

# BOOK REVIEW: "Finding Our Way to the Future through the Past" *Resilience, Reciprocity and Ecological Economics: Northwest Coast Sustainability*

Ronald Trosper. Routledge, London. 188pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-78252-4 (paperback), 978-0-415-41981-9 (hardcover). \$41.58 p/b, \$130.00 h/c. 2009.

The myth of the "Noble Savage" is a problem for anthropologists and ecologists. Though the myth was debunked as a myth itself almost 100 years ago, it's a concept that remains a barrier to conversations about what humans have done right in the past when it comes to the environment and conservation.

The book *Resilience, Reciprocity and Ecological Economics: Northwest Coast Sustainability* by Ronald Trosper is part of an academic effort to get past that barrier and use the natural and social sciences to investigate how humans in the past lived successfully within an ecosystem without destroying it.

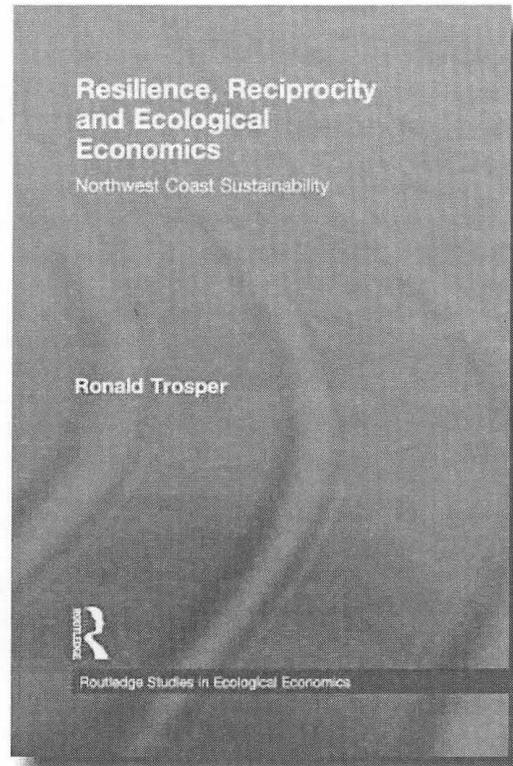
Much of the literature in anthropology and paleoecology has focused on the innate destructiveness of *Homo sapiens*—anywhere we land, overexploitation follows, and in turn that's followed by extinction of other species. The idea of humans as innately destructive—from Pleistocene humans eradicating Neandertals to our current predicament where species are going extinct at anywhere from 100 to 1,000 times the normal speed—is so pervasive we have a hard time accepting that overexploitation might be more nurture versus nature.

To make matters worse, efforts to tease out what indigenous societies did right when it came to environmental conservation are often met with a dismissive, "that's just the myth of the Noble Savage" response. The speaker is exposed as uneducated, or even racist, since the myth is a stereotype based on a religious concept where individuals who withdraw from society—corrupt "European civilization" in this case—are virtuous.

Trosper methodically dismantles the myth of the Noble Savage as a legitimate cry of protest by investigating the economics of human exchange within the Northwest Coast cultures, which ranged from northern California to southern Alaska. By dissecting how they collectively exploited common resources, he offers a potential model that can be used today to integrate economics with ecology. Trosper roots his thinking firmly within the parameters of human behaviour. He makes a strong case—by exploring the economy of indigenous Northwest coast cultures—that humans are not born to be destructive nor will every culture evolve to be destructive.

This slim book is a gem. Trosper spent time with the Nisga'a on the northern British Columbia coast, and he's careful throughout the book to point out that First Nations and the umbrella cultural groups they fall under are all different. Yet he succinctly lists resilient features of their economies—features likely adopted from each other at some point in time—that persisted for at least 2,000 years, if not longer. In socioeconomic terms, for a society to last virtually unchanged for that long is a good example of resilience.

Trosper explains the resilience of the system through archaeological and anthropological evidence, economic theory and



the traditional knowledge from the people who grow up within the system. A couple of key features across cultures on the coast are the concepts of generosity and reciprocity. Trosper uses case studies to show how resilient the indigenous Northwest Coast economic system is; it continues to function, fractured though it has been through Canadian government policies instituted over a century ago geared toward its demise.

Most impressive, however, is the chapter "An Alternative History of Industrialization of the Northwest Coast." Trosper takes a stab at imagining a different meeting of disparate cultures if the settlers recognized the governing and territorial system of the indigenous people. His focus in this counter-factual history is how the end result would have been different for settlers, not just the indigenous people. At a time when fisheries around the globe are in serious decline and in some cases gone, it's a valuable lesson in how a dominant culture—when it steps back to try and understand a different world view—may adopt development strategies more adaptive to the community as a whole. For the indigenous ecological, social and economic system in the Northwest Coast, the settlers would have had to adopt a system of cooperation and sharing a finite resource.

