

KINGSTON REFLECTIONS

Personal Thoughts on a Tribal/District Training Opportunity

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Working Effectively with American Indians

United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
National Employee Development Center

August 13-17, 2018

Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe
The Point Resort and Casino
Kingston, WA (Kitsap County)

September 14, 2018

For well over 50 years I have been on a personal journey of linked experiences that have elevated my knowledge of Native American culture in this state and country. The latest check-in on my journey was the week of August 13-17, 2018, in Kingston (WA). On the grounds of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, I participated in a federal training opportunity titled, Working Effectively with American Indians. I have attended a portion of this training in the past, but this marked my first opportunity to attend the full week.

Across the span of over 37 years of paid and unpaid public service, I have been privileged to meet some remarkable people. The Kingston cadre was/is an exceptional group of individuals:

- Martin Bales, Gila River Yaqui Tribe, Arizona
- Nathaniel Todea, Navajo Nation, Utah
- David Pesicka, Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Lakota Nation, South Dakota
- Roylene Rides at the Door², Blackfeet Nation, Montana

Also contributing their experience and knowledge were two, 'old' acquaintances:

- Greig Arnold, Vice Chairman, Makah Tribe, Washington
- Robin Slate³, Tlingit Tribe, Alaska

Invited speakers shared their perspectives and life learnings:

- Anthony Jones, Attorney, Tulalip Tribes, Washington
- Steven Moe, Attorney, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Washington
- Stormy Purser, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Washington
- Nicole Rasmussen, Water Quality Biologist, Quileute Tribe, Washington (Enrolled member of the Little River Band of the Muskegon Ottawa Nation of Indians - Wisconsin)
- Joan Johnston Nelson, Executive Director, Washington Association for the Education of Speakers of Other Languages (WAESOL) [Enrolled member of the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa Tribe – Michigan]

Further reflection may yield additional 'takeaways' than are expressed in this paper. For now, the major lessons and realizations of the week for me were:

1. **TRUST** - My level of understanding of the history of U.S. treatment of this country's first residents was significantly elevated in Kingston. As a result, I believe I have a much deeper understanding of why trust, established through personal relationships, is so critical to forging working conservation partnerships between districts and tribes. Comments from cadre members, and others, the week underscored this fact:

Martin Bales, *"Elders won't begin to open up to you until they know something about you."* Start with your name and then be personal; be human. In the beginning is not the time to give your title, where you work, etc.

Nathaniel Todea, *"Make the first impression the right one."* It can take up to 20 times to correct a wrong first impression.

David Pesicka, *"It takes a long time to build trust."*

David Pesicka, *"If we're joking with you, we've accepted you."*

Indian anger and mistrust are the product of bearing the consequences of:

- The U.S. government entering into and breaking some 500 treaties/agreements /executive orders with tribes.
- The forced removal of Indian children from their families and enrollment in boarding schools for assimilation purposes.
- The loss of land and placement on reservations with accompanying loss of freedom of movement.

The record of breaking promises informs me about the accumulated level of distrust held by the Indian community for non-tribal governments and government employees. It explains to me why a personal relationship built on knowing you as a person is fundamentally necessary to establishing the foundation of trust from which a working partnership may be possible.

2. **CEREMONY** - Ceremony is an integral part of the Native culture. Each morning opened with a prayer. In some tribes, standing for prayer is the custom. In some tribes, sitting for prayer is the custom.

Sharing a gift is showing respect. All invited speakers were presented gifts as an expression of thanks and appreciation. Friday morning the penultimate activity was presentation of course completion certificates for each attendee. In addition to the certificates, each participant was presented a gift of one or more of the following:

- tobacco (representing balance and healing)
- cedar (representing harmony and protection)
- sage (representing courage and strength)
- braided sweet grass (representing connection to the Creator and Mother Earth)

The week closed with an outdoor healing circle. ♦ Roylene and Nathaniel lit sage and tobacco in an abalone shell for a smudging ceremony. She held it to the four directions. Everyone in the circle was given the opportunity to cleanse with the smoke. It was OK not to participate. ♦ Everyone was given the opportunity to shake a rattle and say one word that summed up the week for them. My word was 'journey'. Other words that I recall: family, love, courage, learning, gratitude, grateful, and freedom (by Martin, preceded by two sharp whoops). ♦ Roylene ended with a prayer. ♦ Greig closed with a Makah song from his grandmother, about love, and drummed as he sang.

3. **TIME** - Reinforced for me from prior experience is the fact time is a different concept in Indian Country compared to the perspective of my European cultural heritage. Subsequent to Kingston, I came across an article that includes the following excerpts:

When I began living and working in Indian country, I learned the origin of the phrase "Indian time." I came to understand that traditionally Indian people were very good students of nature. They studied the seasons and the animals to learn how to live well in their environments. Given this, they learned that it's important to be patient and to act when circumstances were "ripe" rather than to try and force things to happen when circumstances did not support them. I have come to understand it's a Western idea that we can control most circumstances and that we should run our lives by the clock and the calendar.

