Return of the 'noble savage': Misrepresenting the past, present and future

Article in Australian Aboriginal Studies · January 2004

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Return of the ‘noble savage’: misrepresenting the past, present and future

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Abstract: The view that a ‘noble savage’/‘ecologically noble savage’ existed in peaceful harmony with nature is a concept that has permeated writings in anthropology, cultural studies, philosophy, political science, literary and art criticism, and in the popular media over many years. The idea of the ‘noble savage’/‘ecologically noble savage’ has resurfaced in recent publications and this article questions the reasons for this and discusses the negative implications of such views. A critique of these concepts may be interpreted as an attack on indigenous peoples or is at least considered insensitive, if not politically dangerous. But to continue to accept the ‘noble savage’/‘ecologically noble savage’ requires a substantial suspension of disbelief. When indigenous peoples are stereotyped as ‘noble savages’ they are once again frozen in the past and therefore can have little to contribute to human history. There is a continuing need to search for a view that focuses on a much more positive engagement with indigenous peoples on environmental issues.

Larissa Behrendt, a Eualayai and Gamilaroi woman, Professor of Law and Indigenous Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney, and Barrister of the Supreme Court of the ACT, has critiqued the ‘noble savage’ concept in Marlo Morgan’s 1994 ‘New Age’ fantasy Mutant message down under. She briefly but concisely pointed to the many inherent dangers of the ‘noble savage’ stereotype (1998:268):

In the onslaught of complaints about the images of Aboriginal people, few attack the romanticism of the ‘noble savage’ pervasive in texts and cinema, letting it slip as though the characterisation may be politically useful, or worse, even true. Critics ignore the noble savage myth, leaving it standing. Yet it is the noble savage myth that is the aspect of these appropriations and romanticism that can be most dangerous, with political implications far greater than the ignorance-rooted misunderstanding of cultural practices.

I parallel Professor Behrendt’s concerns, and question representations of the ‘noble savage’ and ‘ecologically noble savage’ in a variety of recent forms.¹

Today, many people accept that an ‘ecologically noble savage’ existed who lived in peaceful harmony with nature. The view is sometimes dogmatically presented, and must be skilfully questioned. A critique of the concept may be seen as an attack on indigenous peoples and insensitive, if not politically dangerous. That humans may not have been particularly ecologically sensitive could, for example, be used as an excuse to justify present-day ecologically damaging behaviours. Debate is therefore often avoided (LeBlanc with Register 2003:231, fn 11). If we misunderstand or deliberately misinterpret the past, however, we also misunderstand the present. Avoiding or sanitising aspects of the past to remove negative implications or to promote certain ideological views can be dangerous. When indigenous peoples are stereotyped as ‘noble savages’/‘ecologically noble savages’, they are frozen in the past, with little to contribute to human history or to the environmental crisis facing us today (Redman 1999).

A critical awareness of our shared humanity, good, bad or indifferent, should be an objective of any
human study (Ellingson 2001:388). It is argued here that it is a myth that humans were ever ‘noble savages’/’ecologically noble savages’—that it is too much to expect of any human group. The ‘ecologically noble savage’ has returned in some recent publications, and I consider it necessary to question the reasons for this, to highlight the negative aspects of this stereotype, and to begin the search for a view that focuses on a more positive engagement with indigenous peoples on environmental issues.

The return of the ‘noble savage’

The environment belongs to us all, we are a living part of this environment and we must keep it in pristine condition for our well-being, and for the future generations of Australians whether they are Indigenous or not, using whatever means it takes to maintain it. Our future depends on it. It is up to all of us.

These words, from Graham Dillon (a Kombumerri man from the Gold Coast), are from the opening address to Indigenous traditional owners at a forum providing input to the State Coastal Management Plan: Queensland’s Coastal Policy (Anon. 2001:1). There would be few, one would hope, that would disagree with the meaning, clarity or persuasiveness of Dillon’s logic on this issue. However, in the following paragraph (not attributed to Dillon), it is noted that (Anon. 2001:1):

Indigenous Traditional Owners have always been one with their environment. For over 60,000 years, they sustained a symbiotic relationship with the land. Through this relationship with plants, animals, land, air, freshwater and saltwater, Indigenous Traditional Owners maintain a way of life that is fundamentally ecologically sustainable. It ensures the basic human needs of food and shelter as well as providing political, social economic, cultural and spiritual well-being. Through these interactions with their ancestral homeland estates, Indigenous Traditional Owners derived a unique cultural identity that is intrinsically linked to plants, animals, land, air freshwater and saltwater.2

