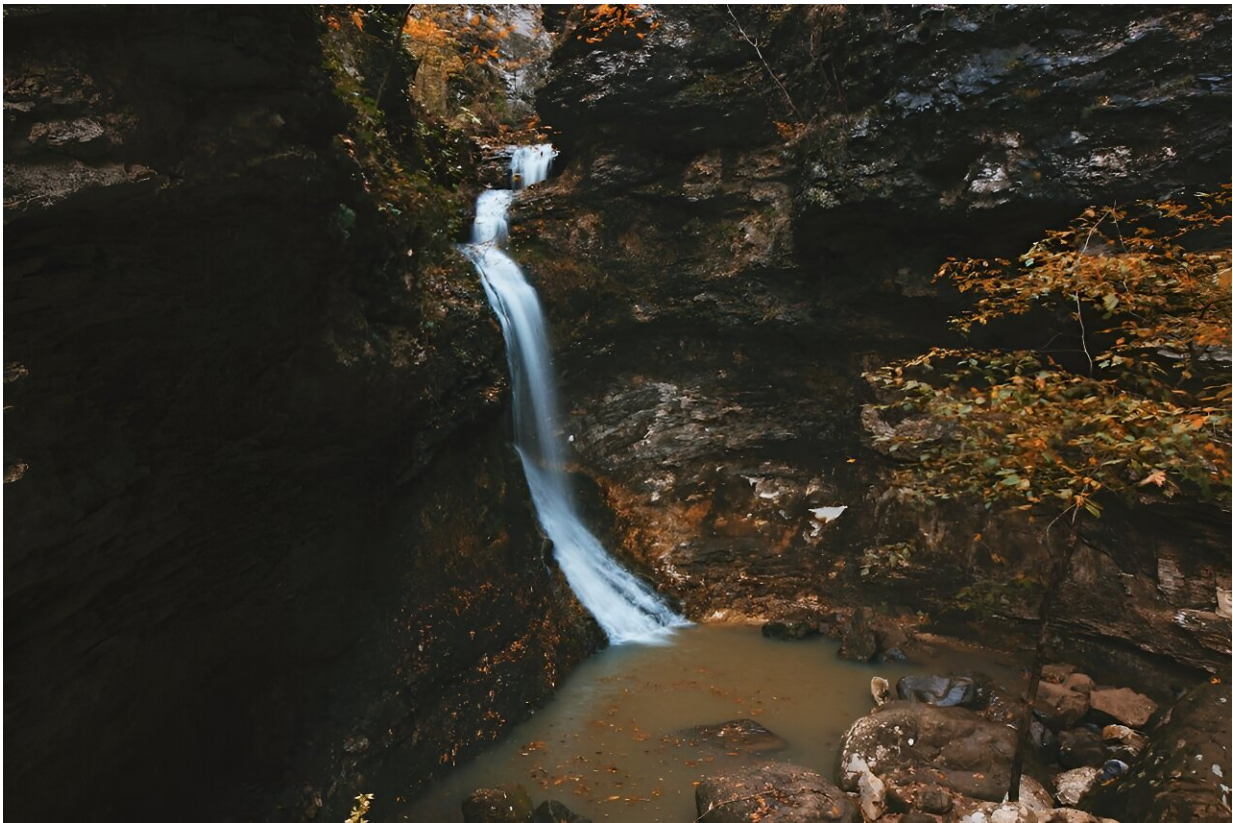


How Indigenous knowledge can help solve the climate crisis

November 21 2023, by Yvaine Ye



Eden Falls—waterfall hike to the end of the Lost Valley Trail on the Buffalo National River in the Fall. Credit: [Josh Clemence/Unsplash](#)

As the world grapples with adapting to a warming planet, Indigenous Peoples are experiencing unique climate-related challenges exacerbated

by centuries of having their land overtaken by settlers and governments.

