

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, A TOOL FOR CULTURAL REVIVAL

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In the winter of 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville watched as a boat full of Choctaws floated across the ice-filled Mississippi on their way to exile to the West. “I believe that the Indian nations of North America are doomed to perish”, he warned. Tocqueville, it turned out, was wrong. But the day was still far ahead when tribes would turn the mainstream rules into a vital tool for their own survival.

Native American nations face severe social and economic problems stemming from past mistreatment by the federal government. Yet, a manifest imperative for those nations is maintaining Native cultures and strengthening their sovereign powers. This paper will try and show that economic development is a major tool for sustaining traditional cultures. The development of resources leads to a higher standard of living, increased cultural vitality, and greater freedom to make choices concerning the future.

Only when the individual tribe has control of its resources and sustains its identity as a distinct civilization does economic development make sense. A common misconception sees conflict between maintaining a tribe’s cultural heritage and pursuing increased economic activity on the reservation. Yet, there is *one* answer to three basic questions :

- How do tribes maintain their cultural individuality and secure their cultural integrity?
- How do tribes develop their sovereign rights as stipulated in the Constitution and laws of the United States and treaties?
- How do tribes become self-determined and self-sufficient, thereby securing their rights and cultures?

Economic development is the answer to those questions<sup>1</sup>.

There is much poverty in Indian America, despite the economic advances of recent years, and alcoholism is a major problem. Many reservations are arid and infertile. The discovery of oil and other resources has made a big difference to some tribes and all kinds of new industrial projects are under way. Some Indians worry about the effect those projects will have on their environment and culture, but it is widely recognized that they are needed to support a rapidly growing population. Inevitably, more and more Indians are drawn to the cities. Some are assimilated; others return to the reservations with professional backgrounds and skills learned in the “cement prairies”.

Many educated young Indians have a clear vision of the future: they don't want to be walking museum pieces but live as contemporary Indians in a modern world. They take pride in their identity as Native Americans, and as members of tribal groups, and they aim to modernize the old tribal ways so that they will not only survive, but be revitalized.

An advertisement by the American Indian College Fund pointed out 4 areas in which “traditional American Indian thinking” applies to modern problems: environment, family structure, greed, and international turmoil<sup>2</sup>.

Indeed, economic development without concomitant principles of cultural and social identity simply leads to consumerism. On the other hand, cultural identification without development is not self-sufficient and diminishes as disposable resources are reduced and pure survival becomes the individual's goal. But when the two are synergetic, growth of the social and cultural aspects of the individual and the tribe is possible. That is how the income from gaming brings some tribes wealth *and* social and cultural revitalization. A portion of the Mashantucket Pequot Foxwoods Casino profits are used to reconstruct tribal history and culture, since tribal “traditions are almost all gone, eroded after 350 years of dispersion, along with most of our language and the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert White describes how described how 5 reservations have merged economic development with economic development. These reservations are using rising income to regain their self-sufficiency, considered in a holistic sense, and not simply a monetary one. *Tribal Assets : the Rebirth of Native America*, New York, Holt, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> « A Sane, Rational Argument for Giving the Entire Country Back to the Indians », advertisement for the American Indian College Fund, *US News and World Report*, Oct 4, 1993, p.84c.

important ceremonial dances”<sup>3</sup>. Joya Walker, coordinator of a Pequot-sponsored festival and dance competition that drew native dancers from all over the United States, reports that the Pequot are now relearning native traditions: “We’re working with other tribes to learn from them how to do things like dancing and bringing back our culture”<sup>4</sup>.

In 1992, President John Yellow Bird Steele, of the Oglala Sioux Tribe in the Pine Ridge Reservation, explained the importance of developing jobs and incomes because of their *social* importance. He said it was not hard to understand that when you wake up in the morning realizing that “not only today is going to be like yesterday, but tomorrow is going to be like today and yesterday, you go out and get a bottle”. He added that tribal members are interested in federal service jobs because anyway they are the onl jobs available and the only goal is to get a pay check.

