

## Interpretive Troubleshooting: Native Lifeways

# Myths and Exaggerations Passed Off as 'Facts'

## Pop-Cultural Favorites: A Few Examples

### In Perfect Harmony

Many believe that Native Americans lived in 'perfect harmony' with their natural environment; never polluting, exploiting, or manipulating it for their own benefits. In fact, many Northeastern Native Americans were well known for (to name a few):

- their controlled burning of undergrowth;
- the mining of thousands of pounds of copper from the copper deposits of Lake Superior;
- the dumping of clam, mussel, and oyster shells along rivers and sea shores in dumps so large they became the shorelines;
- the selective breeding and cross-breeding of or corn to make unique types of corn designed to grow in more Northern climates.

The Native hand was heavily imprinted on these lands. Their ecological impact if often overlooked today, possibly because it threatens our current popular perceptions of Native American Peoples of the past. It is true that the Northeastern Indian Peoples did seem to have much more restraint in exploiting their environment than Europeans of the time, but this did not mean they didn't change their environment. Europeans were far from *discovering* a 'pristine' land.

### Surviving the 'Surviving Pigeonhole'

Popular thought is that historic Native American life was a constant struggle for survival; that barely making it day-to-day was usual and defined Woodland Indian cultures. Usual struggles experienced by Native Peoples before the American Revolution was not unique to Native cultures alone, and was experienced by most Europeans (Europe in many areas was on the brink of serious collapse - her lands could not support her starving, overpopulated masses; so Europeans establishing themselves on newly open tracts of Native lands defined the term 'struggling to survive.')

Struggles brought on by crop failure, war, and disease were usual setbacks for all societies, and were not traits that characterized the whole culture, especially Native American cultures. Native American Peoples dedicated massive amounts of time to artistic pursuits (quillwork, moose hair embroidery, weaving, carving, etc.) and games (lacrosse, doubleball, shinny, racing, hoop and pole, dice games, etc.). Many students of Native American history will accept the knowledge of both the extreme model of a struggling culture, and of a culture that dedicated large amounts of time to sports and decorative arts. This should at least appear contradictory through mainstream American eyes (although let it be stated that in truth these activities are interdependent in Native worldviews, like the natural and supernatural). We know now that 'tribal' peoples tended to have more free time than we as modern Americans do today. One would think those supposedly barely surviving would use their extra time in important food gathering activities, not playing a ball games.



