The Real Chief Seattle Was Not a Spiritual Ecologist

Chief Seattle's 1854 Speech is widely accepted as demonstrating the superiority of Native American attitudes toward the environment. However, the chief never made the speech attributed to him.

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Many books have been published during the past several decades promoting the widely accepted belief that all Native Americans lived in "balance" with their environment prior to the coming of the white man. The belief also holds that American Indians possess a deep respect for and spiritual awareness of nature that has been lost by those who live in urban industrial societies with their emphasis on the exploitation of nature for commercial and material gain (e.g., Neihardt 1932; Brown 1953; Waters 1963; Lame Deer and Erdoes 1972; Storm 1972; Deloria 1973; Highwater 1981; Jeffers 1991). One particular publication stands out for its popularity, its inspirational message, and its widespread acceptance as illustrating Native American

spiritual values in relation to the natural environment. This is "Chief Seattle's 1854 Speech" (see Kaiser 1987; Adams 1994; Low 1995). Although the speech attributed to Seattle is widely believed to have been given by him, it is, in fact, pseudo-historical.

Chief Seattle's 1854 Speech

> How can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people....
>
> If we sell you our land, remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also received his last sigh. The wind also gives our children the spirit of life. So if we sell you our land, you must keep it apart and sacred, a place where man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow flowers.
>
> Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the sons of the earth.
>
> This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.
>
> One thing we know: Our God is also your God. The earth is precious to Him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator. (Gore 1992, 159)

The above quote is taken from Vice President Al Gore's book, *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit.* It is part of a larger 1,200-word speech attributed to Chief Seattle, a nineteenth-century Suquamish Indian of the American Northwest. The speech has been widely used not only to illustrate Seattle's poetic appreciation of nature and his deeply spiritual understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things, but also to emphasize the ancient wisdom contained within Native American cultures generally—a wisdom many view as lost in the highly technical and materially oriented urban industrial societies of the late twentieth century. However, there is a fundamental problem with the above quote, as well as with the larger speech from which it is taken: not only were the words never spoken by Chief Seattle; they could not possibly have been.

The current version of Chief Seattle's speech represents but the latest rendition of a changing and evolving work of fiction. The original text of this speech was written by Dr. Henry A. Smith and published in the *Seattle Sunday Star* on October 29, 1887 (Kaiser 1987, 503). Smith claimed that the text he published was a direct copy of a speech given by Chief Seattle in 1854 during treaty negotiations with Isaac Williams, Washington State's first territorial governor. Increasingly modified versions of Seattle's speech were subsequently published by Clarence Bagley (1931), John Rich (1932), and William Arrowsmith (1969).

The most far-reaching revision of Seattle's speech was created in 1991 by Ted Perry, a Texas scriptwriter. Perry composed a substantially modified and enlarged version of the previously evolving Seattle speech to accompany a program on ecology produced by the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission.[1] Perry's script departed sharply from all previous versions of Seattle's speech (see Kaiser 1987) and soon spawned its own various offspring, including 1) an abbreviated version of his 1971 script distributed at the 1974 Spokane Expo; 2) an anonymous booklet titled *The Decidedly Unforked Message of Chief Seattle* (see Adams 1994, 52); 3) an anonymous 1991 revision of the 1974 Spokane text titled "This Earth is Precious" and 4) a poetic adaptation of the original Perry script published in the Midwest Quarterly in 1992 under the title, "Chief Seattle Reflects on the Future of America, 1855" (see Low 1995, 410).

In 1991, a further modification of Perry's script provided the text for a children's book titled *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* illustrated by Susan Jeffers. Jeffers assumed credit only for the illustrations that she produced for the book; she attributed the text itself to Chief Seattle. Ironically, Jeffers's book, which sold more than 250,000 copies, was listed as number five on the *New York Times* bestsellers list for nonfiction in 1992 (Bordewich 1996, 132). That same year, The Nature Company advertised a small book in its Christmas catalogue titled *Chief Seattle's 1854 Speech* (see Low 1995, 407).