He pointed out that the lack of economic development at Pine Ridge has an adverse influence on cultural activity. In order to engage in cultural activities, it is first necessary to provide for basic needs: food, shelter, clothing. Once the basic needs are taken care of, a certain amount of disposable resources are available for cultural activities. An example of how increasing disposable income increases the cultural integrity of Indian nations is the *powwow*. Besides attracting tourists, these events are socially important activities as extended families travel to attend them. The costs include the design and production of costumes, food, lodging, travel, and the like. Drum groups must be paid and facilities must be made available. Thus an increase in disposable income will lead to greater demand for *powwows*, which will stimulate interest in the cultural activities of dancing and drumming.

Maintaining cultural integrity does not necessitate returning to pre-Columbian economies – not even the Havasupai desire to do so. On the contrary, as Native American standards of living rise, more resources are available to them. Let us take the example of the Navajo: the Navajo Nation is facing a diminishing number of medicine men and weavers. As the Navajo economy develops, there will be resources to pay for ceremonies, and as the market for Navajo rugs develops, there will be extra income from weaving, thus increasing the number of medicine men and weavers, which will boost the cultural integrity of the tribe. The achieve that goal, they have realized that

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<sup>3</sup> Carl Shaw, « The Back Page », *Indian News*, Oct. 8, 1993, p.6.

<sup>4</sup> Becky Mliller, « Early Edition », *Christian Science Monitor Radio*, Washington DC, Oct. 11, 1993.

they must develop new and innovative products and production techniques. Modern Navajo arts and crafts industries include world famous techniques for weaving and silversmithing. Techniques for dying and spinning wool have progressed from rudimentary ones to advanced techniques allowing for intricate designs and patterns. Originally, the Navajo developed these industries for domestic consumption of jewelry and blankets; these industries have now become significant sources of income for individual artisans and the tribally managed Navajo arts and Crafts Enterprise<sup>5</sup>.

When tribal development plans are conceived externally by members of the dominant culture, they tend to reflect the beliefs, aspirations and values of their authors. As tribes approach true self-determination, maintenance and renewal of traditional values are at least as important as simple economic development. The tribes work with consultants and, despite their urgent need to solve immediate problems, they proceed with caution. As they say, they don't have the luxury of most Americans to mess up a place and move on.

What can we see today? The Nez Perce are breeding their own line of high quality horses similar to the Appaloosas of the ancestors. The Blackfeet are taking advantage of the surrounding mountains with wind energy projects. The tiny Makah Reservation on the Olympic Peninsula is developing an innovative wave energy generating station offshore.

Let us focus more specifically on two very different examples:

### *North West Tribes*

They used to live on salmon fishing. With the building of dams, salmon can't swim up rivers to spawn, although some salmon ladders have been built. In order to make for the loss of that traditional dietary and economic staple, tribes like the Nez Perce, Umatilla and Yakama have set up hatcheries on their reservations *and* are teaching hatchery fish to behave their wild cousins by creating holding tanks that resemble wild rivers. Like federal hatcheries, tribal facilities use concrete tanks, but create currents,

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<sup>5</sup> Dean Howard Smith, *Modern Tribal Development*, New York, Altamira Press, 2000, p.46.

cover the surface of the water with green netting and leaves to provide shade; they periodically introduce predators like mergansers (diving ducks). With half as many salmon per pool as common hatcheries, the tribal facilities are seeing much less disease.

According to the director of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, the new hatcheries are not only scientifically smart, they are culturally imperative. These Indians grew up fishing on the Columbia River, taught by their parents and grandparents that Indian People and Salmon are like brothers, and that they have an obligation to protect them. That duty prompts the tribes to experiment in ways that make some scientists uncomfortable. In common hatcheries, fish returning from the ocean swim into the hatchery raceways where they were reared. All the fish that aren't needed for spawning are killed in order to prevent commingling with their wild cousins. Tribal facilities don't spawn fish in the hatchery, but in holding tanks that rest within the river, to ensure that when the mature fish return years later, they will spawn their progeny in the wild. In this way, within just one or two generations, fish of hatchery descent will regain the genetics of wild fish.

A Umatilla biologist explains: "Hatchery fish and wild fish are just the same. Making a distinction is like saying Indians who went to White boarding schools are different from Indians who stayed on the reservation"<sup>6</sup>.

