native descent?

Sheppard Krech III's book *The Ecological Indian* sets out to probe the basis and historical validity of the idea that people of native descent are, and always have been, caring towards the environment, a characteristic commonly claimed by or attributed to them. With a series of empirical case studies he investigates whether their ideas and actions were always those of ecologists and conservationists. He finds that the Ecological Indian proposition is of doubtful validity, concluding that, for example, Indians needlessly killed many buffalo, set fires that got out of control, and over-exploited deer and beaver for their skins.

This book is handsomely produced, and well-written by a respected scholar who draws on an enormous quantity of interdisciplinary sources and diverse lines of thought. While, as will become clear below, I am sceptical about its thesis, the work covers many important issues and I, at least, found it instructive to trace the author's endeavour, despite the shortcomings, on which my review will concentrate.

In his Introduction, Krech examines the beginnings and development of the notion that Indians are by nature 'ecological'. Most of these sources are not aboriginal people, but the likes of Baron de Lahontan, James Fenimore Cooper and Ernest Thomas Seton, all drawing upon the 'Noble Savage' ideal. In fact only two aboriginal people are cited in this section -- the nineteenth century Dakota Sioux author Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa) and the Lakota holy man Black Elk (along with a cursory footnote allusion to Chief Seattle). Not until the book's Epilogue does the author turn his attention to self-attributions of the image by several native authors, most appearing after 1970, and often in the context of political disputes.

The bulk of the book consists of seven self-contained test cases, each of which deals with different groups, three of them involving prehistoric situations, and the other four historical ones. Each of

these cases is well known to specialists, having been the subject of much scholarly controversy. Krech provides a detailed and generally even-handed review of these debates, along with additional data and his own conclusions.

In the first chapter Krech asks if over-hunting by Paleo-Indians was responsible for the extinctions of various large mammals during the Pleistocene era. He presents the position of Paul Martin, who concludes Paleo-Indian hunters caused these extinctions, along with that of his critics. However, both arguments seem to me based on a great deal of unwarranted speculation. While Krech is unconvinced by Martin's position, he is not sure that Paleo-Indians were entirely free of any responsibility. But, given the very distant lineage that may connect Paleo-Indians with modern aboriginal people, one wonders about the relevance of this case to the issue being addressed in this book.

The next case also seems to me to be of questionable relevance. Krech asks if the prehistoric Hohokam's irrigation practices caused salination of their fields, leading to their disappearance. He offers the contrasting views of two authors, Bernard Powel and Emil Haury. The issue between them is whether the Hohokam should be condemned for the ecological problems arising from their system of irrigation agriculture, or admired for its achievements, which are compared to the negative effects of more recent settlement by non-natives of this region of southern Arizona. Krech delves into the considerable complexities of the case, but does not resolve this unanswerable question, acknowledging that it is not known what finally happened to the Hohokam.

One aspect of *The Ecological Indian* is based on the notion that North American aboriginal people looked after their environment, so the first Europeans found the continent in an unspoiled condition. Krech's next chapter questions this. He notes that several authors have revised upward earlier prehistoric population estimates and, as a consequence, have increased their assessment of the post-contact population decline. Krech suggests that, apart from along the East Coast, many initial European reports of a pristine environment came after the aboriginal population had declined, so that the newcomers would have arrived in an environment that was no longer supporting its previous larger population. The land would have thus by then returned to the more natural state that the newcomers described. (In the next chapter he further discredits the idea of a 'pristine' proto-contact environment, suggesting that Europeans were predisposed to find the wilderness they described, regardless of evidence to the contrary.) But in the end his convoluted argument fails to offer any real indication of a pre-contact environment that was other than the pristine one the newcomers described.

In the next chapter, Krech asks whether the Indians were acting with environmental responsibility in their deliberate setting of forest and brush fires. The extensive literature on this topic shows that Indians in all parts of the continent used fire to modify their environment, serving a wide variety of purposes. While in some instances this was done to improve hunting, he shows that fires were also set during wars against trespassing groups, both whites and other Indians, and for communication with other Indians. Many authors believe they did so with sufficient skill that fire generally benefited the environment. But Krech refers to several settlers' anecdotes about Indian-set fires that got out of control. However, it does not seem to matter to Krech if such mistakes were by Indians in unfamiliar territory, due to post-contact dislocation.