Similar views are expressed in other government documents. Williams et al. (2001:70), for example, claim that the benefits of establishing Indigenous Protected Areas are well documented, and include the justification that ‘the preservation and/or enhancement of biodiversity by Indigenous Australians over many thousands of years is considered testimony to their superior ability over European practices to conserve nature’. Ironically, in what might be residual racist undertones, they conclude that ‘management of protected areas by Indigenous peoples can be a very cost effective solution to conserve biodiversity for governments’. A further example is Kohen’s (1995:ix) claim that indigenous use of the environment ‘was based on the concept of “sustainable development”’. Although widely discussed in recent literature, the term ‘sustainable development’ remains ill-defined today and it is difficult to see how it might have been conceptualised by indigenous peoples.3 Kohen (1995:137) himself is aware of the dilemma when he concludes: ‘to suggest that Aborigines had no impact on their environment is to deny their place in Australia’s ecological history’.

The ‘noble savage’ is implicit at various stages in Australian anthropology and early views developed into theories and ideologies that impacted on state-building processes in respect to Indigenous Australians (Briscoe 1996:132). An example in the late 1960s is Gould’s (1970) claim to have met a small group of Australian Aborigines living in the heart of the Gibson Desert who had never previously come into contact with Europeans. The group was portrayed as having lived in a poor and undependable physical environment where they had survived and developed rich oral traditions and ceremonies along with a social system of amazing subtlety and complexity. Gould found it a pleasant change from meeting Aborigines, living on the fringes of white settlements, who were increasingly dependent on the white man’s culture. To him, the friendliness, independence and pride of the small community provided a rare and rewarding experience. In hindsight it is unlikely that any such people existed at this time in Australia or elsewhere. The ‘gentle and untouched’ Tasaday of the Philippines were also discovered at this time and received considerable popular attention before subsequently being exposed as a myth (Berreman 1991). In both cases we see a glorification of the isolated ‘noble savage’ in contrast to the debased fringe dweller, dependent on European society. The ways in which such views impacted negatively on indigenous peoples at both governmental and societal levels were numerous and complex.

The ‘noble savage’/’ecologically noble savage’ has again returned more explicitly and polemically in a paper by Ross and Pickering (2002). They claim that, prior to the British invasion of their respective countries, the Quandamooka of south-
eastern Queensland (Australia) and the Squaxin of the Puget Sound area of Washington (United States) practised a highly developed fisheries management system that ensured the survival of fish stocks and shellfish reserves for future generations, though this is not demonstrated in the paper.

In a more generalised set of claims, Ross and Pickering (2002:190–1) argue that indigenous peoples actively managed, and consequently modified, ‘natural’ landscapes for tens of thousands of years. They take issue with attempts to discredit the concept of the ‘ecologically noble savage’ (which they attribute mainly to Redford 1990). They disagree with views that modern indigenous communities are so severely disrupted that they no longer have a meaningful relationship to the environment, nor retain an historic memory of that relationship. They contend that indigenous knowledge has survived despite substantial disruptions to ‘traditional’ lifestyles brought about by European settlement. They disagree with a view that ‘ecologically noble savages’ are using resource management issues to further their political agenda of self-determination, as well as economic self-sufficiency. They argue against a Western European paradigm that they perceive has successfully isolated the scientific ‘truth’ from political values and religious morals. In their view, the privileging of science has led to the demise of ecological sustainability of the planet in the face of rapidly expanded capitalist production.

Ross and Pickering’s solution is the reintegration of political values and spiritual morals into natural resource management. They declare that through ‘the cultural and political revival movements of indigenous communities, the call for reintegrating truth with values and morals has been launched’. They also disagree with detractors who suggest that a reintegration of the practices of ‘ecologically noble savages’ offers no assurances that traditional ecological knowledge will result in positive resource outcomes. They do not and therefore avoid a potential weakness in their argument that they are not advocating that governments appropriate indigenous knowledge as yet another dispossession of indigenous rights (Ross & Pickering 2002:188, 199).

In sum, Ross and Pickering (2002:209) argue that there is a long history of indigenous peoples managing their land and sea resources in a sustainable fashion, and that it was the arrival of European settlers both in Australia and America that upset the balance between culture and nature. They propose a return of the ‘ecologically noble savage’, coupled with religious morals (whose is not clear), in order to check an otherwise unlimited drive towards even greater production and accumulation. I will take issue with many (though not all) of their views in the following discussions.

