

# Indian Tribal Elders, Environmentalists Share Views

## Fire Gathering Taps Tradition

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PETERSHAM— For the first time, American Indian elders from tribes throughout the northeastern United States and as far west as Lake Superior met with environmentalists to talk about how their culture was able to live sustainably in the region for thousands of years. The meeting took place this month at the Eighth Fire Gathering at Earthlands in Petersham. Although fire gatherings have been held at Earthlands in the past, this was the first at which elders met with people working in the field of sustainable energy, said William J. Pfeiffer, director of the Sacred Earth Network in Petersham that sponsored and organized the event.

Mr. Pfeiffer said he sensed something happened during the gathering that was bigger than the people participating in it. “I sense the kind of trust built that weekend will further conversations among elders in Canada and the region, and the sustainability people, to talk about how to build a healthy culture for our children,” he said. He said it has typically been white, middle class, college-educated people that have been discussing environmental issues.

“It is crucial to get Native Americans into the conversation,” he said. “They had a successful culture here for at least 10,000 years. Maybe they know something the rest of us don’t.” The main focus of the gathering was to learn from the elders, he said.

“They have been swept under the rug and made invisible by dominant society,” Mr. Pfeiffer stated. “And, they should be considered the most sacred human resource we have.” He said the gathering was held at the “11th hour” when things are in a crisis situation and people in the United States are realizing that “business as usual” is not going to continue forever.

David W. White, 36, a Nipmuc, said the gathering was a “seed,” where a lot of healing took place. “We started working together,” he explained. “All walks of human beings came together to think of a better way to live our lives and to live more in balance.”

He said the tribes represented at the meeting stopped separating themselves as different nations and tribes, and worked together as one.

“It is time to heal our community and branch out,” he said. “We watched this beautiful land of our ancestors deteriorate in the last 400 years after having been here for thousands of years. People need to be aware and recognize what is around them.” He said part of that is recognizing the importance of humans’ relationships with nature. “Our animal brothers, trees, plants, flowers, fish and water — all those things that need to survive and are so important for our survival, need to be recognized,” he said.

For Patricia A. Turner-Weeden, 69, from the Wampanoag tribe, that means giving back to the earth instead of perpetually taking. Mrs. Turner-Weeden, or Cammetah, the name given to her by a medicine man, offered her message at the gathering of the importance of patience and of respecting the earth. “We talked about taking the negative things that are happening to Mother Earth and turning them into positives,” she said. “We are concerned about generations to come.”

Cammetah is a retired nurse educator at the American Indian Center in Boston. She has two sons, and lost two sons — one when he was only 28 days old from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, she said, and the other died when he was 22 on Easter Sunday, which was also on her and her husband’s 23rd wedding anniversary. He was buried on April 18, her birthday, she said. “I have been to hell and back,” she said. “And, my mother and father

grew up in the school of hard knocks. They did not make it past the fourth or fifth grade in school and did what they had to, to raise the family.”

She said growing up that way made her value what she has and she wants to help teach younger generations not to take what they have around them for granted; to love one another, and to share what they have with others. “We as Native American people come from an oral history and that is how we pass it down,” she said. “Change is slow, but it has to come around and we have to start thinking about more solutions.”

James B. Beard, a cultural consultant who holds programs on aboriginal teachings worldwide, was adopted into the Ojibawe tribe. He said the gathering definitely had an impact. “It is nice to have a meeting and have words, but it is the actions that are going to make the difference,” he said. “Since World War II, society expects and demands things. We don’t pay attention to how we get them. No one wants to give up a car, but we want to see the technology used in a responsible way.”

He said that for many years, the American Indian elders have stayed quiet. The gathering was a way to help them instill the values of the American Indian culture to influence and aid environmentalists who are working toward making more green energy available for people to use. “The basis is respect for all life around us,” he added. “People need to be more mindful why they want to use these types of environmental technologies.”

