



## Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Jeannette Armstrong (Syilx)

*Interviewee: Jeannette Armstrong*  
*Interviewer: David E. Hall*  
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*Excerpts from the full text:*

**DH:** To start can you just share a little bit about yourself in terms of your background, cultural heritage, and your work?

**JA:** My name is Jeannette Armstrong. My Okanagan Syilx name means something like the light, rippling off of moving water. It's an image name. I come from the Okanagan, but my mother is from Kettle Falls at the Columbia River. The Okanagan River is the most northern area that the salmon reach in their spawn. I come from a people that were people that respected and loved salmon on the way to the Columbia.

**DH:** [...]. The term sustainability is one you've used a few times and a term that more and more people are using to speak to the environmental, social and economic challenges that we're facing today and I'm wondering how you define that term, how you explain it.

**JA: (18:43)** With great difficulty, because I'm a fluent speaker of my language, and if I try to translate that, or even interpret that into my language, it's not a very good word. It's a very inadequate word. Though in the intent of that, in terms of how unsustainable this culture is towards the resources on the land, then towards what community is, and what people really are, within that, the word seems to have a better meaning than some of the other words.

**Sustainability on one level means to be able to maintain and sustain the fullness of health that needs to be there for us to thrive, and for everything else to thrive. In that context it sounds like it fits with the way I would think about sustainability in my language. But the way in my language that it translates is sustaining the human abuse to a certain level, and keeping it at a level that it doesn't quite destroy everything. So that's not an adequate definition. We need to be able to think about the definition that our people have which maybe translates to something like: a hundred-percent sustainability (laughter) with that built into it. What that means for the Okanagan is that, if you cannot practice that, if you do not know how to practice that, then you are a danger. You're endangering a whole community, you're endangering generations of children that are coming. You have to be**

able to understand how to do that, and if you don't have the knowledge, and if you don't understand how to do that then you have to seek that knowledge, and you have to find a way to be able to. Otherwise, you're not living up to your human capacity. You're remaining ignorant and you're remaining uncivilized, if you cannot achieve one hundred percent sustainability of everything that you're using.

[...]

**DH:** If you're talking with someone who's completely unfamiliar with the idea of sustainability, how might you help them to understand it? Like through a story or analogy or anything?

**JA: (24:52)** I guess one of the things in our community is that it isn't something that is *theorized*. It is always something that is *practical*, and something that is understood in terms of what you do, and what you don't do. Some of those things are expressed in terms of our traditional laws, or our practices and ceremony. Some of it is conveyed through actual teachings, like taking your child out, and talking to them, and clearly giving them instructions about how to harvest, and what you should be doing and looking for, and what you shouldn't be doing, and what you should be aware of, and how you should be moving through the land to maintain that. Now I understand that there are issues of population. All the questions about, "if we all went back to the land, then the land couldn't sustain everyone." I don't know if that's true. I don't know if there's scientific basis for that, because it hasn't been tested, or it hasn't been tried, and in a way that makes sustainability with the human being at the core rather than commerce or issues of class or economic difference and disparity, control, power, all of those things. So that's one side of the issue, and I'm not giving any answers because I don't really know the answers. If I were to try and explain sustainability to someone who didn't understand about it, I would say: "for this whole year, in order to be sustainable, you should try living without having to buy anything. You should try either growing everything that you're going to eat, or trading for everything that you're going to eat. If you can manage to do that, and if you can figure out a way to be able to do that in a given area, then you'll know something about sustainability. You will have learned something about sustainability." In a sense, pre-Colombian history in the Okanagan, that's what you had: you were living in that condition, where if you destroyed that berry harvesting field this year, it wasn't going to produce a hundred percent next year, it produced ninety percent the next year, and the next year after that... Mathematically how many years would it take before that is totally depleted? Well, you might think you're only losing ten percent but there's a threshold for harvesting food and sustainability that makes a huge difference in terms of how much you have, how much you will have, and how much you produce. Understanding those principles that you can't even in one year decide that next year it's okay if only ninety percent comes up, you have to work towards understanding the land and working the land, harvesting the land so that one hundred percent comes up next year, and that's the best that you can do. Better than that, you should find knowledge ways, and technological ways that you can have it produce more than the one hundred percent without interfering in any of those-our people learned burn technology and techniques, and they learned different kinds of techniques that increased yields and increase production in different kinds of crops, and birds and animals and so on, without destroying the land, but enhancing the land.

(29:53) There is real clear evidence on some of our people who are doing research now that that not having taking place in the last hundred years, our land is dying. Many of our plants and bird species are disappearing. Much of our area is still wilderness and undisturbed, but without the human intervention. So there's something about the *human* intervention, and the human role on land, and on environment that creates bounty, and that creates productivity, and that creates enhancement to the environment and in the biodiversity. That role is totally not understood, and totally not given any kind of opportunity to arise except in indigenous communities. So I think there is a lot of learning, and a lot of work and maybe research that needs to be done in those areas, and I don't think any of it is happening. I really do not see it anywhere. Because they're thinking about sustainability from a whole different paradigm. The idea of sustaining a level of production for human use, and not really thinking about the fact that as indigenous people you are a part of the land. What does that mean? Taking away all of the political connotations, and taking away even the cultural, and racial, and social connotations. What does *indigeneity* fundamentally mean? And what does the human, as an indigenous person, what is that role in terms of the land, in terms of environment? And, should we not be understanding and looking at that? Should we not be doing appropriate scientific research in those areas, in terms of the situation that we are in right now? That is a really serious question that I think people have to look in the eye of and see what the human is.

**Because the human has, in a lot ways, in the European cultural system evolved a view that the human is separate from, and/or dominant, and/or somehow not part of the natural world; somehow not a part of the life form of the land. I think that's one of the things that as an indigenous person, having the indigenous knowledge, and living it, practicing it, I understand is missing from the knowledge about us as human. I think there's a search for that, somewhere in the context of sustainability. Somewhere in the context of ecoliteracy, or ecological consciousness, or green consciousness, all of this is coming to a head as a result of the climate change and global warming and the real *fear* that we're in something that was totally caused by the human, and totally needs to be mitigated by the human. There is a role. There is a role; we are a part of this planet. We are a part of the life forms. That is extremely part of my everyday thinking in terms of the work that I do, the looking at restoring culture in my community, and trying to find ways to articulate that, talk about that. Not so much as though I knew anything, or had any answers, but to ask questions or even to put the thought out there. To be able to say, 'well, what about this?' Because, as an indigenous person I might have a perspective that might open some doors, or might trigger some research, or find a way to look at something from a different perspective. (34:38)**