Ross and Pickering (2002:196) contend that governments misuse information for political purposes, and few might disagree. They argue that a decline in wildlife resources over time was used by Queensland’s Environmental Protection Agency to reduce Indigenous Australians’ access to resources and to exclude input into management decisions. The document they cited as the source of this information (Anon. 1999:2–3), when reviewed less polemically, suggests that Ross and Pickering have been misleading. In this document it is stated that Indigenous hunting may be a significant threat to the recovery of dugong populations where they are depleted by the cumulative effects of habitat loss, incidental kills and Indigenous take. It is also noted that the sustainability of current levels of Indigenous take of dugongs in Torres Strait, the Gulf of Carpentaria and eastern Cape York is unknown. To ensure that Indigenous hunting of dugongs is ecologically sustainable, the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service proposed to continue to develop and formalise joint custodian arrangements with representative Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bodies as a focus for local area management, education and monitoring.

These responses might be seen as a sensible management approach when information is lacking. At least on the evidence presented it does not seem to be a deliberate attempt by the Environmental Protection Agency ‘to reduce indigenous access to the resources and to exclude input into management decisions’ (Ross & Pickering 2002:196). On the contrary, it would appear that the Giru Dala Council of Elders ‘have considerable input into the strategic plan...have representatives on decision making bodies relating to traditional hunting and fishing (specifically, dugong and turtle) and are consulted in regard to permit applications for tourist projects and developments’ (Barker 1998:89).

In other Queensland government publications, the ‘savage’ (noble or ignoble) ironically fails to appear at all in the ‘natural history’ of Cape York Peninsula, which is unproblematically referred to as unspoilt, undeveloped wilderness (Herbert & Peeters 1995:2). This clearly ignores the complex interrelationships that Indigenous peoples in Cape York had with the environment over a period of at least 40 000 years.
and is another myth that must be regularly challenged (e.g. Gomez-Pompa & Kaus 1992:271–8; Vanderheiden 2002:175).

**Defining the ‘noble savage’ and ‘ecologically noble savage’**

Researchers from a wide variety of academic disciplines and the popular media have critiqued the concepts of ‘noble savage’ and ‘ecologically noble savage’. A review of this literature demonstrates that it is difficult to find support for either concept and that the continuing use of this caricature is damaging to indigenous peoples.

The myth of the ‘noble savage’ and its associated rhetoric has permeated writings in anthropology and other fields over many years (Ellingson 2001), though use of the concept has come and gone according to contemporary events and intellectual fashions (Whelan 1999:7). Ellingson (2001) in The myth of the noble savage provides the most comprehensive account. First use of the term is debatable (Ellingson 2001:13, 32, 81–2; Gillespie 2002:91; Kidwell 2002; Pinker 2002:6; Whelan 1999:2–5), but, according to Ellingson, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), widely accepted as the creator of the concept of the ‘noble savage’, did not originate the phrase or ever use it in his work. Although he did not use the term, Rousseau nevertheless rejected the central credo of the Enlightenment—its belief in progress based on reason, science and commerce. For Rousseau, men were naturally good, who were then corrupted by civilisation. As society and its institutions evolved, primitive innocence and natural honesty were replaced by artificiality and falseness.

According to Ellingson (2001:291), the ‘noble savage’ concept was resurrected in 1859 with the founding of anthropology, while its popularity is claimed to have returned in the 1960s and 1970s when ‘hippies’ explored the concept but faltered when they found not ‘the glory of the Garden of Eden but the gleam in Charlie Manson’s eyes’ (Williams 2001:148, 154). Pinker associates its return with the 1970s, and the aggressive relativism of postmodernism, while pointing out that in genetic evolutionary terms a thoroughly ‘noble savage’ was unlikely because noble guys tend to finish last (2002:55, 411). The concept of the ‘ecologically noble savage’ was introduced and critiqued in an article by the conservation biologist Redford (1990; cf. Diamond 1991; Whelan 1999, ch. 3) and has become enmeshed in a wide and varying web of contexts (Headland 1997). It has far outstripped the bounds of its anthropological origin and penetrated broadly and deeply into scholarly and popular culture (Ellingson 2001:381). Its continuing presence in government and academic publications (e.g. Ross & Pickering 2002) raises many concerns.

Those who promote the ‘noble savage’ or ‘ecologically noble savage’ concepts tend to emphasise certain aspects of the past and avoid discussion or deny others. The subjects of warfare, cannibalism and environmental impacts, for example, appear to be taboo in some modern anthropological/archaeological studies. They are discussed only briefly here in order to demonstrate that the idea of the ‘noble savage’ is difficult to sustain.

