

Aboriginal Perspectives of Sustainable Development

Indigenous people and their communities and other local communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should recognize and fully support their identity, culture and interests, and enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development. (The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development 1992, 1992)

Traditionally, Aboriginal people have exemplified the qualities of good stewardship in their interactions with the environment.

Aboriginal environmental knowledge developed over centuries of observing and understanding seasonal changes — changes that were taken into consideration as a natural part of daily life and decision making.

Decisions were made with regard for the environment, which ultimately met the needs of individuals, families, and communities.

As food gatherers, Aboriginal people moved to areas where the land was bountiful. Each of the four seasons had a special time to hunt and trap animals for food and clothing, a time to catch fish, to harvest fruit and berries, and a time to pick and prepare medicines and roots.

In conducting these activities, Aboriginal people considered the growth, reproduction, and regeneration cycles of plants, animals, and birds. To interrupt these natural cycles and

patterns was considered to be an act against the laws of nature. This knowledge and understanding of the natural environment reflected the importance of sustaining Mother Earth for seven generations to come.

It is necessary for all peoples to embrace the concept of survival of the seventh generation, which is truly the heart of sustainability.

We must make decisions that ensure an equitable quality of life for all for seven generations to come.

Embedded within the Aboriginal world view is the concept of collective responsibility for tending the land and using only that which is needed for sustenance. Important, as well, is the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life forms — humankind, flora and fauna, and all that exists on the Earth. The concept of sustainability is not new to Aboriginal people; they are very aware of the growing need for all humans to show greater respect for the environment — respect for Mother Earth — if we are to continue to coexist in this world.

Many Aboriginal people currently embrace sustainability beliefs through their traditional practices. This is evident in the richness and vastness of Aboriginal cultural practices, in particular, the many feasts and celebrations that are held to give thanks for life. There is a celebration and acknowledgement for each season and, as in the past, there is a special time to say “thank you” to the Creator for all life.

Aboriginal Perspectives of Sustainable Development

Given that the Aboriginal population is one of the fastest growing segments in Manitoba, it is critically important that these beliefs and practices are maintained and passed on to new generations. However, in a world where sustainability has not been the norm, the challenge of this approach can be difficult. Aboriginal people face a double challenge — to maintain their traditional sustainability practices and to achieve equity in a fast-changing world.

Aboriginal beliefs and practices have also received global recognition, as evidenced in Principle 22 of the Earth Charter. This recognition provides a sense of hope and rekindles Aboriginal people's collective and social responsibility for the future — a responsibility that must be shared equally among all people.

Aboriginal people are rich in environmental knowledge and can provide important perspectives when considering the impact of economic decisions on the environment.

Aboriginal people are also a source of sustainability strategies that can contribute to our collective well-being. Through ongoing communication and an understanding of traditional and environmental knowledge, education for a sustainable future can be achieved.

Aboriginal perspectives, with respect to traditional environmental knowledge as well as sustainability concepts, can be integrated into curricula in order to help teachers and students understand the importance of an education towards a sustainable society.

The chart that follows illustrates key Aboriginal sustainability concepts.

Aboriginal Sustainability Concepts	
Mother Earth as a Life-Giving Force	In many Aboriginal languages, "Mother Earth" is depicted as a living person. If the inhabitants of this world continue to desecrate her, then she will no longer be a life-giving force.
Laws of Nature	There was a time and season for all life-sustaining activities. Animals were not killed during their reproductive cycles.
Life-Sustaining Elements of the World	<p>Air: the essential element of human and all life forms. It also is the means by which one thinks and speaks.</p> <p>Earth: provides food and many other life-sustaining materials and resources.</p> <p>Fire: provides heat and light. The Sun is fire.</p> <p>Water: cools and nurtures, makes life and growth possible.</p> <p>Balance among the four basic elements, the innate capacities of humankind, and the life-sustaining elements of nature makes it possible to live well and comfortably.</p>
Interrelationships and Interconnectedness	Take no person, animal, or thing for granted. Everyone and everything has a role and a place.

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