In the U.S., most Native tribes relocated to the country's least desirable lands, which have limited resources and infrastructure to buffer the impacts of [climate change](#). In the Southwest, for instance, the Navajo Nation faces a severe water shortage as prolonged drought intensified by climate change further limits access to clean water. In Oklahoma, Cherokee's heirloom crops are becoming harder to grow, threatening their food security and cultural heritage.

"As the climate changes, we find ourselves in a situation where we have limited adaptation tools and resources given the small, patchy lands we have," said Clint Carroll, an associate professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies and a citizen of the Cherokee Nation.

With the United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP 28, approaching Nov. 30, CU Boulder Today spoke with Carroll about why it's critical for Indigenous Peoples to have a voice in climate action planning—and how Indigenous knowledge can provide solutions.

How has land loss exacerbated climate risks faced by Indigenous Peoples?

Over the past centuries, European settlers and later the U.S. government forcibly removed Native Americans from their homelands and pushed them onto smaller, segregated lands. Because of that, Native Peoples now find themselves having to adapt to their environments and a changing climate with very limited resources and constricted mobility.

The Cherokee Nation, for example, lost access to about one-third of plants that we use for medicine when the tribe was forcibly relocated from the southeastern U.S. to today's Oklahoma in the 1800s. The land

we have now is much smaller and more fragmented. The tribal lands today are not bounded by ecological boundaries like mountains or rivers but by socially constructed political boundaries and human activities such as the clear-cutting of forests and imposition of private property.

As the climate starts to shift, the plants that we now rely on may shift habitats or even die, while the property boundaries remain the same. With the territory we have, our ability to adapt is constrained.

What are Indigenous communities doing to adapt?

Sometimes the only story that people hear about Native people is a litany of tragedies. But Native people don't just sit around and do nothing in the face of challenges. As a nation, we are working hard to conserve the territories that we have to preserve our culture and traditional knowledge. Both are deeply connected to the land and nature.

In addition, we are navigating the political system in a bid to open up access to other places that could help our communities adapt to the effects of [climate](#) change. A project I've been working on is to initiate and maintain collaborative agreements with entities like the National Park Service, which will allow Cherokee people to gather plants within the Buffalo National River region in Arkansas.

Can Indigenous knowledge be applied globally to mitigate climate change?

Yes and no. Indigenous knowledge is often tied to a specific place that has a specific set of ecological conditions and specific animals and plants. So this knowledge may not be widely adoptable.

But I think many ethical principles Indigenous Peoples take when

thinking about our relationship to the non-human world are very valuable. It's hard to summarize Indigenous ethics, but many communities share this overarching understanding that Earth is alive and that it has rights.

A somewhat common principle among Indigenous tribes is "don't take more than you need." It sounds simple, like something we tell children, but it still needs to be said when it comes to extractive activities that are happening across the world.

I think a good place for people who aren't Indigenous to start is to try to understand what it means to be in a good relationship with the land and that we have an obligation to it.

What does it mean?

Many people view our connection with the land in a romanticized way, picturing a stereotypical image of Pocahontas talking to birds and raccoons, which is not accurate. We need to look at the relationship through the lens of Indigenous law.

Indigenous communities relate to the land in a way that their legal framework defines obligations and responsibilities to animals and plants that share the land, and to the land itself. An example of that would be the Cherokee Clan system, which said animals have something to teach the Cherokee people. Through that, people of those respective clans had obligations to uphold those beings.

The [ethical principles](#) of those forms of governance can offer something that's better for the planet than dominant forms of political organization, some of which aren't focused on the importance of relationships between human beings and where they live, and the other animals that reside there.

How do we ensure our climate action is inclusive?

One of the most important things would be actively listening to Indigenous Peoples and understanding what Indigenous Peoples are saying. Time and again, we see conferences like COP happening, but it's important to acknowledge that there are a lot of people who aren't getting in the door of COP, and their voices aren't heard.

Native peoples have something to teach the world. So, listening and understanding in a way that centers Indigenous voices is absolutely important.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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