In the last three chapters the author examines whether Indians over-hunted, respectively, the buffalo,

the white-tailed deer and the beaver. All these species were used aboriginally for subsistence, and after contact they continued to be sources of subsistence food at the same time as they provided market commodities. Krech thinks the commercialisation of deer and beaver hides lead to their overexploitation, but he also believes Indians were wasting buffalo even when the species was being hunted only for subsistence.

For me, this chapter provides the book's most serious challenge to *The Ecological Indian*. While Indians had uses for every part of the buffalo, their practice of slaughtering whole herds, at a buffalo jump or in an enclosure, sometimes produced more carcasses than a group could possibly use. As a result, waste occurred. He documents instances of Indians leaving animals to rot, utilising only the cows, or taking only the tongues and the humps. However, the overkilling did not cause the extermination of the species, which only came after non-Indians and Metis hunted them commercially for fresh meat, pemmican and hides.

Krech proposes two 'religious' reasons for the earlier over-killing. It was believed (by the Piegan and Cree) that any buffalo that escaped while being rounded up in the hunt would warn other buffalo, who would then avoid hunters, so that it was necessary to chase and kill these escapees, whether they were needed or not. Other Indians (specifically the Cheyenne and Arapaho) believed that when hunters were unable to find buffalo it was because the animals had retreated to a land underneath a large lake, from which they would eventually reappear in endless numbers. Krech concludes that, given these beliefs, the Indians did not see overhunting as a cause of any shortage of animals or the need to conserve.

The next chapter concerns the white-tailed deer. Between about 1670 and 1800 the skins of these animals, previously the major subsistence species for Indians in the Southern and Eastern United States, became their main item of trade with Europeans. Deer were hunted in increasing numbers, in part, according to Krech, to satisfy the Indian's craving for alcohol. By the end of the period deer were scarce or locally absent, which Krech concludes was due to overhunting by Indians. The population did not recover until many years later.

While Krech acknowledges the trade in deer skins occurred during a period of intense disruption, he does not see that dislocation and warfare resulting from European settlement may have rendered the Indian's conservationist practices ineffective. Instead, as with the buffalo example, he explains the willingness to overkill deer by reference to the pre-Christian spiritual beliefs of the tribes of the region. He notes, for instance, that the Cherokee believed in the reincarnation of deer, some of them believing this could recur four or seven times. From this he concludes that conservation would have made no sense to them.

The final substantive chapter is about the beaver, an important subsistence food source for prehistoric northern Indians, and later a mainstay of the fur trade. Their sedentary existence made the species especially vulnerable to overhunting, particularly with the introduction of steel traps. Beaver eventually did become extinct in some regions such as New England, although generally in areas where they were never particularly numerous. For the subarctic Indian Krech blames overhunting for causing reported declines in beaver populations.

However, there were other factors Krech does not sufficiently take into account, like incursions by

foreign Indians and cutthroat competition, that would have undermined local conservation efforts. Also, since beaver meat was eaten, they were harvested more intensely if other game were at the low end of their cycles of abundance, something neither Indians nor traders could control. Beavers were also subject to epidemic disease.

Krech explanation of the overhunting focuses on ideology, saying Northern Algonquians (i.e. forest Cree, Ojibway and Innu) only showed interest in "today's conservation ethics and practices" in the nineteenth century (p. 206). He notes that in this recent period Indians used family hunting territory to conserve beaver, while traders' tried to influence their ideas of conservation. However, Krech does not take adequate account of the evidence that Indians made their own strategic decisions.

Krech thinks Indian spiritual ideas account for their purported failure at beaver conservation. He says Algonquians believed the bones of animals were set aside to be reincarnated, so that they could not be over-hunted. Algonquian non-Christian religious ideas "apparently had nothing to do with waste and conservation of animal populations until recently" (p. 204). I, however, contend that Algonquian religious ideas support conservation strategies, by providing a moral basis for human-animal relations, beyond the pragmatic one. But these strategies also depend on their ability to control their lands.

Initially, the target for Krech's book seems to be the use by Madison Avenue and Hollywood of the Ecological Indian image. But in the Epilogue he sets his sights on modern Indians, both those who attribute to themselves ecological sensitivity, mainly in the context of political fights over resource issues, and those who in his view engage in environmentally questionable activities, despite the image. He sees a disjunction between the Indian's environmentalist image and their historical practices. "Their actions, while perfectly reasonable in light of their own beliefs and larger goals, were not necessarily rational according to the premises of Western ecological conservation." (p. 212).

