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# What climate scientists are learning from indigenous peoples

**By Amy Brady on Dec 12, 2017**

## Chicago Review of Books' Amy Brady interviews Gleb Raygorodetsky, the far-roaming conservation biologist. Re-posted with permission.

**By Amy Brady**

**Wednesday, December 27, 2017**

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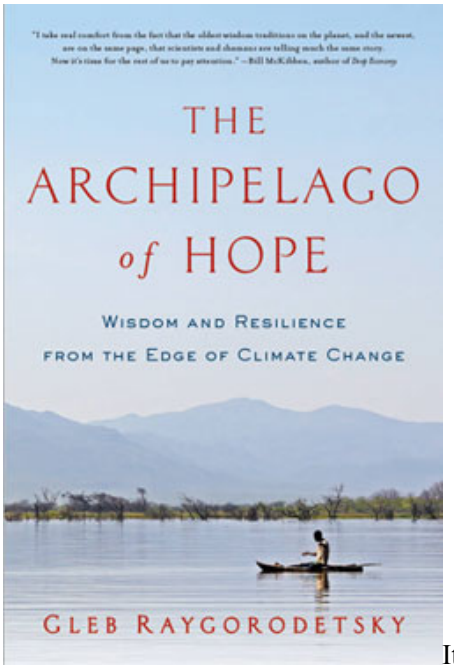


It's no secret that climate change is wreaking havoc on some of the world's largest cities. But less reported are its effects on more rural areas and the Indigenous peoples who live there. After living on their respective territories for millennia, Indigenous communities are experiencing unprecedented environmental changes that are forcing them to shift how they live and work on the land.

Gleb Raygorodetsky, who was born and raised in a small village on the Bering Sea coast of Kamchatka Peninsula, USSR, helps to bring greater attention to climate change's impact on Indigenous peoples in his new book, The Archipelago of Hope: Wisdom and Resilience from the Edge of Climate Change, out now on Pegasus Books. Affecting and beautifully researched, the book made it onto *Library Journal*s list of "Best Sci-Tech Books of 2017."

I spoke with Raygorodetsky about his research, the knowledge that climate scientists might gain if they better listened to Indigenous peoples, and what the rest of us can do to combat climate change and support the activism coming out of Indigenous communities.

**Amy Brady:** *The Archipelago of Hope* has little to do with actual archipelagos.

**Gleb Raygorodetsky:** I was fortunate to work for a few years as a Program Officer for The Christensen Fund, a private foundation based out of California that focuses its grantmaking on supporting "stewards of biocultural diversity." One of the key lessons I took away from that project was that the source of global resilience lies within the Indigenous traditional territories, which support about 80 percent of the world's biological diversity and contain close to a quarter of the carbon stored above ground in the world's tropical forests (not including the carbon stored in the soil). *The Archipelago of Hope* is my attempt at conveying the fundamental role that Indigenous territories have in determining the future of humankind and our planet.

**Amy Brady:** You tell in your book a story about how you became acquainted with Indigenous cultures and the concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, the environmental knowledge that Indigenous peoples developed after thousands of years of working and living in their territories. What inspired you to start thinking of these communities in terms of climate change?

**Gleb Raygorodetsky:** It has not emerged out of some naïve vision of Indigenous peoples as "noble savages" or a romantic belief that somehow we must all be magicked back into the "ancestral ways" to solve our current problems. On the contrary, what has motivated me all these years is quite rational and pragmatic. In two decades of scholarly and community-based learning, observation, and participation, I have come to realize that it is the Indigenous peoples who are the true stewards of global biocultural heritage. After all, it is they who have a robust millennia-long track record of maintaining intimate relationships with the natural world, which has nourished their communities and sustained their cultures, without devouring the life-giving environment. This is the track record that they continuously strive to maintain, despite formidable odds, including fierce opposition from the "developed" world.

The "accomplishments" of modern society, however, are a lot more recent, paltry, and have had much more destructive consequences for life on Earth. The most efficient path toward enhancing climate change resilience is to secure and support Indigenous peoples' rights to their lands and waters, so that they can continue to support the majority of Earth's remaining biological and cultural diversity.

