

Proven Sustainable Teachings from Indigenous and Maroon Peoples: A Model for Holistic Educators

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Abstract

This article explores the author's journey as the founder and curator of Proven Sustainable (www.provensustainable.org), a website that shares the voices of Indigenous and Maroon cultures that have managed to live sustainably for hundreds of years. It reveals how this journey and the nature-based Indigenous teachings of the website it led to are an ultimate example of holistic education that should be part of every classroom.

Keywords: *Indigeneity, Indigenous Peoples, decolonization, educational resource*

As a young white boy growing up in suburban New Jersey in the 1960s, my media-influenced view of possible futures was informed mostly by the Jetsons and Star Trek. These futures were led by white men who saw high-tech engineering as the path to the promised land. Then, when I was 20, I spent five months as a student teacher at Taos Pueblo Day School. Standing beneath the sacred Taos Mountain at recess, I found my mentors in two Taosena teachers, Tonita Lujan and Crucita Archuleta. From that vantage point beneath Pueblo Peak, the future looked much like the past – steady state community life informed by ancient enduring traditions fixed squarely on sacred land.

Fifty years later popular media representations of the future haven't changed that much with Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos seeking to colonize space and fossil fuel giant BP changing its name to Beyond Petroleum. Like George Jetson and Captain Kirk, we once again see white men selling techno-futures only now with a green label. But Taos Pueblo represents a sustainable future by keeping faith with the past on land

they've fought to protect ever since the Pueblo Revolt of 1680.

For the past 20 years, I've worked as the main curriculum writer for Project Look Sharp, an educational program based at Ithaca College that promotes media and digital literacy. In 2011, we published a collection of lessons entitled, "Media Constructions of Sustainability: Food, Water and Agriculture," the first of a series of such collections devoted to encouraging students to think critically about what sustainability means and how sustainability interweaves with social justice. As I researched media documents that would help to unearth these themes, I became frustrated by the lack of mainstream attention to the traditions of people whose very survival in the face of the assaults of nation states should be recognized as proof that sustainable culture is possible.

I began to look for examples of such "proven sustainable" cultures and realized that there are Indigenous Peoples across the globe who have held their ground as much as the

people of Taos Pueblo have, for a very long time. I also found myself drawn to the experiences of the Maroon – freedom fighters of African descent in the Americas, who steadfastly demonstrate sustained freedom in place across the centuries of resistance to enslavement and white supremacy. These indomitable Indigenous and Maroon freedom fighters represent dynamic and resilient cultures that, in the words of Seneca activist and scholar John Mohawk, understand “humankind’s relationship to nature (through a) pre-colonial, pre-patriarchal, pre-modern story.” If I want to imagine what a just, free and sustainable future might look like I turn my face to their examples as offered on our Proven Sustainable website.

As my independent study advisor, Jim Koplín read my early writings about my desire to teach, he recognized and named a key truth that I needed to acknowledge and work with in a disciplined manner: “You see things in a really culture-bound way. It’s probably true that most people on this globe live in circumstances where all of the things that you (and I) worry about could not possibly make any difference.” I was humbled and awakened. Jim became a friend and mentor throughout the rest of his life. He introduced me to Dr. Gloria Joseph, through whose class I managed to arrange my student teaching on Taos Pueblo. Gloria also became a lifelong friend and (her word) “womentor.” Forty years later, from her bedside in St Croix, she sent me to pick a healing stone from Maroon Ridge for her healing altar.

Gloria was the first person with whom I discussed my seed thoughts for Proven Sustainable. I told her I wanted to learn with and support people who have demonstrated genuine sustainability beliefs and practices across the planet for hundreds of years. She said, “We know that sustainability relies not on technology but on relationships – to one another, all creatures and the living earth. Your understanding of ‘the sacred’ is critical.” She pointed to her portrait of Chief Joseph with the quote, “The earth and myself are of one mind.” She went on, “The phrase ‘Nothing is sacred’ means that the truly sacred has been damaged by the forces of empire, along with the very meaning of the word ‘sacred.’ Your goal is to point back to that which was rendered invisible without using the language of the systems that damaged sacredness.”

