



Michael E. Marchand, Kristiina A. Vogt, eds. *The River of Life: Sustainable Practices of Native Americans and Indigenous Peoples*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016. 294 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61186-222-5.

Reviewed by Kenneth Zontek (Yakima Valley College)

Published on H-AmIndian (June, 2017)

Commissioned by F. Evan Nooe (University of North Carolina-Charlotte)

The River of Life: Indigenous Approaches to Sustainability

The River of Life begins with a query by the ten authors: “Do we need another book on this topic [sustainability]?” (p. v). They subsequently provide an affirmative answer, stating, “We contend that the local to regional cultures and traditions of Native Americans, as well as global indigenous communities, can provide the road map to help refine tools and practices needed to become a sustainable practitioner” (p. viii). Thus begins a book aimed at describing an approach, not a prescription, for sustainability that largely features Northwest Native American concepts and practices supplemented by Indonesian, Finn, and Icelandic examples. Toward the goal of imparting routes toward sustainability, the book has four parts, most consisting of multiple chapters and usually concluded with several theses collectively referred to as “Coyote Essentials.”

The first two sections, comprised of three chapters, provide nearly one hundred pages of historic and cultural backdrop. Readers familiar with Native American and environmental history will recognize much of the material here, though the packaging and Native authorship provide some insightful perspective. The first chapter recounts the detrimental effects of European colonialism and introduces the river metaphor of *up-river* and *down-river* relations, whereby Native people often have lived in the up-river areas and become marginalized by the down-river demands of the Euro-Americans. The second chapter refines the discussion toward US Indian policy

and drill down to specific examples while invoking the river metaphor. Of the Grand Coulee Dam, the authors write, “This is another example of up-river and down-river analogy, with the tribes being the up-river people who paid all the costs and derived few if any benefits from building a dam on their lands,” that is, communities lost to flooding and resource harvest areas cut off, including the elimination of salmon runs, and with the irrigation water and power flowing to non-Native users (p. 58). The third chapter frames the sustainability discussion as a cultural construct by emphasizing that Native cultures often tie folklore and family lineage to resource use and/or protection. A Nez Perce author clarifies, “We are taught that the importance of culture cannot be stressed enough as it gives us our world views and is an integral part of our living” (p. 78).

The third section, entitled “Portfolio for Sustainability: Native American Behavior Blended with Western Science,” consists of five chapters that constitute the bulk of the text. The chapters establish the basis of a sustainability portfolio and then offer discussion on some essential elements. Sustainability portfolios must take a long view, proactively deal with change, accommodate boom-and-bust cycles, embrace society over individual interests, and humanize practices with cultural tie-in. A primary essential element is connecting society with nature by removing traditional Euro-American boundaries—for example, nature and the wild are found in parks or zoos

but should be simply integrated parts of a community's existence. Another essential element is the need to be open to varying perspectives while promoting diversity. Indigenous people often can contribute to sustainability with Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) beyond the standard discipline-based scientific approach frequently subscribed to by land managers and decision-makers. The authors also maintain that Native American business models, worthy of consideration, often exemplify cultural integration toward community focus, with accountability due to local locus, as opposed to profiteering for short-term financial gain without local accountability, stemming from a separation of decision-makers and area of impact. A concluding essential portfolio element emerges from consensus politics as opposed to top-down decision making.

The authors use the three chapters in the last part of the book to convey examples of Native sustainability practices in the contemporary Pacific Northwest, emphasize diversity and collaboration, and provide a list of the Coyote Essentials theses found elsewhere in the book. Specifically, the authors recount the multilateral and sometimes unilateral efforts of Northwest Indian nations in salmon recovery and toward dam policy. The thorough participation of Native people bringing ancestral knowledge integrated with modern science proves key in bringing back salmon and promoting intercultural cooperation toward sustainability. The authors impart: "People who survive after losing their lands and resources are especially worth emulating" (p. 249).

Readers will find an upbeat and adulatory tone with respect to Native American sustainability practices that likely will confirm the view of supporters subscribing to such interpretation. Skeptics with respect to Native American historic and contemporary sustainability practices likely will look for holes in the message advocating for following Native models of sustainability. Yet, the authors use careful language to evade criticism. First, occasional overgeneralizations appear, such as, "Native Americans are not wasteful and use every part of any resource they collect" and "All Native American business plans are designed to take into consideration the life and livelihood of the seventh generation beyond those individuals making the decisions" (pp. 141, 169). However, there are only a few examples of this type of potentially erroneous blanket statement. More exemplary would be more accommodating language such as, "Native peoples have a robust diversity of models and sustainability practices that can be used to make social, busi-

ness, and environmental decisions" (p. 250). Second, if a reader is looking for explanations of apparent examples of environmental abuse, then the authors provide some answer to this vexation. Upon describing cultural traits that lead to sustainable practices, the authors explain, "These traits describe original tribal people and can be confused today because most Indians have been integrated into the dominant society," thus revealing how and why some Native groups apparently engage in unsustainable resource exploitation (p. 89). In fact, the writers call for a reversal by stating, "It is time that the dominant society becomes acculturated to native culture" (p. 85). Of course, prior knowledge regarding countless Native generations successfully and sustainably harvesting bison at places like Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump or salmon in places like the Columbia River, for example, helps readers understand the advisability of acculturation with respect to resource use as argued by the authors. This reviewer acknowledges influential works on Native American environmental interaction such as Dan Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy," *Journal of American History* (1991); Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian* (1999); and Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison* (2000); however, these works do not address the essential denouement of Native American leadership in the restoration of wildlife, namely the bison. By contrast, *The River of Life* contains many examples of indigenous policy and practices aimed at sustainability and reveal an environmental philosophy aimed at a healthy landscape even though the book acknowledges that indigenous people episodically have strayed. The salmon recovery efforts particularly reflect Native stewardship in habitat and species restoration. The message resonates that Native sustainability practices offer much worth embracing as environmental stressors persist.

This book offers a cornucopia of food for thought as it repackages some historical narrative related to the treatment of Native peoples and their homelands and also delivers several guidelines for and anecdotes of indigenous sustainability warranting attention. Anyone interested in general sustainable practices intersecting with indigenous culture will find this book useful. The book also could serve as a text in a plethora of social science, humanities, and even business disciplines. The ten authors and other contributors represent diverse backgrounds and offer distinct but coherent presentations that are readily accessible to readers. Moreover, the richness of the messaging makes this book a very useful tool for professional development and referencing by academics and aficionados of indigenous cultural studies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amindian>

Citation: Kenneth Zontek. Review of Marchand, Michael E.; Vogt, Kristiina A., eds., *The River of Life: Sustainable Practices of Native Americans and Indigenous Peoples*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. June, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48838>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.