**The not so ‘noble savage’**

Against the general trend of the times, Ember (1978) provides limited evidence that hunter-gatherers could not be described as peaceful. LeBlanc (1999; LeBlanc with Register 2003) shows that warfare was common among the Anasazai, Zuni and Hopi of the American Southwest. Keeley (1997) also seeks to demolish the myth of a peaceful past, a work seen by some as inspirational (Kristiansen 1999:188), while others are highly critical (e.g. Ferguson 1997; Otterbein 1997). Ferguson (1992:109, 113) accepts that indigenous peoples of the Americas knew of war but considered its full expression was not a reflection of ‘man in the state of nature’ but, rather, resulted from contact with the powers of Western Europe. Violence may genetically be part of the human condition (Pinker 2002, ch. 17: cf. Darling 1999 and Ferguson 2001), but the continuing debate over the Yanomamo or ‘fierce people’ provides an example of the difficult but critical search for the basis of human nature (Shermer 2001). There seems little doubt that warfare, while variable in its extent and impacts, has been a part of human history for a very long time. In most cases, however, it can be seen as adaptive, in seeking a balance between population size and resources.

While Arens (1980) proposes that few accounts of cannibalism stand up to close scrutiny, more recently others (Gibbons 1997; Turner & Turner 1999) have demonstrated that it was common in the past. Cannibalism has occurred in a wide range of societies (including modern ones) and for a wide variety of reasons, including starvation, ancestor worship and political terrorism. There is also genetic evidence supporting a widespread and long-term role for
cannibalism in human development (Mead et al. 2003). Nevertheless, whenever the issue is raised (Sahlins 2003a), the researcher is forced to defend (Sahlins 2003b) against vigorous attack (Arens 2003; Obeyesekere 2003). But cannibalism is not a reflection of ‘savagery’. It did occur and it is the social context, causes and consequences of such events that remain important in understanding the human condition (Diamond 2000a; Marlar et al. 2000; White 2003).

Human use of fire over a million years ago may have led to the first human impacts on climate (Bird 1995 for Australia; Bird & Cali 1998; Westbroek et al. 1993). In America, fire was extensively used across the entire continent by Native Americans (Denevan 1992:371ff; Krech 1999; Whelan 1999), and is likely to have assisted the extinction of some fauna. For Australia, Flannery (1994; cf. Bowman 1998 and Horton 2000) has popularised the view that extensive use of fire by Aborigines led to animal extinctions and landscape modification. Humans caused the extinction of many birds and other animals throughout the Pacific (Diamond 2000b; Holdaway & Jacomb 2000).

In Australia, climate change is still seen as a strong causative factor in the long-debated megafaunal extinctions (Webb 1998), but a variety of evidence is suggestive of a human role in megafaunal extinctions (Flannery 1999; Johnson et al. 1999; Miller et al. 1999; Moss & Kershaw 2000; Turney et al. 2001a,b; Roberts et al. 2001).

Humans began altering the climate on a large scale at least 8000 years ago with the development of agriculture and associated massive forest clearance and irrigation (Ruddiman 2003). Large-scale pollution and atmospheric heating followed the development of mining and smelting techniques at least 3000 years ago (Hong et al. 1996; Monna et al. 2004; Shotyk et al. 1998). The overall impact of humans on the environment, and vice versa, and how effectively people could respond to environmental impacts is too complex to discuss here (Redman 1999; Redman et al. 2004; Rowland 1999; Weiss 2002). Humans generally have had a negative impact on the environment and often were not able to cope with abrupt environmental changes, including the effect of introduced diseases (e.g. Campbell 2002). Small subsistence-based populations undoubtedly have less impact on their environments than large industrial societies. There is evidence that humans have practised conservation behaviours over a long period of time. Nevertheless, it is equally true that they have unintentionally been the cause of negative impacts through competition for resources over a similar time span.

The ‘noble savage’ in Australia

Australian colonists who came into contact with Aborigines perceived them in a variety of ways that included the ‘noble savage’ caricature (Woolmington 1973 provides direct quotations). In 1882, Boyd (1974:219) in a chapter on the ‘Noble savage’ notes that when the term was ‘stripped of poetical imagery, nothing but a sneaking, filthy, thievish, murdering vagabond’ was revealed. Archibald Meston, on the other hand, rarely mentioned Aborigines without remarking on their physical condition as ‘strapping, active men’. In an insightful analysis, Walker (1997:42–3) describes the duality in Meston’s perceptions of Indigenous Australians. Meston desired, on the one hand, to preserve the uncontaminated ‘noble savage’ in situ, while, on the other, those ‘contaminated by civilization’ were to be removed to isolated reserves for the ‘period which spans the abyss between the present and the unknown point of their final departure’. He pointed to ways in which Aboriginal living conditions could be improved, admitting that ‘the work of atonement for some of the dreadful past lies before us’. However, concentration on the unreal image of the ‘Noble savage’ in his ‘Wild Australia’ shows hi the shocking condition of those he considered ‘contaminated’. Meston’s system of removals and segregation may also have hastened the deterioration and death of many Aborigines throughout Queensland by dislocation from family and country.

