

# STEWARDS OF A SACRED PLACE

FOR NATIVE AMERICANS,  
SPIRIT AND THE LAND  
ARE ONE

BY LARRY ECHOHAWK

**A**s I travel the length and breadth of Idaho and this country, I find today an interest in — and a fascination with — Native Americans and their culture. *Dances with Wolves* was more than just a rejection of the Saturday afternoon John Wayne good-guy/bad-guy, cavalry-vs.-the-Indians movie. It was an awakening experience, taking Americans beyond the stereotypes of a mythical Hiawatha, or a grieving Chief Joseph, or a scowling Sitting Bull, or an Indian with tears trickling down his cheek at the sight of garbage lying beside the exhaust-polluted highway.

It was an appeal to the American people to know their own roots. Because no matter which continent your grandparents came from, if you are American, you are part Indian in your roots. As D.H. Lawrence said: "The American Indian will never again control the continent, but he will forever haunt it."

For Native Americans, the Earth is sacred. The Pawnee account of creation is of an ancient people emerging from darkness into a lighted world — a holy place. It is less an explanation of the Earth's beginnings than an expression of the constant creative outpouring of the Great Spirit. Creation is not what happened thousands or millions of years

ago; it's what's happening right here and now in this holy place.

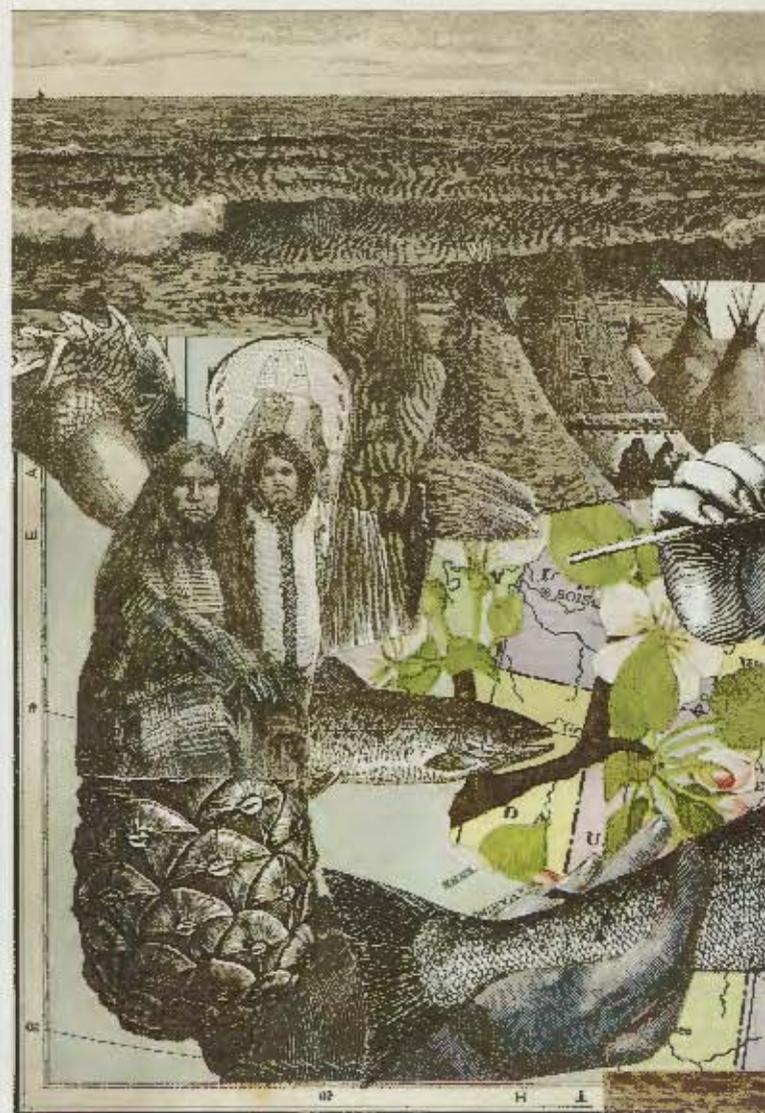
The center of each tribe's communal existence is a sacred mountain, river, plateau or valley. Diversity springs from each tribe's relation to its own land and the animals that inhabit it. The Hopi identity revolves around the "rain dance" of the arid Arizona deserts. The Plains Indians find the Great Spirit in the "seed of their corn" and in the buffalo, while the coastal Indians of the Northwest find it in the salmon.

This interdependence of the species on one another and on the Earth culminates in the tribal member's experience of death. Death, to the Indian, was not to be feared or fought. Each composed a death song, unique to that person; death was met, singing the song, as a final affirmation of the individual's existence and personal integrity.

At death, the Indian rejoined the Earth, with no casket as protection against nature, and no headstone to mark the spot. The body simply returned to Earth, contributing to the rebirth of the land and the continuation of life.

That is why, in Nevada today, Indian tribes refuse to accept millions of dollars awaiting them in the federal treasury if they will cede the land of their ancestors. As a Crow chief said in 1912:

*"The land as it is, is my blood and my dead. It is*





*consecrated and I do not want to give up my portion of it. When it became important to destroy the tribes, the government knew, instinctively, that the key was to break each tribe's tie to the Earth, to destroy its rootedness in the land and the animals."*

The process began with confinement to a reservation. Between 1833 and 1856, the Pawnees were forced to cede some 23 million acres of their aboriginal lands, leaving them with just 1 percent of what had been theirs. They were kept from journeying at will over those lands to hunt; from visiting their ancestral grave sites; from seeking visions on the high grassy hills; from pursuing enemies in response to attack; from taking the sacred pipe to visit and "adopt" members of other tribes.

