

On Being and Not Being Native

Hi Paul,

I liked your editor's note in the 11/26 edition - especially extending the human debate over who is/is not a native to encompass the plants.

Here in the Klamath River Basin where back-to-the-landers like me have been around since the early 70's, some of the Klamath Project farmers came as homesteaders in the 50s and Native Americans have been around for at least 8,000 years, we have healthy debates - public and private - about what constitutes a native.

One of my native friends once suggested that there are two kinds of natives - indigenous natives and non-indigenous natives. I think that is a useful way to look at it but it begs the question of what/who qualifies as native. This fellow and many of the local Native Americans with whom I've worked for 30 years consider me a "non-indigenous native" because I have taken the time to connect with the place in a manner that can be described as intimate.

For those ranchers, farmers and loggers who see me as a threat to their way of life, I will never be a native - even though I lived here from way before many of them were born. On the other hand, I consider the way they pursue those livelihoods foreign and often alien to what is sustainable for/in this landscape. Certainly to most indigenous natives in the West the dominant farmer-rancher culture and lifeways appear very alien. They were, in fact, imported from a foreign culture.

On the plant front, it has long seemed to me wrong to label any plant non-native or alien; that should be reserved for life forms - if there are any - from other planets. Of course the War on Weeds is mostly about the contradictions inherent in the alien lifeway we call agriculture and also finding/creating new markets for industrial poisons than with anything truly native. The NPS and agency botanists are sincere but their view of what is native seems philosophically confused - sort of like those environmentalists who confuse the legal and political term wilderness with the reality of wildness. Those folks went so far as to change the famous Thoreau quote, substituting "wilderness" where Thoreau wrote "wildness".

My gut feeling is that nativeness is in essence about relationship: If one has the openness and takes the time to receive instruction from the place in addition to acting on the place, then one is a native of that place. If, on the other hand, one is only capable of imposing ones will on the land and not learning from it, then one is non-native. In other words, it is a matter of relationship.

From this perspective some folks are native to very small places - a town, a valley, a ranch or farm - but not to the surrounding landscape. Others are native to an entire region or even more. If one considers the entire universe as her backyard (habitat) and is available to listen and learn from the entire universe then, perhaps, one can be deemed

fully native. But we usually call those folks saints, gurus or gods.

Anyway, thanks for stimulating these musings.