The Warm Springs Confederated Tribes<sup>7</sup> have adopted a radical technique: the Deschutes Basin salmon used to sustain at least three tribes, which are now the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs. Since 1885, those tribes have lived on the Warm Springs Reservation, and the Deschutes River marks the eastern boundary of their territory. Booby Bruno, head of the tribal office of natural resources, tells us: "We have always been salmon people. Everything in our culture involves salmon. They are at weddings and funerals. They are part of our religious ceremonies. They are our food".

In 1964, the construction of the Pelton-Round Butte dam complex has made a once bountiful resource scarce. Officials soon realized that the fish ladders (designed to allow adult fish to swim past the dams en route to spawning grounds upstream- did not work. They abandoned efforts to help the fish to pass the dams and instead built hatcheries downstream.

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<sup>6</sup> *High Country News*, June 10, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Les Waco, les Warm Springs et les Paiute, les derniers arrivants.

Now, the tribes have found a new way to take control of their lives and resources. During the first 50 years of the dams' operations, the utility company<sup>8</sup> paid the tribes an annual "rent" of millions of dollars. The money paid for the reservation schools, roads and hospital; but it did not make up for the loss of the salmon and the tribes' traditional ceremonies.

In 1995, 6 years before the dam's original license expired, the tribes announced they would compete with Portland General Electric. They had a chance, because they owned much of the land under the dams. The brought the utility to the table and eventually yielded a partnership<sup>9</sup>. It gives the tribes more power to lessen the dams' environmental impacts. "When we plan for natural resources, we want to make things better, not just tomorrow, but 7 generations out", says the head of the tribal office of natural resources.

They plan to restore salmon runs, but the whole plan rides on untested, experimental technology. If the project works, salmon will be reintroduced upstream of the dam as early as 2007.

### *Navajo Hogans*

The second example is totally different, but is also shows that development and tradition are closely interrelated.

The South West is prone to fire disasters. Precisely this fire problem helps the Navajo return to their roots. In Coconino National Forest are overgrown stands of Ponderosa pine that need thinning and restoration. Spontaneous fires easily break out during storm season. The challenge was to find a way to turn the thinned trees into marketable wood products rather than simply cutting and burning them. At the same time, there is severe housing shortage on the reservation. Housing conditions are poor: most hogans have been put together with whatever materials could be found. The other choices are trailers or government-built housing, much of which is falling apart and costly to heat.

In 2000, some chapter officials came up with the idea to use this wood for a variety of projects on the reservation, including hogans, corrals, fences and armadas. They took

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<sup>8</sup> Portland General Electric

<sup>9</sup> *High Country News*, Sept. 27, 2004. The tribe bought 31 % share of the dam; the ageement allows for them to ultimately become majority owners.

their idea to the Grand Canyon Forests Foundation, which was working to reduce fire danger on the Coconino and to the Northern Arizona University School of Forestry., that accepted to sponsor the project: Indigenous Community Enterprises was born, as a not for profit organization.

They produce Hogan kits, which means that some jobs have been created in a reservation where unemployment hovers around 40 to 50 %. (Wages are \$ 8 to 15 / hour). Such hogans are still expensive : \$ 13,000 to 25,000 with a septic system, while the average income per capital is \$ 6,400. Still, they cost less than Housing and Urban Development houses (\$ 126,000 with 1 bedroom, \$ 133,000 with 2 bedrooms).

As the program expands, it could also make forest restoration more viable. They think smaller scale, community-based operations are a more practical solution (cf. NFPI). Seeing respect for the forest, attitudes among Elders are changing, and chapter officials are coming round.

## CONCLUSION

Those few examples show that not all Native American Nations have chosen gaming to develop, although the growth of this activity is often a success. Yet, for fear of short-lived success and in order to live from resources of a “noble” origin (ie. In agreement with their traditions and values), they create other businesses.

Native Americans seem increasingly determined to regain their independence and dignity by using the methods of countless Americans: hard work and raising capital.

They choose to exist within the industrialized world’s money economy while existing in the tribal society. That is why, instead of choosing integration in the American job market, many choose to develop reservations.

Indigenous cultures are renewing their identities and becoming trading partners within the global economy. The goal of current economic development strategies is revitalized economies stimulating cultural identity.