When the Pawnee tribe was finally uprooted in the winter of 1874 and relocated from Nebraska to "Indian Territory" in present-day Oklahoma, the tribe, like so many others before it, had its own "Trail of Tears."

Those tears came not from the freezing wind and bitter cold; winter buffalo hunts had accustomed them to that. Nor did they come from the lives lost to Sioux attacks; the more settled Pawnee had already known death at the hands of the nomadic Sioux.

No. The tears shed on that trail from the Platte to the Cimarron were shed for loss of a homeland, loss of the great

herd (slaughtered for their tongues and hides), loss of a way of life lived in harmony with the land.

Sadly, the white American's relation to the land has most often been summed up in two words: Manifest Destiny — to tame the wildlands, from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

To the Indians, those lands weren't "wild" but bountiful with the seed corn, the great herd, all the plants and animals — an outpouring of the creativity and generosity of the Great Spirit. Chief Luther Standing Bear of the Sioux said it best:

*"We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills and winding streams with tangled growth as "wild." Only to the white man was nature a "wilderness" and only to him was the land "infested" with "wild" animals and "savage" people.*

*"To us, it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery... When the very animals of the forest and fields began fleeing from the approach of the settlers, then it was for us the 'Wild West' began."*

Today, the "Wild" West is in danger of becoming an amusement park replica of its former self. Like the salmon, anything truly wild today is approaching extinction.

The American Indian was the continent's first endangered species. From 1833 to 1876 the Pawnee nation dwindled from



Larry EchoHawk addresses a group holding a vigil for returning Snake River sockeye salmon last summer at Redfish Lake Creek.

11,000 members to less than 2,500. Today, as then, the losses most frequently came not from direct slaughter, but from destruction of life-sustaining habitat.

The exception, of course, was the buffalo, brought to the verge of extinction by direct slaughter. From 1872 to 1874 more than 7 million buffalo were killed by white hunters for their hides, the carcasses left to rot. With the great herd gone, the tribes could not survive, and by the turn of the century, after relocation to "Indian Territory," the Pawnees numbered less than 700.

We live today in a throwaway society. We talk about recycling and run pilot programs to reuse a small percentage of our enormous waste. The American Indian knew there was no "away" to which things could be thrown. The Buffalo hunters who left those carcasses to rot were incomprehensible — and sacrilegious — to the Indian, who wasted nothing. Buffalo meat sustained life; the hide served as covering for the lodge, sacks for storage and carrying, bed coverings, clothing, saddles, lariats and halters; the sinew made strings for bows, twine and thread; the hooves were used for mallets; bones as scrapers and chisels; ribs as the warriors' bows. Even the animals' bladders became water bags on the annual treks, and their fat a base for mixing paint.

I write of the Native American culture with which I grew up. But I am also an

American, an Idahoan and a realist, and I understand full well that the hands of time do not turn in reverse. Nor would I want them to. But I believe that in the Native American's oneness with nature are lessons for all of us.

Recently, I had occasion again to ponder one of those lessons. When the state of Idaho won its suit against a company that dumped tons of toxic chemicals into the Little Salmon River, the judge in the case did something new: He recognized not only the commercial and recreational value of the lost fish, but their "existence value" as well. Those fish have value, he said, simply because they're there.

We've all had that feeling — that deep sense of oneness that, once experienced, stays with us forever. And we know that whether we ever fish, or even watch salmon spawn, our lives are richer simply because they're there, making their way a thousand miles to the ocean and back in a journey as ancient as the land itself.

Likewise, we may never backpack into the wilderness, but it enriches our spirit and makes us more fully human just to have it there — to know that mountains that existed thousands of years before we did will exist thousands of years after we're gone.

Indeed, all the most powerful images of Idaho — a hawk riding thermals above the Snake River Canyon, jagged peaks reaching

for the sky, a river rushing to the sea — are tributes to the power and beauty of nature, and the blessings its creatures enjoy.

We in Idaho live close to nature — so close we're in danger of taking it for granted. But history has taught us that species *can* be destroyed, mountains *can* be leveled, forests *can* be clear-cut. We humans have the power to destroy nature, and it is our fundamental responsibility — to ourselves, to our children and to Earth itself — to see that we exercise that power with extreme care.

No matter what some would have us believe, we don't *need* to trade one value off against another. We don't need to pollute our rivers, clear-cut our forests, destroy our heritage to have jobs. As Cecil Andrus once put it so beautifully, "We must be able to make a living, but it must be a living worth making."

Now, as we confront the complex issues of the '90s, let's stop and remember that circling hawk, that towering mountain, the incredible salmon. And as we seek to find the elusive balance between our pocketbooks and our spirits, let's remember the words of that Crow Chief: "The land as it is, is my blood and my dead. It is consecrated."

Let's be wise stewards of this consecrated land. □

*This article is excerpted from a speech given by Idaho Attorney General Larry EchoHawk Jan. 24 at the Idaho River Symposium.*