Mulvaney (1958, 1966, 1970, 1971, 1981) and others (e.g. Attwood & Arnold 1992; Beckett 1988) have catalogued in detail the often-changing European perceptions of Aborigines. Mulvaney (1958:138) has noted that, by the time Europeans discovered Australia, a considerable body of opinion was reacting against the fiction of the ‘noble savage’, a change reflected in Australia in numerous ways, usually detrimental to Aborigines. Russell (1994) has astutely examined 1950s perceptions of Aborigines through the pages of Walkabout and found that romantic images of the non-urban (not just Aboriginal) were the dominant theme. Emphasis was on the traditional and pristine at the expense of the hybrid and modern: true Aborigines were silent, black and noble. As in Meston’s time, real Aboriginals were ‘noble’; contaminated ones were ignored. More
recently, Neill (2002), Sandall (2001) and Windschuttle (1996, ch. 9) have attributed many of the problems in modern Aboriginal society to romantic primitivism. The many responses made to the work of these authors are too detailed to discuss here. However, in evaluating their contributions, we should recall Brittan’s (2001) caution that while some might consider most of their writings to be right-wing polemic, we should be wary of replacing it with left-wing polemic.

Few anthropologists in Australia have taken a non-polemical view of the ‘noble savage’ (cf. Sackett 1991), but Anderson’s (1989) discussion of the construction of a road at Cape Tribulation south of Cooktown is a practical and insightful example of the issues. Support for construction of the road by Kuku-Yalanji speakers surprised and shocked many conservationists, and was seen to be at considerable odds with notions of Aborigines and Aboriginal culture. Some viewed Kuku-Yalanji support for the road as a result of their no longer being ‘traditional’, of their being missionised and having lost their culture. Anderson, however, made it clear that the Kuku-Yalanji had not become ‘unnatural’ or ‘un-Aboriginal’ but were political actors operating within complex systems involving both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal universes. They were not ‘ideological phantoms’ but real people. Sutton (2001; cf. Cowlishaw 2003) has convincingly demonstrated that many Aboriginal peoples have suffered declines in wellbeing in recent years, and has identified a frightening gap between progressive public rhetoric about empowerment and self-determination and the raw evidence of reality. Again, the ‘noble savage’ label has proved a burden to Aboriginal communities.

The ‘noble savage’ in America

Large-scale, sustained ecological degradation of the Americas, like Australia, is largely a product of the industrial age. In 1492, however, there may have been as many as 54 million Amerindians, some of whom occupied areas as remote as the Amazon (Heckenberger et al. 2003). They used fire extensively and undoubtedly had an important impact on flora and fauna. Deforestation in the Americas, in fact, may have been greater before Columbus than it was for several centuries after. Therefore, the decline of Amerindians from diseases after initial contact may have created the ‘wilderness’ perceived by European settlers (Turner & Butzer 1992:37–8). Thus, the idea that North America was a ‘wilderness, untouched by the hand of man prior to 1492 is a myth…created, in part, to justify the appropriation of aboriginal lands and the genocide that befell native peoples’ (Kay 1994:381).

Turner and Butzer (1992:16–17; also Denevan 1992; Whelan 1999) have identified two recurrent myths with respect to the depiction of Native Americans. The first portrays them as stewards of the land operating under an ethos of harmony with nature, employing environmentally sensitive and sustainable agricultural practices and minimally changing the environment. The second, often complementary, myth portrays colonial-period Europeans seeking control and exploitation of nature through agricultural methods that are less sustainable and usually degrading to the environment, leading to large-scale deforestation, destruction of croplands, and deterioration of grasslands. On the contrary, Turner and Butzer (1992) suggest that Native Americans acted in ways that maximised their individual fitness regardless of their impacts on the environment. For example, they like other hunters were frequently opportunistic (e.g. Kay 1994:385, 379; Porcasi et al. 2000:202), rather than conservation-minded. Much evidence for apparent resource conservation comes from areas where human survival depends on a careful management of the subsistence base and not from a culturally imbedded ‘conservation ethic’ (Stearman 1994). In most cases, low human population densities, lack of markets, and limited technology more parsimoniously explain the equilibrium enjoyed by native groups than does a proposed harmonious relationship with nature (Alvard 1993, 1994, 1995).