The control we think we have over circumstances is frequently an illusion and can lead to a lot of wasted energy. Much can be gained by watching, listening, waiting and then acting when the time is right. **"Indian time" is really about respecting the "timeliness" of an action.**

<http://blog.nativepartnership.org/my-thoughts-on-stereotypes/>

The message here is that building a relationship on trust is going to take the time it takes, depending on who is involved in the relationship. Pushing too hard and too soon to move beyond the 'getting to know you' step, is likely to be self-undermining.

4. **'FOREIGN'** - I struggle with the challenge of how to begin establishing a relationship with a tribe. Beyond the clear message that the beginning must be grounded in a personal relationship, there is the factor of crossing onto tribal land. It has finally occurred to me that while I likely at first will have to learn some cultural norms, it will not be unlike:
 - Traveling from one part of the U.S. to another (E.g., Seattle to New York City; L.A. to Chicago; New Hampshire to Alabama; Arizona to Louisiana; Alaska to Kansas; etc.)
 - Traveling to another country where the likelihood is high that there will be differences in language, food, cultural customs and protocols, music and visual arts, clothing, religion.

In the examples above, to some degree, the experiences feel foreign because of the unfamiliar - the discomfort of being in unfamiliar territory; the lack of confidence in knowing how to behave in situations and settings about which I have little to no knowledge because I am away from the comfort zone of home. Because I do like to travel, embrace cultural diversity, and enjoy meeting people and making new friends, and given the 'comparative analysis' above, I think I will be less uncertain of my ability to venture forward.

However, there is a factor that differs for me compared to staff. I chair my local conservation district board. I am retired. I am a volunteer (albeit broadly involved with conservation roles at the local, county, state and national levels). As a matter of reality, it is district staff who have far more day-to-day interaction with the tribes and tribal members in my county. Despite my title, and personal desire to interact, my role in advancing the tribes-district relationship, I think, has to lean toward supporting district staff in their job responsibilities and tribal interactions. They are key because they have specific knowledge and program expertise I simply lack. District staff are the district representatives who are instrumental in getting work done on the ground.

5. **SOVEREIGNTY** - Legal tribal sovereignty is not unfettered. There are limitations inherent to the fact that tribes are "domestic dependent nations" and have a trust relationship with the federal government.
6. **MY K-12 EXPERIENCE** - Regarding the extent to which the history of Washington State and U.S. Native American culture was covered, I remember virtually nothing from my K-12 experience (1959-60 – 1971-72). It is abundantly clear that my pre-college education was woefully incomplete. It was a revealing week – peeling back the rug of history and discovering another dimension to how this country unfolded. I know now what I should have been taught back in the day.⁴

Beyond the preceding observations, I offer the following:

TIPS/REMINDERS

- Tribes respect you if you respect children and elders.
- Attend tribal functions. Make your face known, if not your name. Show interest in the kids of council members. Show interest in tribal elders.
--Martin Bales
- “*Get to know us.*” Tribes are different. Don’t assume the Tribe will say no. Tell the Tribe what you can do (E.g., provide information, facilitate access to funds, provide technical services.)
--Nicole Rasmussen

The statewide and nation-wide tribal community is not homogenous. Nicole’s counsel, “*Get to know us,*” is vital. Examples:

- The Blackfeet People see the world in colors.
- The Blackfeet People do not eat fish.
- Navajos do not point. They use head nods.
- Some tribal languages do not always have a word for ‘something.’ In Blackfeet, there is no word for ‘Spring’. (Post Kingston, I am reading the book, Big Medicine from Six Nations. The author writes, “*There is no Tuscarora word for time...*”)
- Generally, to clap is for performances. To acknowledge someone or say thanks, many Northwest tribes do so with raised hands, palms facing inward.
- Ask Robin Slate for assistance in learning about tribal taboos. Example: In Blackfeet culture, the owl is a messenger of death.
- “Tribal members don’t need help. They just want someone to work with to solve problems.”
--Martin Bales
- Know your tribe’s history. Do your due diligence on outside research of the tribe. See above for “*Get to know us.*”
- “What someone tells me they’ve seen is not the same as seeing for myself.”

--Greig Arnold

My enhanced understanding of trust is that it evolves from:

- Showing respect for a person as an individual;
- Showing respect for and honoring ceremony as integral to culture;
- Showing respect for and honoring a different perspective about time;
- Showing respect for and recognizing history.

