Panel II: Natural Resources, Economics, and the Environment: Global Issues Facing Native Communities [Panel Discussion]

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I shall briefly discuss four topics today. They include the concepts of natural resources, economy, globalization, and change. I want to do this by simply reviewing some vocabulary that appears in the Indian law, environmental, and economic development discourse. Tribes must determine what certain words mean for them before they can truly move forward on their own terms. Words and language are absolutely critical in terms of how tribes view environmental justice, cultural preservation, and economic development.

According to the environmental historian, William Cronon, there is no such thing as natural resources. Natural resources are defined by, and mediated through, culture in order to determine what is and what is not a natural resource. The base line question always is—what does the culture tell you to do with a natural resource? Is it to preserve, to exploit and/or to generate wealth? In the early part of the history of the United States the emphasis was to develop and exploit natural resources. Today one of the goals within the environmental movement is to set reasonable limits on development. Similarly, tribal people need to decide how they define natural resources and whether they are to be used to preserve beauty, to enhance spirituality, and/or to aid economic development.

The second term in this discussion is to define what is an economy and what is it for? Is an economy simply for developing and maximizing wealth or does it also include other issues such as balance and respect for people and the environment? This is an important topic of discussion for tribes. Is the purpose of an economy to benefit the individual or the collective whole? It is vital for tribes to decide in which direction they want to go. How do tribes define wealth? Is it to have a lot of disposable income like non-Indian society or, as suggested by William Cronon, may it be found by desiring less? Tribal people must define wealth. There is a potential

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1 Rain Archambeau, Member of the Yankton Sioux Tribe of South Dakota; Indian Law Symposium Student Coordinator and panel moderator; J.D. University of South Dakota School of Law, December 2002.

difference in the definition between tribal cultures and non-Indian cultures. An economy must meet the needs of the people and involves basic questions of producing and distributing revenue and income. Tribal people need to define economy and determine what their economy should accomplish. And as part of this, tribes need to determine whether there is a basis for cooperation with non-Indian society and if so, on what terms.

The difficulty in solving these problems is often exacerbated by the lack of mutual knowledge and understanding. The unspoken difficulty is often the issue of literacy. With a foundation of literacy, citizens are free to engage in productive and beneficial exchange to solve problems. But in the non-Indian community, there often is extensive illiteracy with respect to Indian culture and Indian law so that in many instances they cannot make an adequate contribution to the dialogue. Dean Suagee has indicated that many times environmentalists do not understand treaties and tribal sovereignty. In South Dakota and elsewhere, the educational system is not informing students adequately about basic Indian history, law and cultural values. There is a significant need for more positive change to be made in this area.

The third term of this discussion involves globalization. By definition globalization is the evolution of a single, worldwide economy. For tribal people this raises serious questions about what the tribal position is in regard to the forces of globalization at work in their communities. Tribes are primarily faced with the need to generate revenue and growth to alleviate poverty, which is obviously a good thing. The potential danger however is the price to be paid for generating wealth in the context of globalization. That price includes the likely erosion, if not disappearance, of local culture. There needs to be a certain kind of culture to maximize wealth development in this emerging new world. This thrust towards globalization can pose a serious threat to tribal communities. In light of these costs and benefits, how do tribes want to position themselves? Tribes need to consider the positive aspects of globalization that they can take advantage of and also determine what they are opposed to as harmful to their interests. People often talk about globalization as being inevitable. Increasingly, tribes need to deal with that issue in order to define and protect their interests.

Lastly, there is the related concept of change. Tribes are clearly interested in economic change but the key questions are how is change defined and how can tribal groups control change within their traditions? Tribes must understand the forces of change and mediate them through their own cultures to achieve a result that advances economic development yet preserves tribal traditions and values. Such understanding will result in the beneficial control of the pace and direction of change.

The ability to control change is an element of sovereignty. In the dominant society, change is almost always considered a good thing. In tribal societies, they need to evaluate change and say yes, we are interested in certain elements of change but not in others. In order to make decisions about which direction to take in

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2 Dean Suagee, Professor of Law/Director of First Nations Environmental Law Program, Vermont Law School, fellow Panelist, Panel 1: Tribal People and Environmentalists: Friends or Foes? 7th Biennial Indian Law Symposium, University of South Dakota School of Law.
response to global forces, tribes must rethink and adjust this emerging vocabulary in order to see what definitions work for them. A new dialogue requires tribes to arrive at their own definitions of these key terms and as part of this, tribes need to continue the dialogue with non-Indian communities to see if there is a basis for establishing common ground in going forward.

Thank you.