

# Native American Heritage Month: Spotlight on Living Ecological Knowledge

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A young bald eagle flies over a grove along the Fork Branch near Cheswold, Delaware. She circles above us six volunteers four times and then flies off to the south. It was a fitting vision to behold as I visited the **Lenape Indian Tribe of Delaware** to discover more about their watershed restoration project and other efforts to reclaim and honor the sacred lands and waters of their ancestors.

In 2016 this tribal community attained state recognition status from the state of Delaware with a bill signed by then-governor, Jack Markell. Since then, they have actively engaged with universities and organizations on projects that blend traditional ecological knowledge with modern scientific methods of environmental assessment, water research, and land management.

At the edge of the Little Church Union cemetery is a ½ acre plot of freshwater wooded wetlands. The land was donated to the tribe in the 1990's and now, after three years of steady work by Tribal youth and community volunteers, includes a walking path, "talking circle" and plantings of native species like sassafras, paw paw, and mountain mint. In the stream at the north end of the site, leaf packs have been inserted and are being monitored for the presence of macroinvertebrates, thanks to a partnership with Chester County's **Stroud Water Research Center**. The reintroduction of freshwater mussel "seed beds," an original staple of the Lenape tribe of this area, will hopefully be the outcome of these monitoring efforts. Tribal Chief Dennis Coker says this land is intended to one day be an Edible Forest Garden for the Lenape Indian Tribe of Delaware community.

Restoration projects incorporating traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) have been integrated by governments, watershed organizations, and communities interested in approaching preservation of nature in a broader context inclusive of Indigenous knowledge. These partnerships in Pennsylvania and our neighboring states elevate the value of interacting with nature as an ally and teacher. **Rebecca Tsosie** (2013)

describes the “**relational ethic**” (p. 279) of the Indigenous world view as “kinship with the natural surroundings.” Simply framed, it asks, What are my responsibilities to nature? as opposed to, What are my rights to it? Nature, as relative, reveals stories and shows us through her ecosystems what is here and what is coming.

In a political personification of that relationship, the Yurok Tribe, in an effort to protect their inherent subsistence lifestyle and relationship to the Salmon in the Klamath River, have passed an **ordinance** giving the river the “rights of Personhood.” It is an effort being replicated in **Indigenous communities globally** to legally recognize the rights of nature.

Native American Heritage Month is marked by the United States as a **National month** to celebrate the cultural lifeways and remember the histories of the first sovereign nations of its North American territory. Understanding how Lenape and all Indigenous lifeways were criticized and outlawed as savage, their bodies and spirits uprooted and severed by dispossession and cession of **nearly 99%** (Farrell, et al., 2021) of their territories, is a truth we must admit here in the tri-state area, even as we celebrate the value of these partnerships that seek to connect old and new ways of caring for the earth.

Stories of triumph and honor of the ancestral shoulders, cultural traditions, and legacies of Indigenous Peoples of these territories will be celebrated this month in Pennsylvania. Below are some events around the state to participate in the acknowledgement of these stories.

Penn State Campuses statewide are holding these **events**  
Albion PA – Presentation by the **Fort LeBoeuf Historical Society**  
Pittsburgh PA - Council of the Three Rivers **American Indian Center Gathering**

## **Sources**

Farrell, J. et al., (2021). Effects of land dispossession and forced migration on Indigenous peoples in North America. *Science* Vol. 374, No. 6567. DOI: 10.1126/science.abe4943

Tsosie, R. (1996). Tribal environmental policy in an era of self-determination: The role of ethics, economics, and traditional ecological knowledge. *Vermont Law Review*, 21 225-333. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24673668>

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