**Amy Brady:** What do you think climate scientists would learn if they better listened – perhaps even partnered with – members of Indigenous communities?

**Gleb Raygorodetsky:** There is a growing body of evidence in scientific and policy-making communities that show that to maintain resilience in the face of change, we must draw on the best available knowledge, regardless of its epistemological origins – whether it is Traditional Ecological Knowledge rooted in millennia of meticulous on-the-land observations of seasonal animal behavior or contemporary scientific methodologies that rely on satellites to remotely capture large-scale changes. The process of interweaving different knowledge systems creates opportunities for developing a deeper understanding of observed events and their consequences, facilitates joint assessment of information, and leads to new insights and innovations.



**Amy Brady:** What will it take for scientific communities to take Traditional Ecological Knowledge seriously?

**Gleb Raygorodetsky:** As I learned from the Skolts, synergies between traditional knowledge and conventional science have helped them maintain resilience in the face of climate change. Traditional knowledge enables the Skolt Sämi to monitor and respond directly to the changes they observe in the status of Atlantic salmon with greater expediency and efficiency than existing government programs. At the same time, the Skolts collaborate with scientists on other aspects of environmental monitoring that are outside of their own areas of expertise, such as changes in the marine portion of the salmon life-cycle. But this process of co-producing knowledge works well only when the rights of Indigenous peoples to make decisions about land use are acknowledged and respected, as required by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) that has been endorsed by 148 countries, including the United States and Canada. Recognizing the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples to be stewards of their lands and waters is key if their traditional territories are to continue to play an important role in biodiversity conservation and climate regulation.

**Amy Brady:** What surprised you the most during your research for this book?

**Gleb Raygorodetsky:** I learned a lot and continue to learn daily from work with Indigenous peoples. One of the main revelations for me was that, despite everything they have endured at the hands of the "developed world," they are still forgiving, generous, and patient with us. Another eye-opener for me was that there is no sense of doom and gloom. Despite dire circumstances, they maintain hope for the future.

**Amy Brady:** What can people who are not Indigenous – but who care deeply about how we're treating the planet and these people – do to support Indigenous cultures and the activism coming out of their communities?

**Gleb Raygorodetsky:** Many things. In Canada, the Truth & Reconciliation Commission developed a number of recommendations to help guide and inspire Aboriginal peoples and Canadians in a "process of renewed relationships that are based on mutual understanding and respect." And based on my own experience I've tried to capture some ideas in what I call the "Pledge of a Good Ally."

**Amy Brady:** What's next for you?

**Gleb Raygorodetsky:** I just started a new job as an Executive Director of the Indigenous Knowledge, Community Monitoring and Citizen Science (IKCMCS) branch of Alberta Environment and Parks here in Canada. It is extremely heartening to see the Alberta Government champion the critical and challenging issue of respectful knowledge co-creation based on the synergies between Traditional Ecological Knowledge and conventional science. It is an honor and a privilege to contribute over two decades of learning, practice, and leadership experience to the evolution of this important initiative. In terms of writing, I'm working on *Bardo*, a YA novel I've been writing on and off for the last couple of years. I'm trying to explore in it similar issues I write about in *The Archipelago of Hope*.

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The Archipelago of Hope: Wisdom and Resilience from the Edge of Climate Change, by Gleb Raygorodetsky (Pegasus Books, published November 7, 2017)

*Gleb Raygorodetsky is a Research Affiliate with the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance at the University of Victoria and the Executive Director of the Indigenous Knowledge, Community Monitoring and Citizen Science Branch of the Environmental Monitoring and Science Division within the Department of Environment and Parks, Government of Alberta. All proceeds from*

*the sale of The Archipelago of Hope will go toward "The Archipelago of Hope Indigenous Resilience Fund," established through Land is Life, to support the communities profiled in the book.*

The interview is re-posted here with permission of Brady and the Chicago Review of Books.

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