

# Safeguarding Indigenous Knowledge

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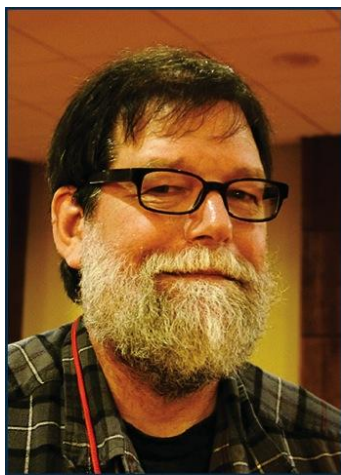
Whenever a tribe works with outside entities on a project that might reveal traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), control of that knowledge is often an issue. Tulalip Vice Chairwoman Deborah Parker says, “Tribes are trying to hold onto their medicinal plants, their stories, their songs. Northwest tribes have been the leaders in helping to preserve the salmon fisheries, our land, our sacred waters along the coast. Those are our traditional pathways to life, and they go hand in hand with our traditional belief systems.” Ecological threats are pervasive, she says, and they must be addressed by those who can best address them, which sometimes includes nontribal scientists and researchers. But the cultural risks in such cooperative work are pervasive, too. “I think most tribes throughout North America are trying to ensure that their private knowledge remains respected,” she says.



*Deborah Parker*

Protecting cultural knowledge is an ongoing challenge, on many levels. Parker relates a local issue that illustrates one part of the problem. “We have a place where people like to go fishing. It’s a place where human remains have been found. The tribe has put up signs—‘Private Area, for Tribal Members Only’—but others come in and constantly tear down the signs. It’s really been a battle. They have no idea of sacred areas, places that need to remain untouched.”

This lack of respect for a location that is sacred to the tribe represents the most obvious kind of abuse. But the problem can rear its head in more subtle ways as well. Traditional knowledge—such as awareness of where a medicinal plant grows, which tribal family holds possession of a particular sacred song, or how a ritual is conducted—represents a crucial part of a tribe’s identity. Losing control of such knowledge is oftentimes a cultural, if not a spiritual, affront to the tribe.



*Preston Hardison*

A major legal obstacle in TEK protection, says Tulalip Watershed Policy Analyst Preston Hardison, is that U.S. copyright law presently does little to protect tribal rights in the matter. “In U.S. society,” he says, “generally the only time people want to protect knowledge is when they want to make money off it.” A significant dilemma for tribes seeking such protection, he adds, is that “if they don’t share their knowledge their values may not be protected, whether that be about the land, an important animal, or an ecosystem. But if they do share the knowledge, they’ve lost control.”

Hardison is presently involved in an effort with Tulalip and other Pacific Northwest tribes to craft rules-of-use for the possession and use of traditional knowledge. The rules they shape will help ensure that individuals exposed to private knowledge have a clear understanding, and clear responsibilities, regarding how they traditional information to which they are exposed. “Essentially,” says Hardison, “the guidelines will be high-level rules that say,

'Here are the kinds of things the tribes will expect from you if you come to us seeking this kind of information. It's essential to understand you have to come to the tribal authority and get consent before you get access. And you have to respect the tribe's authority regarding the rules you agree to.'

Chairwoman Parker is confident that tribal "medicine carriers doing this work will know how that protection can be achieved." She offers general guidelines that she believes could help decrease TEK abuses: "I believe [those given access to traditional knowledge] should ask the person who is sharing the knowledge how it should be shared. Some knowledge is private, but other knowledge should be made public—we might need people to know we're protecting this or that plant. Typically you consult with the elders who carry the traditions. [Those exposed to TEK] should ask, 'Can I record this? Can I share this?' And they should keep asking, to make sure each piece of information received is acceptable to share."

Parker believes such rules will be a great help. But she adds that there is another angle to consider: While the Western-science approach can be valuable in restoration efforts, it isn't the only lens through which to view traditional knowledge. "The four-legged, the winged, the finned—we call them our brothers and sisters of the earth. For some that's an unacceptable, unscientific explanation. But not everything has to be defined the way you're taught to define it. Sometimes you don't have the words to protect what you're looking at—you just have the thoughts and feelings. That's okay, too. I can appreciate researchers and others trying to have that understanding. But sometimes we have to accept that it's not for us to understand but simply to protect."

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*Photo of Preston Hardison courtesy of Dennis Wall, Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals.*

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This profile was developed by Dennis Wall, Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, Northern Arizona University. It was first published as an article in ITEP's *Native Voices* newsletter, Volume XX, No. 2, Summer 2013.

The profile is available on the Tribes & Climate Change website: [www4.nau.edu/tribalclimatechange/](http://www4.nau.edu/tribalclimatechange/). The tribal climate change profiles featured on the website are intended as a pathway to increasing knowledge among tribal and non-tribal organizations about climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.

For more information about the tribal profiles and the website, contact: Sue Wotkyns, Climate Change Program Manager, Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, [susan.wotkyns@nau.edu](mailto:susan.wotkyns@nau.edu)