The sum of these aspects of respect, I believe, will increase the likelihood of forging successful, joint conservation projects and partnerships between tribes and conservation districts.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Friday morning, listening to the personal stories of the cadre teachers, my heart hurt. Their courage to so openly share was as inspiring as were the disheartening nature of their stories. It was hard to listen to the personal testimonials about the damage done to individuals, families and tribes by the forced enrollment of Indian kids in boarding schools. I was not without tear-filled eyes. In the absence of Roylene, Martin, Nathaniel and David (and Greig and Robin) having the courage to be so openly vulnerable, I could not begin to understand the struggle and pain that is inherently part of the historical story of Indian Country. Subsequent generations are still feeling the legacy of injustice of federal and state governments. I can only admire their personal strength of character, resolve and resilience to relate painful life chapters. Their stories illustrate why Native Americans are hesitant (not unwilling) to trust someone from government.

I am a better person for having met, or seen again, the cadre members. So, to Roylene, Nathaniel, Martin, David, Greig and Robin, I raise my hands in thanks for your leadership in an influential week in my life: Nitsíniyi'taki (Blackfeet); Ahééhee (Navajo); Chokessia (Yaqui?); Pilaymaya (Lakota); Klack KO, Klack KO (Makah); Gunalchéesh (Tlingit).

My learning journey continues. It was certainly elevated in a significant way in Kingston. I could not more highly recommend this training experience.

The training title, Working Effectively with American Indians, brings to mind an old Chinese proverb:

The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now.

This proverb, to my way of thinking, syncs with the most fundamental element of establishing and sustaining a relationship between a tribe and conservation district – get started at the human level. Eventually, it is the only path leading, hopefully, to a professional partnership.

Roylene shared a brief story about her Dad. She asked him one day not long before he passed, “Dad, what do you want?” He answered, “One more day.” MESSAGE: Never take a moment for granted. So, get going, engage, proceed. Start.

¹ Charter member of the Tribal Relations Committee of the Washington Association of Conservation Districts (WACD), and Member of the Tribal Outreach and Partnership (TOP) Resource Policy Group (RPG) of the Natural Resources Policy Committee (NRPC) of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD). On TOP, he represents the NACD Pacific Region (comprised of seven states and five Pacific Ocean nations or U.S. Territories.)

²Roylene is the NRCS State Conservationist for Washington State.

³Robin is the Washington State NRCS Tribal Liaison in Washington State.

⁴ In 2005, the Legislature and Governor enacted a law *“Relating to teaching Washington's tribal history, culture, and government in the common schools.”* This law was amended in 2015, including requiring the inclusion of tribal sovereignty curriculum be taught in all schools. All federally recognized tribes in Washington State have endorsed the curriculum, titled, Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty in Washington State.

RESOURCE SUGGESTIONS

BOOKS (List provided in training)

- The Rights of Indians and Tribes, Stephen Pevar
- Black Elk Speaks, John Neihardt
- When the Tree Flowered, John Neihardt
- Drummers and Dreamers, Click Relander
- Hear Me My Chiefs, L.V. McWhorter
- Tough Trip Through Paradise, Andrew Garcia
- Seven Arrows, Hyemeyohsts Storm
- The White Dawn, James Houston
- Pretty Shield, Frank B. Linderman
- Never Cry Wolf, Farley Mowat
- Native Heart, Gabriel Horn (White Deer of Autumn)
- States and Tribes: Building New Traditions, James Reed
- Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, Dee Brown
- Exiled in the Land of the Free, Oren Lyons et al, Grinde, Berkey
- Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World, Jack Weatherford
- Red Earth, White Lies, Vine Deloria, Jr.

VIDEOS (shared at training)

- **DAKOTA 38** - <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=DAKOTA+38&qft=+filterui%3amsite-youtube.com&view=detail&mid=AEF8DBA0F6CE0E176EDDAEF8DBA0F6CE0E176EDD&&FORM=VRDGAR>
- **AS LONG AS THE RIVERS RUN**
<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=as+long+as+the+rivers+run&&view=detail&mid=3C4CB1176D10FD49342C3C4CB1176D10FD49342C&&FORM=VRDGAR>

My learning is ongoing. Kingston sparked additional investigation and exploration, leading to these resource recommendations:

BOOKS

- Bear's Heart, Burton Supree, with Ann Ross
- A People's History of The Seven Inlets, Squaxin Island Tribe
- In the Hands of the Great Spirit: The 20,000-Year History of American Indians, Jake Page
- Debating Democracy: Native American Legacy of Freedom, Bruce E. Johansen
- Big Medicine from Six Nations, Ted Williams
- To Become a Human Being: The Message of Tadodaho Chief Leon Shenandoah, Steve Wall

VIDEOS

- **DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY**
<https://youtu.be/JvM4SjN76Yg>
- **RUSSELL MEANS TESTIMONY TO SENATE COMMITTEE IN JANUARY 1989**
<https://youtu.be/xVANRroxuOo>
- **THE TRAUMA OF THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY, MARK CHARLES - NOVEMBER 2, 2015**
<https://youtu.be/gIQ68W-nCzc> (Intro to speaker begins at 8:45; Speaker begins at 11:40)

[09.14.18 Reflections from Kingston WEWAI Training](#)