

Resources on African American and Indigenous Perspectives on the Environment

African Americans, Racial Injustice, and the Environment: Context and Resources

Context:

Environmental scholars often tell the story of the American landscape from a white, middle-class perspective, describing iconic landscapes as pristine wilderness, untouched by humans. But to African Americans, the American landscape has often been a site of oppression and violence. Nevertheless, African Americans have forged meaningful relationships with the land, fighting to liberate it from oppression and restore it to health and wholeness. The following resources will help you understand this rich tradition, the roots of the environmental justice movement.

Resources:

Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll, eds. *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History* (Univ. of Pittsburgh Press 2006)

Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (University Press of Kansas 2007)

Scott Giltner, *Hunting and Fishing in the New South: Black Labor and White Leisure After the Civil War* (Johns Hopkins University Press 2008)

Kimberly N. Ruffin, *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (University of Georgia Press 2010)

Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African American to the Great Outdoors* (University of North Carolina Press 2014)

Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (California Studies in Food and Culture Press 2013)

Kosek Jake, *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico* (Duke University Press 2006)

The New York Times: [Black Environmentalists Talk About Climate and Anti-Racism](#)

Alice Walker has written a great deal about her relationship to the natural world as an African American woman. Useful essays include:

- “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience,” “Choice: A Tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr.,” “Choosing to Stay at Home,” “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” “Only

Justice Can Stop a Curse,” and “Nuclear Madness,” all in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1983);

- “Am I Blue?” “Longing to Die of Old Age,” “Everything Is A Human Being,” “Why Did the Balinese Chicken Cross the Road?” and “The Universe Responds,” all in *Living By the Word* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich 1988).

Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Context and Resources

Context: The “Ecological Indian” debate:

One of the more persistent stereotypes about indigenous people is that they are “closer to nature” and therefore their traditional practices have a uniformly benign ecological impact. That stereotype has been challenged, most prominently by Shepherd Krech in his 1999 book *The Ecological Indian*. Krech argued that Native Americans did not understand ecological relationships and often had a harmful impact. In addition, some Native American scholars such as Vine Deloria Jr have criticized the Western scientific tradition (see *Red Earth, White Lies* (1995)). Both views have tended to create distance between Native Americans and the natural sciences as taught in American colleges and universities.

Today this debate is evolving into a more nuanced exploration of how indigenous people have traditionally understood and managed the natural environment, in the context of on-going conflict, violence and displacement—as well as the role that allegedly objective, “value-free” scientific practices have played in that displacement. We in the Environmental Studies Program embrace that exploration. These are resources we’ve found helpful in understanding Native American experiences and perspectives on Western scientific traditions and for bringing those experiences and perspectives more prominently into the environmental studies classroom.

In order to make this list as useful as possible, we have included additional resources that speak to other traditions and/or help us to connect our disciplines to these conversations.

Resources:

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013)

R.W. Kimmerer (2002). “[Weaving Traditional Ecological Knowledge into Biological Education: A Call to Action](#)”. *BioScience*, 52.

Mark Dowie, [Conservation Refugees](#): The Hundred-Year Conflict between Global Conservation and Native Peoples; [Conservation Refugees](#), Orion Magazine

How native people—from the Miwoks of Yosemite to the Maasai of eastern Africa—have been displaced from their lands in the name of conservation.

Gwen Westerman & Bruce White, Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota (Minnesota Historical Society Press 2012).

Tells the history of the Dakota people in southeast Minnesota, including a wealth of stories about the meaning of specific places, useful discussions of how the Dakota people related and relate to the land and to the European-descended settler community.

D. Veton, "[Margaret Hiza Redsteer uses Navajo memories to track climate change](#)," High Country News (April 4, 2012).

Redsteer, a member of the Crow tribe, is a geologist and climate scientist. This article explains how she draws on the Navajo community's oral traditions to understand how the land and climate are changing.

Resources on [Native American Science Curriculum](#)

This website was developed by faculty at University of Kansas, Northern Arizona University, University of Alaska-Anchorage, and University of New Mexico. The project is supported by an NSF grant

[Native Land website](#)

Who lived on this land and what language was spoken here before European settlement? Which treaties relate to this land? This website is a good place to start exploring those complicated questions.

C.C. Makondo and D.S.G., Thomas (2018). "[Climate change adaptation: linking indigenous knowledge with western science for effective adaptation](#)." Environmental Science and Policy, 88, 83-91.

J. Mistry and A. Berardi (2016). "[Bridging indigenous and scientific knowledge](#)" Science, 352, 1274-1275.

Elizabeth Hoover, Fires Were Lit Inside Them: The Pyropolitics of Water Protector Camps at Standing Rock (Review of International American Studies 2019 Vol 12 No 1: 11-34)

Organizations in the Twin Cities:

[Dream of Wild Health:](#)

This is one of the longest continually operating Native American organizations in the Twin Cities. Its mission is to restore health and wellbeing to the Native American

community by recovery of knowledge of and access to healthy indigenous food, medicines, and lifeways. For example, it provides educational programs that reconnect the urban Native American community with traditional Native plants and their culinary, medicinal and spiritual use.

UMN [Native American Medicine Gardens](#)”

Located on the University’s St. Paul campus, the Native American Medicine Gardens are run by Native caretakers in the Native American tradition. Visitors to the Gardens are free to take edible and medicinal plants for personal use, with the intention that they reflect upon the true sources of their own food and the importance of food sovereignty.

Article is by Madeline Giefer (Sept. 10, 2014). See also Melissa Licht, Learning About the UMN Native American Medicine Garden,” Hennepin County Master Gardeners [website](#).