

# Natural Resources, Nature's Gifts

All life on Earth requires the same five basic needs to survive: air, water, food, shelter, and space. Whether bear or bug, beaver or whale, life has always, and will always depend on these basic needs. Humans are no exception. Throughout our history we have relied on our environment for resources, or the materials and supplies we use, to satisfy those five needs. Our basic needs have not changed, and the resources around us have not changed. Yet, in the past 500 years, the way that the peoples living in North America treat resources and interact with the environment has changed drastically.

Before the arrival of Europeans, Native Americans lived in North America. For over twelve thousand years, Native American Indians hunted and gathered to obtain supplies for survival without ever diminishing the environment they depended on. They knew not to overuse the available resources, to only take as much as they needed.

For example, when a Native American came across a patch of highbush blueberries, a third of the plants' fruit was gathered for food, a third was left on the bushes for animals, and a third was left for the plants' own regeneration. The two thirds of the berries left behind ensured that the animals (often the same animals Native Americans relied on for food) would survive, and ensured that there would be plenty of new berry bushes next season.

After hunting and gathering in one place for a time, the Native Americans would migrate, or move their settlement, so they wouldn't deplete the area of resources. That way, the environment had a chance to recover from any damage caused by human activity; trees and plants could regrow, and herds of animals could return and repopulate.

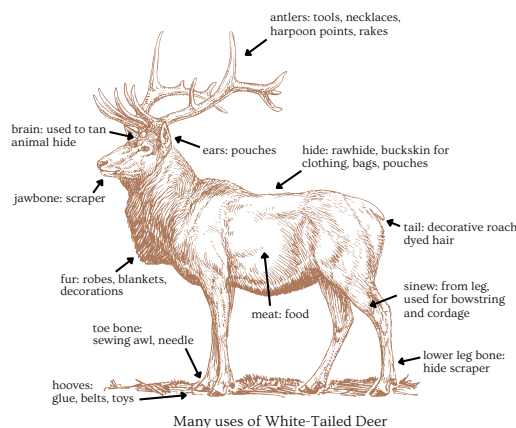
Of course, in order to survive, a certain amount of **destruction** to the environment was necessary. Trees needed to be harvested, animals needed to be hunted. But even then, Native Americans practiced respect and restraint. To use the body of an animal for one's own survival was a gift. Native Americans cherished and respected the animal that gave its life by utilizing every part of the creature's body.

A family of five needed about one White-Tailed deer every week in order to survive. In total, that is fifty deer a year just to keep one family alive. That's a lot of deer that had to die so that one family would have food in their bellies. And clothes on their backs. And string in their bows. In fact, the body of each deer provided dozens of resources for the family to use. The animal's meat was smoked to cook and preserve it, while the hide could become clothing, shoes, blankets, doors, drums, or lashings. The animal's bones and antler were used for tools such as awls and rakes. Even the deer's tendons



could become cordage for bow strings and its hooves could be boiled and used as glue.

Each part of each deer's body was used and respected as a gift and a sacrifice; nothing went to waste. Even trees were treated with the same level of respect as the animals that were hunted. All parts would be put to use; the bark could form wigwams or longhouses (Native American homes), the branches became handles for tools, the wood itself was turned into dugout canoes or was burnt for heat and cooking. Trees were an important resource for Native Americans for thousands of years, and are just as important for us today. Our staff has a list of over fifty uses for a tree; how many can you think of?



Many uses of White-Tailed Deer

Resources, like trees, were one of the main reasons Europeans traveled to North America in the first place. Homes, ships, heat, and cooking all required wood, but a large part of Europe had been deforested due to overuse of the environment without any replacement of what was lost. Forest after forest was cut away and used up without a single new tree being planted. Eventually, Europeans needed to seek out "new worlds," or new places, for basic survival resources.

This deforestation, along with over-hunting, led to the near-extinction of the beaver in Europe. Europeans valued the beaver for its fur, which has dense under hairs and a Castor gland to make it

waterproof. As was the fashion of the time, the soft, waterproof, shiny beaver pelts were turned into top-hats. There were not enough resources available for the beaver to repopulate; Europe didn't have the carrying capacity for the beaver. In other words, there was not enough space for the animal to obtain the food and shelter necessary to survive. People in Europe at the time faced the same problem as the beaver; without forests to supply wood for their fires and homes, they would struggle to fulfill their basic needs. So Europeans traveled to the Americas to find more resources.



Today, we still eat meat and we still use wood to build our homes. Animals and trees from our environment are used every day to ensure our survival. But we do not treat these resources as gifts, the way Native peoples did. We chop down a tree for a single product and then throw out the rest. Or we chop down forests, just to make way for roads or cement buildings. Our basic needs have not changed, and the resources we have today are no different than what was here 500 years ago. But unless we begin to treat our resources like gifts, as a privilege to use instead of as our right to use, we will lose them completely. To use only as much as we need, to make use of every part, to respect the other life that shares the same resources, is to honor our gifts.

Botanist, author, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, wrote, "Strawberries first shaped my view of a world full of gifts simply scattered at your feet. A gift comes to you through no action of your own, having moved toward you without beckoning. It is not a reward; you cannot earn it, or call it to you, or even deserve it. And yet it appears. Your only role is to be open-eyed and present. Gifts exist in a realm of humanity and mystery," (Kimmerer, 23-24). Our resources on Earth are our gifts for survival.