Chief Seattle's speech—or, more correctly, various embellishments of Ted Perry's fictional script—quickly gained broad acceptance throughout the industrial world. In one form or another, different versions of "Chief Seattle's Speech" have served a wide variety of public uses. The "speech" provided the basis for a multimedia teaching aid produced by the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in London, as well as a prayer used by the Woman's Day World of Prayer (Kaiser 1987, 498). Portions of Perry's script have also been published in *Passages* (Northwest Airlines' in-flight magazine), *Environmental Action,* numerous Sierra Club editorials, Canada's "Green Plan," and NASA's "Mission to Planet Earth" (see Kaiser 1987, 498–500; Adams 1994, 52). Joseph Campbell incorporated the Spokane text in his book *The Power of Myth,* with Bill Moyers (1988), and subsequently read from the text in his video series, *Transformation of Myth through Time.* And, as illustrated above, the Vice President of the United States included a portion of Seattle's mythical speech in his book calling for increased global ecological awareness (Gore 1992). Far too many additional adaptations of Seattle's "speech" exist than can be listed here, including its ubiquitous application on T-shirts, buttons and other items sold at innumerable folk festivals, art galleries, and New Age spiritual gatherings. However, it is worth noting that excerpts from Seattle's "speech" have even found their way into scholarly publications about American Indians (e.g., Thornton 1987, 225), as well as into at least two environmental science textbooks (e.g., Collard 1989; Dobson 1995).

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Improbabilities Associated with Seattle's "Speech"

A critical evaluation of the full "modern text" of Chief Seattle's speech (i.e., the collection of texts derived from Perry's script) clearly demonstrate its inauthenticity. It is, for example, impossible for Seattle to have made the statement, "I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the prairie left by the white man who shot them from a passing train," which is contained within the "modern text" (Kaiser 1987, 527). First of all, it would have been impossible for any single person to have witnessed one individual shoot anywhere near one thousand buffalo from a passing train, given the speed of a train combined with the time that would have been needed for an individual to reload and fire a rifle in use in 1854 that many times. There also were no buffalo at the Puget Sound where Seattle lived, which is over a thousand miles from the Great Plains, and there is no evidence even suggesting that Seattle ever traveled to the Great Plains. Furthermore, the transcontinental railroad was not completed until 1869, and the Euroamerican bison slaughter did not begin until the 1870s. Since Seattle gave his speech in 1854, a full fifteen years before the railroad was completed and nearly twenty years before whites began to slaughter buffalo in large numbers, he could not possibly have commented on it in his speech. Finally, and most important, Seattle died in 1866 (Kaiser 1987, 502). It would, therefore, have been very difficult—need I say impossible!—for the chief to have witnessed an event that occurred after his death.

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The modern version of Seattle's speech also contains the quote, "What is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of a whippoorwill?" (Kaiser 1987, 527). Since the whippoorwill, like the buffalo, is also not native to the Northwest, Seattle is unlikely to have ever heard one sing. Similarly, the modern text contains a reference by Seattle to the white man's urban pollution. However, since Seattle's speech was made as part of the negotiations for the initial purchase of Indian land, he could not have commented on developments that were to follow the very land transfer he was negotiating.

All modern versions of Chief Seattle's speech are, therefore, completely inauthentic. Indeed, given the fictional nature of Perry's script and the fact that all modern versions of Seattle's speech derive from his original text, all of the latter are, by definition, themselves works of fiction. However, there are also numerous problems associated with the original text that Henry Smith wrote in 1887, which raise serious doubts about its authenticity as well. To begin with, Smith's text was published a full thirty-three years after Chief Seattle gave his original speech. This separation in time alone raises serious questions regarding the text's accuracy and reliability, much as the 30 to 100-years gap between the death of Jesus and the writing of the various gospels have raised serious doubts regarding the authenticity of specific words attributed to him.