The burden of being ‘noble’

Nature, or what is perceived to be ‘natural’, has gained a major foothold in contemporary consciousness (e.g. the increasing interest in natural foods, natural medicines and natural childbirth) and there is a complementary distrust of things man-made. Much of this, however, is misguided. For example, genetically modified foods are unlikely to be significantly more dangerous than ‘natural’ foods because they are not fundamentally different from them. Virtually every animal and vegetable sold in a health-food store has been ‘genetically modified’ for millennia by selective breeding and hybridisation. Plants have no particular desire to be eaten, and do
not go out of their way to be tasty, healthy, or easy to grow and harvest; many have evolved irritants, toxins and bitter-tasting compounds to deter humans and animals from eating them. It is thus an illusion and possibly a dangerous one to think that there is anything especially safe about ‘natural foods’ (Pinker 2002:8, 229). While this is often overlooked in modern society, earlier societies recognised this and developed ingenious methods of dealing with toxic plants (e.g. Rowland 2002).

An emphasis on what is ‘natural’ has also involved a return of the ‘noble savage’ that is also a misguided view of the human condition. Human populations must respond to both long-term and short-term environmental changes of different levels of oscillation. Accomplishing this has always been difficult and there is no evidence in the archaeological, ethnographic or historical records that humans have attained this balance for more than a few centuries. All human groups are capable of errors, of misjudging ecological circumstances, and self-interest might on occasions have been a more powerful influence than group interest (Edgerton 1992). Most human populations grow, impact their environment, and sooner or later exceed their carrying capacity. This ecological imbalance was often a cause of past warfare and related violence. The inability to evolve a worldwide ecological balance would therefore not reflect a departure from the ‘noble savage’ of the past. We have never had that heritage, nor the opportunities we have today. Only solving the problem of adequate resources and their equitable distribution will enable us to become better at ridding ourselves of conflict (LeBlanc with Register 2003:230).

For meritorious reasons and with no malice, indigenous values and practices are often depicted as more ‘natural’ and therefore more sound than those of non-indigenous peoples. However, archaeological and ethnographical studies do not support such a view (Sackett 1991:242–4). The ‘noble savage’ concept simplifies the complex issue of indigenous relationships to land and creates problems for them. Europeans have created the ‘noble savage’ in part as a yardstick with which to measure their own societies’ progress. The comparison tends to highlight Western societies’ departure from an ideal ecological lifestyle, therefore creating an ideological distance from indigenous peoples. When indigenous peoples fail to live up to the unreasonable expectations of ecological nobility, a further distancing is emplaced. Furthermore, those who accept the stereotype of ecological ‘nobility’ are likely to remain ignorant of the actual living conditions and experiences of indigenous peoples. Those who fail to meet the standards of the ‘noble savage’ are likely to be ineligible for the ‘benefits’ accorded other indigenous peoples. The ‘noble savage’ also provides Europeans with the power to authenticate, and thus control, who counts as ‘indigenous’. This feeds back to fragment indigenous communities by introducing identity politics and inciting internal divisions between ‘full-bloods’, ‘half-bloods’ and others (Berreman 1991; Buege 1996:86; Grande 1999:320; Kamat 2001; Stearman 1994).

Stereotypes of the ‘noble savage’ or ‘ecologically noble savage’ can in fact serve to oppress indigenous peoples by what Wolfe (2000:134–5; cf. Pinker 2002:119) has called ‘repressive authenticity’. Thus, colonised peoples are given the impossible task of acting out pre-contact stereotypes of themselves produced by the colonising culture. The promotion of an authentic Aboriginality, defined in contradistinction to White Australia, for example, has the effect of stigmatising and invalidating those who fall between the two. These include the ‘half-caste’ children who were removed from their parents, and the urban Aborigines who fail to qualify for land rights. The Yorta Yorta’s claim to native title was dismissed in part because of their failure to conform to a pastoralist view of what they should have been (Kerruish & Perrin 1999). Some caricatures of the noble savage might be amusing if they did not have such serious implications for the individuals involved.

