

Indigenous Cultural Landscapes

Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail
National Park Service | Chesapeake Bay Office



The Indigenous Cultural Landscape of the Eastern Woodlands

An Old/New Model for Conservation, Interpretation, and Tourism

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It is universally recognized by those concerned with the preservation and restoration of treasured landscapes such as the Chesapeake Bay or other major waterways that widespread public buy-in can be best achieved by appealing to the citizens' appreciation of those areas in their relatively natural state. The immediate corollary is that to appreciate such waterways, one needs to have access to them, or to the lands adjacent. Those lands will be best appreciated if they are already preserved and protected from some of the encroachments of modern life, and especially if those lands and access points have scenic, historical, or cultural significance.

The concept of the indigenous cultural landscape as useful in land conservation programs and interpretation arose from considering what an indigenous person's perspective of the Chesapeake Bay region might have been when John Smith first explored the Bay and its tributaries. It has more recently been recognized as applicable to other indigenous peoples' lands, if their pre-Contact lifestyles were similar. This construct recognizes and respects that Indian cultures lived within the context of their environment, although not in the stereotypical sense of "living in harmony with the environment". American Indian peoples lived around major waterways within large varied landscapes, with which they were intimately familiar. They used different parts of those landscapes in different ways: for food, medicine, and clothing procurement, for making tools and objects related to transportation and the household, for agriculture, and for settlements.

A brief glimpse into the lifestyles of the American Indian peoples of the Chesapeake Bay region at the time of early European contact might be helpful here as an example. Although those many nations had somewhat different cultures and sociopolitical structures, their life-ways were similar throughout the Bay area, and indeed were shared by nations in most of the Eastern Woodlands. They practiced agriculture, and lived for some parts of the year in permanent towns and communities. The communities were often fairly widely dispersed. Houses were not stationary, but moved as agricultural lands became fallow, so that communities drifted in location over the years. Men and women had differing duties, and the duties of both connected them with their broader surroundings and took them away from their permanent communities during some periods of the year. Men were primarily responsible for hunting, and procuring food from fish and shellfish. They were also the principal tool makers for tools made of stone. The women were primarily responsible for agriculture, for gathering plant materials used for food, housing, medicine, and clothing, and for processing animals for food and clothing.

To be effective in such a society, both men and women had to be familiar with very large areas of land and water, and be able to remember and travel to the appropriate places for gathering particular plants, acquiring stone for tools, or hunting particular species of animals. This was the indigenous person's world of the time; in area it far outstripped what is generally understood today as an "Indian community" according to the dots on the early explorers' maps. This view of the world one inhabited and lived with was the indigenous cultural landscape.

The construct of the indigenous cultural landscape is particularly pertinent to land conservation and interpretation in the East today for two major reasons. It embraces an aspect of America's cultural heritage that has widespread appeal for the geotourist. People of all ages and backgrounds are intrigued by Native history and culture and eager to learn more about what life was like for Indians, especially during that time before the advent of Europeans into the Chesapeake region changed the Indian world. This fact is acknowledged by one of the major themes of the National Park Service's Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, which embraces respect for, inclusion of, and education about the Indian communities of the Chesapeake.

In addition, the use of such a construct does more than capitalize on the public's great interest about American Indians and their cultures, and the emotional ties such interest brings to the conservation of natural resources. It also recognizes that these indigenous communities still exist, and that respecting them and their cultures is a valid and central goal of any land/water conservation effort. Furthermore the construct re-emphasizes the values that American Indians have toward natural resources, including an attachment to place, and thereby encourages that attachment to place which will further efforts to help save and protect Eastern waterways and their watersheds.

In the past, opportunity related to American Indian cultural conservation and curiosity has focused primarily on archeological sites, not on the full landscapes in which these cultures existed prior, and for some decades after, European contact. Conservation and preservation of Native archaeological sites is indeed critical, but our efforts should not be limited to such sites. Instead, they should be expanded whenever possible to embrace known archaeological sites - or areas of high potential for pre-Colonial archaeology - and their surrounds, preferably in units of land large and natural enough to accurately reflect the cultural life-ways of the communities that lived within them. Such an approach strengthens the arguments for preserving and conserving and/or restoring larger cohesive landscape units, which may include uplands, forests, natural openings and meadows, as well as riverine, estuarine, and marine waters, in connected blocks and corridors.

This approach also brings both equality and visibility to the descendants of the indigenous cultures who inhabited these lands historically. If we conserve for both indigenous cultural and ecological reasons, along with scenic and aesthetic reasons, we build a greater meaning for these

landscapes, and for the people who were...and still are...attached to them culturally. We build opportunities for the public to interact with and learn about these communities which furthers their attachment to those lands and waterways. In addition we include these indigenous peoples, who are today largely absent from the greater “conservation communities” of the Eastern United States, as equal partners, consultants, educators, and interpreters.

The descendent indigenous groups of the East should participate in the process of selecting and prioritizing culturally significant indigenous landscapes, which are currently underrepresented in our federal, state, and regional databases. These groups will be those who have descended from the original indigenous peoples and who have maintained their American Indian identity through the centuries. Such participation would not be linked to their recognition by the Federal government or the states as tribes. Federal recognition by these groups is usually problematic, because their treaties with European nations preceded the formation of the United States government and were not subsumed by the U.S. at its formation. Nevertheless, these American Indian groups still use, protect, respect, and enjoy the rivers and tributaries that often share their names, and they will want to help in efforts to conserve the related lands of those watershed.

Additionally, it will be useful for conservation and interpretation purposes to define indigenous cultural landscapes even where there is no extant descendent Native community that acknowledges a historic connection to the area. These landscapes can be readily identified by knowledgeable American Indian scholars working in consultation with trusted archaeologists and anthropologists experienced in recognizing areas of high probability for pre-Colonial use and habitation.

Finally, the use of the indigenous cultural landscape can be applied to protected lands no matter who manages them. The added value of the indigenous cultural landscape lies in its particular suitability for educational and engaging interpretation wherever public access, whether private or public, limited or unlimited, is permitted on preserved lands. To know the people’s history, one must know the landscape and how it was used. Presenting information about the historical use of the landscape offers further opportunity for underserved American Indian communities to enrich the field of heritage tourism by sharing their stories and their perspectives on the lands being conserved.

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