Furthermore, Seattle spoke no English and his speech was given in Lushotseed (a Salish dialect), his native tongue, which was then translated into Chinook Jargon. Chinook Jargon was a regional trading language containing an admixture of French, English, and local Indian words. It contained approximately 300 words and has been described as "barely suitable for bartering" (Adams 1994, 53). Given its verbal limitations, it is highly unlikely that Chinook Jargon could express the abstract conceptual images contained in Smith's version of Seattle's speech, including such statements attributed to Seattle as "Yonder sky that had wept tears of compassion upon our fathers for centuries untold . . ." (see Kaiser 1987, 503). Moreover, the scene set by Smith in his version of Seattle's speech was described too melodramatically to represent an objective historical account. Smith wrote that "Chief Seattle arose with all the dignity of a senator who carries the responsibility of a great nation on his shoulders" (ibid.). Finally, Kaiser (ibid., 506) shows that substantial differences exist between the original Smith text and two short treaty speeches attributed to Seattle in the National Archives and concludes that "the selection of the material and the formulation of the text is [sic] possibly as much Dr. Smith's as Seattle's."

The Real Chief Seattle

Due to cumulative changes in the content of the speech attributed to him over the past 150 years, Chief Seattle has been transformed from a local Suquamish Indian into a late Victorian version, and more recently into a modern environmentalist version, of the "noble savage." Through time and textual revision, Seattle has been completely removed from the nineteenth century sociopolitical context in which he lived. He has, instead, been fashioned and refashioned into successive, politically correct versions of the white man's Indian. Since Seattle presented his speech during preliminary treaty negotiations with Isaac Williams, the new territorial governor, it must be understood within that context.

Seattle's original speech was made as part of an argument for the right of the Suquamish and Duamish peoples to continue to visit their traditional burial grounds following the sale of land to white settlers. The specific land that was purchased by whites was sacred to the Suquamish and Duamish because their ancestors were buried there. It was this specific land that was sacred, not land as an abstract concept. It is whites who have created the romantic notion that all land is sacred to Indians.

The very fact that Seattle was chosen by the U.S. Government to represent his people in treaty negotiations raises important questions. Why, for example, was Seattle chosen and not someone else? The Northwest peoples were orga-

nized into a variety of clans and possessed no centralized leadership or political organization. However, as in other situations where colonial governments encountered land occupied by tribal societies, the United States Government needed friendly leaders to serve as representatives for the various indigenous peoples of this region. Chief Seattle was one of the local leaders chosen for that purpose. Seattle was likely selected because he demonstrated allegiance, rather than opposition, to whites. He had, in fact, converted to Roman Catholicism around 1830 (Kaiser 1987, 503) and was positively disposed toward white settlement. Seattle never fought a war against the Americans and even sided with them during one Indian uprising, an uprising he blamed on Indian youth (Adams 1994, 52–53). He was, significantly, the first Indian to sign the 1855 treaty. Finally, two statements in the original treaty speeches found in the National Archives clearly attest to Seattle's positive disposition towards whites:

"Now by this we put away all bad feelings, if we ever had any. We are friends of the Americans.

I look upon you as my father. I and the rest regard you as such. All of the Indians have the same good feelings towards you." (Adams 1994, 52–53)

Seattle was not simply a pawn of the U.S. Government in this situation, however. He needed whites to protect and advance his own economic and political interests. Seattle was commercially allied with a Dr. David Maynard in the curing and packing of salmon (Adams 1994, 53) and needed whites to help him in his conflict with other native leaders for control over fishing rights essential to his newly developing commercial venture. In one of the original treaty speeches preserved in the National Archives, Seattle refers to the U.S. Army as a "bristling wall of strength," which will assure that "ancient enemies will no longer frighten his people" (ibid.). Seattle was therefore likely using whites to advance his own political and economic interests, just as they were using him to advance theirs.

Stereotyping Native Americans

Although on the surface it may not appear harmful to portray Chief Seattle and other Native Americans in idealistic terms, such romantic portrayals are incorrect and serve to perpetuate racial stereotypes. They deny American Indians their diversity and adaptability. While it may be an improvement to project stereotypes of sainted elders rather than brutish savages, as Alice Kehoe (1992, 591) points out, "neither mythic projection reflects the reality of the one-and-one-half million Native Americans who grew up as Indians."

