

Indigenous Cultures: What Can We Learn from Them About Our Relationship with Trees?

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Photos: Cheryl Ames

For much of modern history, forests have often been viewed through an economic lens. Trees become board feet of lumber, sources of pulp, fuel, or land to be cleared for development. While these uses are real and sometimes necessary, they can

obscure a more fundamental truth: forests are living communities upon which all life—including our own—depends.

Seeing Trees as Relatives, Not Resources

Many Indigenous cultures throughout North America have long held a different perspective. Although each nation has its own traditions, languages, and beliefs, many share an understanding that humans are part of a larger community of life. Trees, animals, rivers, and even the soil are not merely objects to be used, but fellow participants in the world we share. This way of thinking invites us to replace ownership with relationship, and consumption with stewardship.

Here in Oregon, this perspective can be seen among the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and other Indigenous groups. While each tribal nation has its own unique heritage, many of their traditional teachings reflect a profound respect for forests and the understanding that people are sustained by the land only when they care for it in return.

A World of Relationships

In many Indigenous traditions, the natural world is understood through relationships rather than possessions. A western redcedar is not simply a tree waiting to become lumber. An Oregon white oak is not merely firewood or shade. Trees provide homes for birds, shelter for wildlife, food for insects, stability for soils, clean water, and clean air. They nourish countless forms of life while asking very little in return.

For the peoples represented by the Grand Ronde and Siletz Tribes, western redcedar has long been one of the most valued trees of the Pacific Northwest. Cedar has provided material for homes, canoes, baskets, clothing, rope, fishing gear, tools, and ceremonial objects. Yet cedar has traditionally been harvested with care and gratitude. Rather than stripping a forest bare, people usually took only what was needed, recognizing that the tree itself was a living being deserving of respect.



Similarly, the oak woodlands of the Willamette Valley have been carefully tended for generations. Oregon white oak supported rich ecosystems that produced acorns, camas, berries, and habitat for game animals. Indigenous stewardship—including the careful use of low-intensity fire—helped maintain these open woodlands for centuries, benefiting both people and wildlife.

Harvesting with Respect

Many Indigenous communities have practiced sustainable harvesting for generations. While customs differ from nation to nation, common themes include taking only what is needed, avoiding waste, expressing gratitude, and ensuring that enough remains for future generations.

Among the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, whose ancestral lands stretch from ponderosa pine forests east of the Cascades to higher mountain forests, trees have long provided materials for shelter, fuel, tools, and cultural traditions. But these forests were also understood as places that supported deer, elk, salmon streams, edible plants, and medicines. Caring for the forest meant caring for the entire web of life that depended upon it.

This understanding reminds us that every harvest carries responsibility. Whether gathering cedar bark, collecting firewood, or using wood to build a home, the goal is not to maximize what can be taken, but to ensure that the forest remains healthy and abundant.

Modern forestry increasingly embraces many of these same principles through sustainable management, habitat protection, and restoration. Indigenous traditions remind us that these practices are not new ideas but values that have guided people for thousands of years.

From Dominion to Participation

Industrial societies have achieved remarkable advances in technology, yet they have also encouraged us to think of nature primarily as raw material for economic growth. Forests are measured in timber value, land value, or development potential. The ecological services they quietly provide—filtering water, storing carbon, moderating climate, protecting wildlife, and enriching our communities—are often overlooked because they are difficult to assign a monetary value.

Indigenous perspectives offer a different starting point. Rather than standing above nature, humans are participants within it. Every choice affects the larger community of life, and healthy forests ultimately sustain healthy people.

Today, ecologists increasingly recognize what Indigenous communities have understood for generations: forests function as interconnected systems. Healthy



soils nurture healthy trees. Trees protect streams. Streams sustain salmon. Salmon nourish forests through the nutrients they carry inland. Every part of the ecosystem depends upon the others.

Lessons for Our Communities

We need not adopt another culture's spiritual beliefs to learn from its wisdom. We can choose to notice the intricate web of life surrounding each tree in our neighborhoods. We can plant native species, protect mature trees, reduce unnecessary removals, and support thoughtful forest management. We can recognize that trees are more than landscape features—they are living partners in healthy communities.

The forests of western Oregon still bear the imprint of thousands of years of Indigenous stewardship. Long before modern conservation emerged, Native peoples were actively shaping landscapes in ways that promoted biodiversity, resilience, and renewal. Their example reminds us that stewardship is not simply about preserving nature from people; it is about learning how people can live within nature responsibly.

As we face changing climates, growing cities, and increasing pressure on our forests, perhaps one of the most important questions we can ask is not, “What can we take from the forest?” Rather, we can consider, “How can we help the forest continue to thrive?” That shift in perspective—from seeing trees as commodities to seeing them as fellow members of our shared community—may be one of the most valuable lessons Indigenous cultures have to offer us today.

Resources and Further Reading

Ancient Wisdom: What Indigenous Cultures Can Teach Us About Forests, trimming.org.

Julia Astashova, *Significance of Trees: Lessons from Indigenous Culture and Science*, wordpress.kpu.ca.

Indigenous Beliefs About Trees and Their Connection to Them, May 25, 2024, silvotherapy.squarespace.com.

Native American Tree Mythology, Native Languages of the Americas, native-languages.org

Oliver Eastwood, *Native People, Native Trees, & the Power of Spiritual Ecology*, Forest of Thoughts, Issue 1, 2022/23, unearthmag.com.