Ultimately, the concept is not foreign to Western society. If the goal of a culture is robustness and resiliency, the best course of action is obvious. Similar economic systems exist in Western

subcultures where wealth is not measured in dollars—scientific labs, for example.

For the past year I followed a few scientific programs doing fieldwork, in biology and archaeology. I found the successful ones work through a system similar to the reciprocity of the potlatch. The Principal Investigator (the PI) is the “heh goos,” (in the Tla’amin language that’s “head man”) who has access to knowledge, equipment, funds, and other “elite” PIs in the field. A PI generously shares with students access to resources. In turn, the students cooperate with the PI and each other to add to that lab’s body of knowledge, which adds to the lab’s prestige. Successful labs have generous PIs, who recruit elite students, in turn establishing their own labs while keeping ties with their old labs (that’s the intermarriage part). This generosity and reciprocity leads to resilience. As long as the knowledge remains valuable, the lab and its prestigious status remain stable. (This is sometimes why

scientific theories that need to die might take a long time to do so—they come from a resilient lab. The theory only dies when the investigators die.)

The biggest difference in these two economies is that knowledge is not a finite resource. The biggest problem with knowledge is that it sometimes gets lost, especially if it’s not written down. Trosper has gone to the trouble to draw a road map of how a culture can include stewardship of the land within their economic and social systems.

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## BOOK REVIEW:

# *Being and Becoming Indigenous Archaeologists*

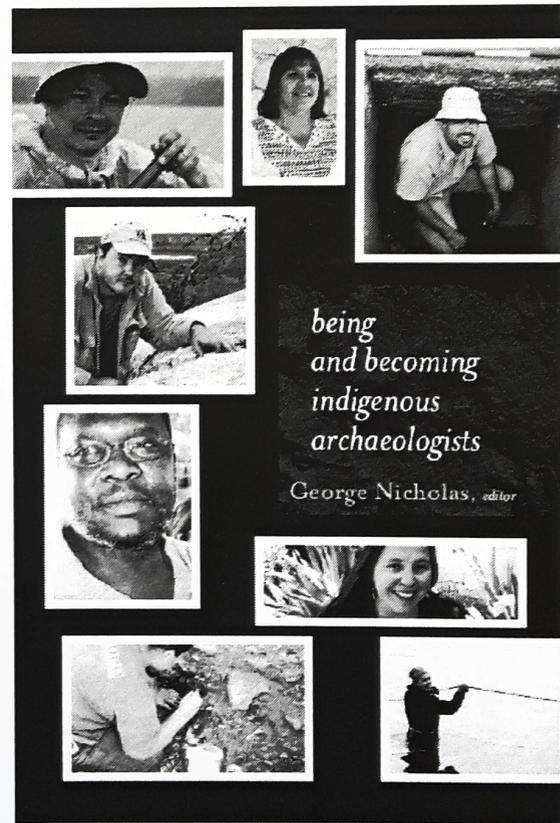
George Nicholas (editor). Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA. 352 pp., ISBN: 978-1-59874-498-9 (paperback), 978-1-59874-497-2 (hardcover). \$34.85 p/b, \$69.00 h/c. 2010.

“It is precisely in this uncharted interface between abstract principles and real-life events that things happen.”

(Augustine F.C. Holl, 131)

Indigenous archaeology, like feminist archaeology, is a consciously political framework that is closely aligned with global civil rights movements. These days, it is widely acknowledged as a key theoretical development in archaeology and is included in university curricula. In *Being and Becoming Indigenous Archaeologists* the contributors, along with editor George Nicholas, personalize this theoretical development by showing that Indigenous archaeology is also an experience and identity shared by a diverse group of individuals. This collection of short autobiographical stories recounts the archaeological careers of 36 self-identified Indigenous peoples from North America, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific. These essays are introduced by Nicholas, who initially coined the term “Indigenous archaeology” in 1997 to refer to “archaeology with, for, and by Indigenous peoples” (Nicholas and Andrews 1997). This collection highlights the “by” portion of this definition by presenting the experiences of Indigenous practitioners of archaeology along with the surprisingly engaging descriptions of their paths to professional archaeology careers.

Contributors were contacted by Nicholas and asked to write their own stories in their own words. The result is a diverse collection of interesting perspectives from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. Nicholas did not edit for style or cohesion, and thus the stories range from casual to academic, with some humour and irony thrown in for good measure. The addition of photographic portraits of each writer allows each author’s character a place within this volume, adding an intimate quality to the book. Nicholas notes that the variety that defines the collection is also what defines Indigenous archaeology as a whole. Yet it is the



similarities between the encounters of the individual archaeologists that convince the reader that there is a shared “Indigenous” experience.

Unfortunately, this shared experience of Indigenous archaeology is based as much on the challenge of confronting racism as it is on the complexity of balancing traditional beliefs with