The way in which stereotypes rob Native Americans of their humanity and diversity is clearly illustrated in Susan Jeffers's book, *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky.* Jeffers states on the original jacket cover of her book that she "consulted with Native Americans, especially with members of the Lakota Sioux Nation" in the writing and illustrating of her book, even though Chief Seattle was not a Sioux. Jeffers's illustrations are all of the Lakota. The cultural context of her book is, thus, entirely Plains Indian, the "classic" American Indian of Hollywood and the environmental movement. Not one of her illustrations is of the Suquamish or Duamish peoples of the Northwest, the authentic cultural context of Chief Seattle. Moreover, when confronted by a *New York Times* reporter regarding the inauthenticity of the text attributed to Seattle in her book, Jeffers replied, "I don't know what he said. But I do know that the Native American people lived this philosophy, and that's what's important" (Bordewich 1996:133). Writers such as Jeffers, who uncritically accept such romantic portrayals of Native Americans and who fail to distinguish between one Indian group and another, communicate, however unintentionally, the notion that all Indians are the same.

Conclusion

During the past three decades, Chief Seattle has emerged as one of the premiere icons of Native American values for many whites. Unfortunately, however, the Chief Seattle known to most people is mostly fictional, a fabrication by and for whites. This creation of a false Indian stereotype is hardly new. Throughout American history, whites have fabricated Indians into images that served their own interests. During the nineteenth century, when the Euroamerican population of the United States grew rapidly and whites came into direct competition for land with Native Americans, Indians were popularly viewed as savages who needed to be tamed, settled, and civilized—and even removed, if necessary. Once Indian independence and sovereignty were eliminated and the bulk of the native population was placed on reservations, Indians became viewed nationally as children unable to manage their own affairs and needful of white supervision. White-run government agencies were, thus, established to administer Indian reservations, to establish reservation development policies, and to negotiate contracts with industrial corporations doing business on Indian land. This paternalistic policy served white interests more than it served Indian interests and frequently hindered Native American economic development.

More recently, with the growth of large environmental and countercultural New Age movements, a new Indian image has emerged. Native Americans have become the repositories of a traditional wisdom to those challenging institutionalized beliefs and practices in contemporary industrial societies. It is in this context that Chief Seattle has emerged as the modern icon of Native American environmental wisdom and spiritual values. However, as with past Indian stereotypes serving white interests, the current popular images of Chief Seattle represent yet another white fiction. Significantly, each new version of Seattle's speech, beginning with that of Dr. Henry Smith and ending with the latest reincarnation of Ted Perry's script, has been created entirely by non-Indians. Not one Native peoples has translated Seattle's speech into their own indigenous language (Low 1995, 416).

Native Americans have adapted historically to an impressive diversity of environments in both interesting and creative ways. A careful study of Native American ecology, thus, offers us an opportunity to further understand the processes by

which humans adapt—or fail to adapt—to the natural environment around them. It also offers an opportunity to apply the theoretical principles of human ecology to the indigenous populations of North America and to compare developments here with those that have occurred elsewhere. However, if we want to truly learn from the study of Native American ecology, then our research must be conducted in the same rigorous, empirical manner, and following the same accepted standards of scientific research, that have been applied to all other human populations.

To what extent, for example, were the diversity of Native American subsistence strategies a function of local differences in population/resource relationships and of the demands that such relationships imposed upon food production and distribution? Why, for example, did the peoples of the southeast U.S. live in larger population concentrations than elsewhere in North America, and how was this related to the fact that they were organized into more centralized and socially stratified political systems? Also, what role did resource competition play in the evolution of Indian warfare, be it on the Great Plains, in the northeast woodlands, or along the northwest coast? More specifically, did increasing population growth in the northern Plains following the acquisition of the horse lead to greater warfare due to increased competition over hunting territories and grazing lands? And, most important, how do these and innumerable other developments compare to what has transpired among other peoples on other continents? In other words, to what extent do we see similar ecological processes operating in different parts of the world?

The goal of studying a scientific human ecology is to understand and explain historical and contemporary human environmental relations throughout the world in as objective and parsimonious a manner as possible, free from vested political and ideological biases, and on the basis of solid empirical research. This can be achieved only by adopting a more critical approach to the study of Native American ecology than has been demonstrated by those who have uncritically accepted and promoted the Chief Seattle myth.

Note

1. The Baptists took credit for the speech away from Perry and gave it instead to Seattle by eliminating the "written by" portion of the credits in the film. This caused Perry, who has expressed concern regarding the subsequent embellishments of his script and their presentation as authentic, to break with the Baptist Commission.

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