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# The Ecological Indian: Myth and History

*Shepard Krech III*

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*"A good story and first-rate social science." — New York Times Book Review*

*Myth and History*

## The Ecological Indian

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#430917 in Books Shepard Krech 2000-09-17Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.30 x 1.00 x 5.60l, .62  
#File Name: 0393321002320 pagesThe Ecological Indian Myth and History | File size: 38.Mb

**Shepard Krech III : The Ecological Indian: Myth and History** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Ecological Indian: Myth and History:

76 of 78 people found the following review helpful. Thought-provoking, though not perfectBy BortukanIn this book, Krech sets out to contradict popular perceptions of Native Americans as perfect beings living in harmony with their environments. This doesn't sound like a very nice thing to do at first, but the author clearly states that he feels such images are not only inaccurate generalizations based on biased, outdated European stereotypes, but are dehumanizing

in their suggestion that native people are "natural" animals rather than "cultural" humans. He goes on to present a number of case studies showing situations in which Native Americans were indeed cultural humans not living in perfect ecological balance with their surroundings. His treatment of the archaeological evidence is pretty thorough and unbiased. His historical case studies, while relying a bit heavily on potentially biased historic records by White settlers, remain fairly convincing examples of situations in which Native Americans were not perfect conservationists. Unfortunately, after this array of case studies it can be easy to forget that Krech's stated reasons for examining them were to present Native Americans as active human beings rather than passive stereotypes. Instead, readers can end up with a negative feeling about Native American land use practices in general or about Krech in particular, as the reviews below point out. In spite of these flaws, however, the book does raise interesting questions about how perceptions of Native Americans are constructed (both by native people themselves and by others) and about how we should approach environmental issues (including our definition of a "natural" environment) we grapple with today. His writing is clear and issues are presented in a fairly understandable way for a general audience, not just dusty academic types. Although you may not agree with all of the book's conclusions, the issues it raises make it very worthwhile reading material for anyone interested in environmental impact and Native Americans in the past and today.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Balanced and Demystifying  
By Beverly A. Ramsey  
Cultural myths are good, I am Native American and I am constantly amused by the monolithic beliefs that many have concerning Native American ecological practices. Like all communities, it is not that simple; beliefs are varied; economics clash with ecological values. This is a well presented treatise and I found it balanced and useful.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars  
By raf  
Good info for debunking Native American mythology

"A good story and first-rate social science."  
New York Times Book Review  
The idea of the Native American living in perfect harmony with nature is one of the most cherished contemporary myths. But how truthful is this larger-than-life image? According to anthropologist Shepard Krech, the first humans in North America demonstrated all of the intelligence, self-interest, flexibility, and ability to make mistakes of human beings anywhere. As Nicholas Lemann put it in *The New Yorker*, "Krech is more than just a conventional-wisdom overturner; he has a serious larger point to make. . . . Concepts like ecology, waste, preservation, and even the natural (as distinct from human) world are entirely anachronistic when applied to Indians in the days before the European settlement of North America." "Offers a more complex portrait of Native American peoples, one that rejects mythologies, even those that both European and Native Americans might wish to embrace."  
Washington Post

From *Publishers Weekly*  
The image is gripping: a handsome American Indian with a sad, tear-filled eye offers the simple message, "Pollution: It's a Crying Shame." This 1970s anti-pollution advertisement, which reached millions of people, helped entrench the notion that Indians treated the land kindly and white invaders spoiled it. Not so, says anthropologist Krech, in this compelling, if somewhat incomplete, examination of the historical truths and romantic myths about Native Americans and their relationship with nature. Acknowledging that Indians clearly possessed vast knowledge of their environment, Krech contends that this knowledge was often merged with a religious cosmogony that left little room for conservation as it is understood today. Indians may have treated the individual animals upon which they preyed with great respect in order to avoid offending their spirits, but this view did not prevent occasional overhunting or depletion of resources, according to Krech. If the New World seemed like a rich Eden to European immigrants, Krech contends it was because the populations of Native Americans were too small to have made much of a difference in their environments before they were overtaken by the newcomers' resource-based economy. To prove his points, Krech closely examines the role Native Americans played in a variety of environmental histories, from Pleistocene extinctions to the demise of the buffalo. Yet he overlooks what was one of the greatest single animal-based economies of precontact times, the vast subsistence salmon fisheries of western North America. (Aug.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From *Library Journal*  
A popular question of debate has centered on the Native American relationship to the environment. Were they the first environmentalists, conservationists who neither wasted nor altered their natural resources? Krech (anthropology, Brown Univ.) addresses this cherished American myth by reviewing archaeological, oral, and written records and applying them to a few specific cases. The Native Americans, like all peoples, altered their environments, responded to climatic changes, adjusted to times of feast and famine, and adapted to the new economic forces introduced by Europeans. They were not Noble Savages, nor was North America the Eden that Europeans recorded. Europeans saw what they wanted to see, neglecting the native histories, cultures, and religions that would have helped them gain an accurate representation of this "new land." Krech asks questions to spark new debate on the image of the "ecological Indian." A thought-provoking book; recommended for all libraries.  
APatricia Ann Owens, Wabash Valley Coll., Mt. Carmel, IL Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From *Booklist*  
Anthropologist Krech analyzes the origins of the image of the "Noble Indian," a figure emblematic of Native Americans' deep respect for nature that is often cited by environmentalists. He wondered whether this vision of a people who hold nature sacred and never waste an animal's life or harm the environment was based on fact or myth. Krech searched for scientific and historical evidence of Native American "environmental knowledge, ecological

thought, and conservation-related behavior" over the last 11,000 years and discovered that, like most generalities, this convention is oversimplified. Diverse and complex, Native American cultures inevitably impacted the environment. Krech presents unexpected and provocative perspectives on the disappearance of the Hohokam, or Canal Builders, who once thrived in the Sonoran Desert; the widespread use of fire as a hunting and agricultural tool; the role Native Americans played in the buffalo, deer, and beaver trades; and current conflicts within Indian communities over land use. Not only does Krech shatter a romantic stereotype, he also forces us to think more realistically about environmental issues. Donna Seaman