Australia’s ‘history wars’ have heated up (Macintyre and Clark 2003), and much is now fought in the media, with predictable results. The politicisation of Aboriginal issues, instead of opening up the debate, has in fact stifled it, entrancing ideological positions on both sides and placing some vital issues beyond criticism. The intensity of media scrutiny has produced new and subtler forms of censorship. As Sahlin (2003a) has pointed out, postmodernists who have been deconstructing historical and ethnographic descriptions, on the grounds that the ‘facts’ are them-selves constructed in the service of power or domination, have been taken aback by the dising-enous adoption by the political right of the same epistemological tactics. Sahlin refers to a political lobbyist who advocates making the lack of scientific certainty about global warming the central issue of the debate, in order to divert the public’s attention from the overwhelming testimony.
of human responsibility for it. Similarly, he finds others who have made the ‘uncertainty’ about cannibalism in pre-colonial Fiji the focus of debate. Here we can learn from Sahlin that encouraging unrealistic perceptions of ‘noble savages’ might assist others to distance Aboriginal people from the present.

We need to define better the relationship between humans and the environment and avoid the divisive debates that take us nowhere. There are things that modern societies can learn from indigenous peoples about caring for the environment, and there are things that they can learn from non-indigenous societies. This would be assisted if we could drop the stereotype of the ‘noble savage’, and deal with the world and its peoples as they really are (Whelan 1999:67). Langton (1998:18) has argued that there is a form of ‘ecological imperialism’ present in Australia justified by an assumption of superiority of Western knowledge over indigenous knowledge systems. Where such ‘ecological imperialism’ exists, it needs to be identified and avoided. However, our understanding of the past would be limited without scientific research and if we continue to learn from that research we may avoid repeating past environmental mistakes (Frank 2001).

The current adoption of bottom-up participation as opposed to top-down modernisation approaches in indigenous development does offer new opportunities where informants become collaborators and their communities participating user-groups, but there is still a need to guard against any romantic tendency to idealise (Sillitoe 1998:223, 227). There are numerous excellent reasons for granting indigenous peoples title to the land that was taken from them, but the belief that they will choose to conserve it is not one of them. Rather than returning resources to another set of potential exploiters, more complex solutions involving education, alternative economic development, and implementation of collaborative wildlife management techniques are required (Alvard 1993, 1994, 1995). The evidence does not support a view that sees modern humans as degraded despoilers of the environment. Instead, it appears that a society-wide altruistic regard for nature has surfaced only in recent times, when external nature has become more threatened and less dangerous. The explicit and widespread environmentalism of today has only a small-scale and limited counterpart in past societies.

A vision of Australia’s past as ‘natural’ and hence good, and any modification of it as ‘unnatural’ and therefore bad, is appealing. But rather than project such an image into the past, we need to understand better both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal historical actions. Aboriginal customary law in relation to flora and fauna must be clearly understood to arrive at an understanding of Australia’s environmental history. The ‘fatal impact’ view of Australian history (the assumption that Aboriginals were passive victims of European colonisation) has largely been abandoned in recent years, but there is still a long way to go in understanding the nature and impact of Aboriginal agency. This is especially so in relation to environmental change and is made more complex by the fact that there is a tendency by some to see indigenous peoples as the forebears of environmentalists. The ‘noble savage’ incorporates the idea that indigenous peoples are intuitively ‘close to nature’ and as such have a latent ecological sensibility. It suggests that Aboriginal peoples have historically always wanted to preserve Australian flora and fauna in its original state. The archaeological and historic record suggests otherwise.

In more recent times, Aboriginal peoples have sought to engage in new economic opportunities that Europeans have created and these have often brought about high levels of ecological change. There are no grounds for seeing this as ‘unnatural’, or a departure from the past, in anything other than scale. These modern world-views represent alternative cultural futures, futures that are struggling to find a place within the structures and movements of the contemporary and rapidly changing world system. It would be wrong to burden those present and future decision makers with the yoke of the ‘noble savage’, a concept that cannot find support in biological or cultural evidence.

The search for an alternative ‘nobility’

The survival of traditional resource management knowledge in many circumstances cannot be denied. The sharing of this information among international indigenous communities as well as establishing partnerships between these communities and mainstream resource management authorities is logical and sensible (Ross & Pickering 2002:210). However, to commence discussion of these complex issues as Ross and Pickering do by caricaturing indigenous peoples as ‘ecologically noble savages’, and European colonisers as unconscious despoilers of the environment, is inaccurate history and serves no worthwhile purpose. Capitalism cannot be absolved, but neither can it be
made to carry the whole indictment for the ‘crisis of modernity’. Capitalism itself is in part the product of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, its material achievements rested on the technology made possible by modern science (e.g. Giddens 1991).