Through my relationship with Gloria, I realized that the only way to “honor the sacred” was to offer the words of people who have lived the very beliefs and practices, which can help us to remember what it means to be a human being existing

in relationship to a living earth. I knew that I needed to be expansive in my offering of voices. I selected *Proven Enduring* peoples who have lived in place for 500 years or longer, stewarding and defending their land while making no efforts to colonize distant peoples: the Khomani San and Hadza from Africa, the Yolngu and Noongar from Australia, the Zhongnan Mountain hermits and Ainu from Asia, the Sami and Basque from Europe, the Chukchi and Inuit from the Arctic, the Haudenosaunee and Hopi from North America, the Kogi and Quechua from South America, the Hawaiians and Maori from Oceania. For the *Proven Free* assemblies, I identified peoples of African descent who have lived in place for 150 years or longer in the Caribbean and the Americas, stewarding their African roots and defending their land against white supremacy: the Saamaka Maroons and Quimbolas from South America, the Haitian Vodouists and Jamaican Maroons from the Caribbean, the Gullah Geechee and Black Seminoles from North America.

Through online research I sought the words of women, men, and two spirit people, young and old, in traditional communities and in diaspora. For each of these 22 assemblies I found the words of eight people, 176 voices in total. Each individual on the Proven Sustainable website is represented by a dialogue code, a quotation of theirs and an accompanying image along with questions intended to inspire collective reflection and action about how we might sustain ourselves on a living planet. As I shared this project with others, my longtime friend and Guiding Council partner Ketu, named the need to ask permission of all those represented on the Proven Sustainable website. As he said, “In life, relationship is everything and it begins with I am. Not the ‘I am black, and you are white’ of American race relations. But the humanity that connects us. From the common ‘I am’ I see that You are.”

Then began the lengthy process of tracking down addresses for as many of the individuals as I could and mailing each a letter letting them know that I hoped to repost their words and inviting their response and participation in collective decision-making and collaborative creativity.

I wrote to them about the intended readers and purposes for this project:

1. Members of Proven Sustainable communities to extend and reinforce bridges to other traditional Peoples and to connect with non-traditional individuals whom they might want to educate and from whom they might want to solicit material aid and support.

2. Young people with cultural roots in proven sustainable communities to extend education about their own traditions and to make them aware of beliefs and practices of other traditional Peoples.
3. Community educators in non-Indigenous communities to initiate discussion and action in support of cultural change in the world toward Proven Sustainable beliefs and practices.

I also wrote that the Proven Sustainable website would not accept donations or allow advertisements but instead encourage readers to make direct donations to support projects identified by the Peoples represented on the Proven Sustainable website. A majority of those who replied were supportive of the project. A small number requested that I remove their codes, which we did right away. Several of those who replied agreed to participate in our Proven Sustainable Conversations Series led by lead interviewer Ketu Oladuwa and website designer and Conversation Series director Kelsey Greene. These are videotaped discussions with Indigenous and Maroon Peoples and their supporters intended to realize and challenge our conscious and unconscious colonized thinking and behaviors in order to better inform our actions amidst challenging situations we face worldwide. Each conversation explores individual and cultural beliefs and practices for living sustainably and resiliently amidst drastic environment changes and ongoing historical efforts of erasure.

Two of the Proven Sustainable Conversation participants, Nicole McIntosh and Wahinkpe Topa (Four Arrows), agreed to become members of the Proven Sustainable guiding council, which aims to shepherd the development of the Proven Sustainable Conversation Series through sincere relationship-building efforts.

Their essential words help to underscore and actualize the goals of our work with Proven Sustainable. I borrow their words with gratitude to close this writing:

Nicole McIntosh, proud Jamaican Maroon: “The legacy that you are creating with this platform is really, really important for us as we go through life and learn about other cultures. You know when I come to your platform I’m thinking, ‘Well I’ve never heard of this - all the Maroons there. It’s just wonderful.’ I click the button and I navigate, and I’m excited like a child when I’m on that platform.”

Wahinkpe Topa (Four Arrows), professor in the School of Leadership Studies at Fielding Graduate University: “As educators use decolonization to challenge educational and cultural hegemony, we must also replace it with Indigenous perspectives and values that guided us for most of human history in ways that cultivate more peaceful, healthy and happy relationships in and with the world.”

Nicole and Four Arrows bring me back to where I started. To the centrality of relationship-building as a means to stand in solidarity with and for the indomitable survivors who are honored on this website.

Author Bio

Sox Sperry is the founder and curator of provensustainable.org. His vocation has been to design and implement structures by which small groups can work collectively to deepen awareness of the role of the individual in family and community. He began his teaching career at the Learning Center, a parent teacher cooperative elementary school in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He went on to co-found the Center for Nonviolence in Fort Wayne where he facilitated nonviolence education classes for adult and teen men. Since 2007 Sox has worked as primary curriculum writer with Project Look Sharp, a media literacy integration initiative at Ithaca College.