In his analysis Krech privileges Indian religious ideologies over their environmental knowledge. Virtually any game shortage is used to challenge the Ecological Indian, as if, for the image to be genuine, they would have had to avoid all environmental uncertainty. Anthropologically, Krech's view of Indians seems curiously old-fashioned, presenting them as poorly adapted, without practical knowledge of sustainable production, motivated instead by irrational beliefs. By contrast, most ethnographic field studies of non-western peoples by scientifically trained participant-observers conversant in the local language reveal adaptations that involve rigorously empirical knowledge of the environment, however nonrational their other beliefs may appear.

There is unintended irony in the author's evaluation of Indian actions against "the premises of Western ecological conservation". As Krech himself notes, the modern rhetoric of aboriginal environmentalism involves a critique of North American society over environmental issues. From the start the image of the Ecological Indian entailed a (sometimes-implicit) comparison and criticism of non-Indians. From the Noble Savage to the Ecological Indian, these are indictments of non-native society, particularly its treatment of the environment. In the societies where the premises of ecological conservation originated and where they are paid lip service, the record of successfully following them is less than inspiring. If Indians lacked these ideological principles, it is questionable if they fared any the worse without them. Given the comparative aspect implicit in the Ecological Indian image, I wonder why Krech did not frame the image's empirical tests by means of comparisons

with the equivalent impact on the environment by the activities of the newcomers? Then he would not have just asked whether Indians were environmentally sensitive, but whether they were more or less environmentally sensitive than non-Indians.

Whether or not Indian groups historically acted with environmental responsibility, the contemporary claim that they are, by their nature and heritage, 'ecological' is also part of their counter-hegemonic political ideology. Another study that has looked for the origins of 'Mother Earth', a concept related to that of the Ecological Indian, concludes it first appeared in the context of nineteenth century aboriginal political discourses with whites (Gill 1987). Krech's data seem to concur with those of Gill that it was relatively recently and by comparison to whites that they began to explicitly attribute 'closeness to nature' to themselves.

Krech questions the Ecological Indian as a particular interpretation of the past. A more useful approach would show it to entail an essentializing of a socially constructed primordial identity. As such, it is an assertion of the group's collective self-identity based on a common past, real or imagined (or both), and serves to unite and unify. These are all features characteristic of ethnic group nationalist movements in general, found today in innumerable and multiplying discourses around sub-state ethnic identity (see, e.g. Wilmsen and McAllister 1996).

Krech gives this perspective passing recognition and acknowledges it is an illusion to privilege any one version of history as objective. Yet despite these admissions he thinks it more important to discredit the claim, asserting that "it seems unwise to assume uncritically that the image of the Ecological Indian faithfully reflects North American Indian behaviour at any time in the past." One of the reasons he gives for challenging the image is that it denies variations between Indian groups (p. 26). However, throughout his book he accepts at face value the idea of the homogenised pan-Indian as the subject of the image that he wants to test. Otherwise, he would have limited the results of each of the seven case studies to only the modern descendants of the respective tribal groups.

The test cases each draw on prehistoric or historic data from times when North American aboriginal people's most important identities were diverse among themselves and tribal. However, the image of the Ecological Indian is part of a more recently constructed unified pan-Indian identity. Today pan-Indian unity exists alongside tribal diversity, the one emphasising commonality while the other continues to recognize difference. Krech's test cases only take account of one side of this complex reality, and ultimately hardly seem relevant to the issue of invalidating a pan-tribal conception.

The kinds of claims made about ethnic identity are not appropriately treated as hypotheses put forward as historically verifiable, which is how Krech deals with the Ecological Indian. Whatever their self-conception, simply by being non-industrial Indians were comparatively 'ecological', at least if left to their own devices. However, this study missed the chance to contribute to an understanding of the image, for instance, by showing that if the Ecological Indian is a social construction, it was constructed partly by, and by reference to, the colonizers, as part of an ongoing political dialogue. The image of the Ecological Indian also asserts moral superiority, an understandable response of a relatively powerless group in the political context of struggles over land and resources. Unfortunately, Krech's failure to adequately take account of the political context of Indian environmental discourse means his book may play into the hands of reactionary and racist interests and prejudices opposed to aboriginal rights.

References

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