The ‘ecologically noble savage’ is a caricature that distances indigenous peoples from the mainstream and could be used to limit their access to native title rights. To suggest that a new approach to ecological management can be developed by ‘incorporating [whose?] political values and spiritual morals’ (Ross & Pickering 2002:199) into natural resource management is simplistic.6 The perplexing problem of defining a set of core moral values in a multicultural society must be pursued, but advances in natural resource management will continue to be made by accurate critics of past Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal impacts, the application of best-practice scientific principles and the incorporation of traditional indigenous knowledges. Recent human progress has been marked by the ascendancy of critical intelligence over superstition, cosmopolitanism over provincialism, and the development of abundance over scarcity. It is difficult to see how this situation will change. If modern progress has failed, a return to a mythical ‘noble’ past will not assist in resolving our current problems.

Human impacts on the environment by small pre-industrial societies are unlikely to have been of an order of magnitude comparable with the human-induced ecological disasters of today. Yet, on a different scale, the causes may not have been dissimilar. The widespread range of ecological crises currently facing humans underscores the need to understand the full range of anthropogenic impacts on the environment, and the implication of these effects for human societies at all levels of complexity. Archaeology has the underutilised potential to explore the causes and consequences of human impacts on the environment through a deep-time vision. However, continuing enquiry must commence with a realistic view of human nature.

All human groups have responded, and will continue to respond, to short- and long-term changes in the environment (whether caused by internal, external or a combination of factors), and over the long term they have not always been successful in doing so. Humans throughout history have adapted to a range of environments, not always to the benefit of the environment. Mistakes have been and will continue to be made. Science, however, generally recognises the limitations of what is known. There is always uncertainty. There is generally a willingness to challenge hypothesis. By contrast, moral or religious ideologies rarely seem keen to discuss uncertainty and often project fundamentalism and infallibility.

Neither European science nor traditional knowledge is ‘noble’; both are value-laden and may be wrong, but vague political, moral or religious values will not assist in defining who is right. Partnerships will have to be constantly renegotiated to ensure that the dominant culture does not overwhelm indigenous groups and, ultimately, decisions will be made by wise people of whatever hue and cultural background, not artificially constructed ‘noble savages’. Saul (2004:6), in a wise comment on the modern condition, has written that ‘Ideology, like theatre, is dependent on the willing suspension of disbelief’ and that ‘once the suspension goes, willingness converts into suspicion—the suspicion of the betrayed’. The ideology behind the concept of the ‘ecologically noble savage’ has always required a suspension of disbelief. It needs to be abandoned in all current forms, in particular for the good of the people it is currently betraying. Caricaturing peoples as ‘noble savages’ distances them from the adequate and equitable distribution of resources and power, a factor that must be considered a key cause of conflict in most societies.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Frances Peters-Little, Research Fellow, Centre for Indigenous History, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, for moral encouragement in dealing with the themes of this article. As an Aboriginal woman writing on similar themes she has my deep admiration. I thank Professor Larissa Behrendt for her encouragement and support. I thank two anonymous referees for making me think more logically and Dr Graeme Ward for his guidance and patience. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily represent those of the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines or of the individuals mentioned above.

NOTES

1. Another Indigenous woman who is currently confronting these issues is Frances Peters-Little (2003), who has in press a monograph entitled The return of the noble savage: by popular demand (Aboriginal Studies Press). The similarity between her title and mine is coincidental but does reflect a degree of independent common thinking on the subject.

2. Frequent changes in tense in such passages (note the use of ‘maintain’ and ‘derived’) here suggest a failure of the writer to
come to terms with the past ‘noble savage’ and a present received less ‘noble’ context.

3. I am not denying here the ability to conserve resources but, rather, the inappropriate application of modern terminology.


5. For example, many whites construe the new Native American casino enterprises as a sad lapse from traditional tribal values. Donald Trump poo-hooed the wealthy Pequots, whose Connecticut casino had trumped his own, as not looking to him like ‘real’ Indians. They had looked Indian enough, they retorted, when they were poor (Lowenthal 1997:87). Thus, as a noble savage, you just cannot win. In another example, Lowenthal (1997:198) noted: “You know what they do with the Indians?” a Choctaw soldier in a Vietnam novel writes to his brother. “They put us on point. The stupid bastards think Indians can see at night, that kind of shit…It doesn’t matter if you’re a halfbreed or full or whatever. They call you chief and put you out in the fucking jungle at night.” They are also attributed as having such inherited skills as slithering silently through the forest!

6. Others (e.g. Gibbs 2003) have been able to discuss effectively complex indigenous and non-indigenous environmental relationships without any reference to ‘noble savages’.

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