

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Spring 2001

Review of *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* by Shepard Krech III

John C. Mohawk
State University of New York at Buffalo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Mohawk, John C., "Review of *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* by Shepard Krech III" (2001). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 563.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/563>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Ecological Indian: Myth and History. Shepard Krech III. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999. 318 pp. Illustrations, notes, references, index. \$27.95 cloth (ISBN 0-393-04755-5), \$14.95 paper (ISBN 0-393-32100-2).

In *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*, anthropologist Shepard Krech III sets out to prove that the image of the indigenous peoples and cultures of the Americas so regularly invoked to demonstrate humanity's capacity to live harmoniously with nature is a misleading one, more the product of image building by modern ecologists than a reality of history. That image of the American Indian as ecologist was epitomized in a 1971 Keep America Beautiful, Inc. campaign against litter depicting actor Iron Eyes Cody as a Native American who shed tears over thoughtless acts of littering and pollution. It was an effective campaign, Krech tells us, but did not reflect the true history of the relationship between Indian peoples and nature. Although it is generally difficult to prove a negative, the author does have the advantage of being able to search for examples of American Indian ecological incorrectness across hundreds of cultures and several centuries to make his point.

Ecological destruction in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was one of the most dramatic biological transformations effected by human hands in history. In a few decades, in an area from Texas to Canada, nearly all the buffalo were killed, most of the vegetation put to the plow, and the indigenous peoples removed to reservations. It is against that background that the image of American Indian cultures as relatively innocent exploiters of nature emerged.

The first chapter, "Pleistocene Extinctions," examines the proposal, once popular among anthropologists, that ancient Indians slaughtered North America's large animals eleven thousand years ago but concludes there were probably other factors precipitating these extinctions.

"The Hohokam" recounts the puzzling disappearance of a people who built a network of canals along Arizona's Salt River; despite significant speculation, their demise remains a mystery. A chapter entitled "Eden" concludes that early European surprise at the bounty of the land—seemingly endless virgin forests, waters teeming with aquatic life, vast animal herds and populations—primarily resulted from low populations pushed even lower by epidemic diseases introduced by Europeans. A chapter on the buffalo relates that Indians killed and used vast numbers of buffalo but admits there is no evidence that the herds were decreasing in numbers as a consequence of Indian hunting. Chapters on deer and beaver urge that once pelts and hides were introduced to the European market economy and

became sought-after commodities, Indians exploited these species relentlessly.

Krech makes an effort to tell both sides of this story but fails to give adequate attention to the difference between traditional versus post-traditional Indian cultures. There is compelling evidence that traditional Indian cultures view nature very differently from western culture. The Hopi, for example, have elaborate but cautionary stories about past worlds wherein peoples—presumably Indians—took a path along which they exploited nature and ultimately destroyed themselves. Other American Indian cultures harbor stories that translate into value systems paralleling the Hopi. It will be difficult for many to understand the harm Krech finds in an American-generated myth of an ecological Indian as a symbol of a kinder, gentler approach to nature. As with many myths, this one is likely rooted in facts, most of which are not even hinted at in this book. **John C. Mohawk**, *Center for the Americas, State University of New York at Buffalo*.