

Watershed Worlds; Eight Indigenous Models for Planetary Survival and Resilience

By Matt Oppenheim

BOOK REVIEW BY THOMAS CROWE

The review is published in loving memory of our contributor and well-wisher of the Creation, the late Matt Oppenheim.

"We must focus on sustaining water for a thriving future. Water flows are like the veins of our bodies, and when we treat the watershed as a giant womb, we allow the watershed to enliven the evolution of ourselves and all beings." - Matt Oppenheim, Watershed Words

THERE ARE BOOKS TO enjoy and then there are books that are needed. Matt Oppenheim's *Watershed Worlds* is one that is needed—at a time when our climate and our future is uncertain, at best. In a book that maps the climate crisis from a global perspective and researches the past and present climate histories of countries that include eight indigenous societies located in areas of the world such as Japan, Central and South America, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and, closer to home, includes the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico and the ancient Hawaiians. "It is their teachings and their resilience that offer us our most urgent lessons in these trying times of societal and climate collapse. They have suffered the most, while serving the planet the deepest," Oppenheim states at the outset of the book and then goes on to quote such bioregional prophets as Peter Berg who was founder of Planet Drum Foundation and the term "bioregion." In an email conversation I had with Matt Oppenheim early-on discussing his book-in-progress, he confided in me, saying: "The theme of this book is, I think, that these watershed practices, as a whole, go a long way at addressing most of the climate crisis and ecological harm, and that this can't be done without an indigenous and holistic worldview as well. The case studies in the book have proven themselves through past climate crises, and

Oppenheim showcases the ecological resilience of indigenous peoples and how we can use traditional knowledge on our own path toward a sustainable future. I plan to use *Watershed Worlds* in my anthropology and sustainability classes.

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WATERSHED WORLDS

Eight Indigenous models for Planetary Survival and Resilience

Matt Oppenheim. PhD

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for thousands of years. The book owes its existence to the journeys of the many Indigenous and traditional societies that have endured for thousands of years despite facing genocide, ethnocide, colonization, imperialism, and now climate change."

In many ways, an overview of Oppenheim's book can be at least partially understood by simply citing the chapter headings: "Our Watershed World; People of the Watershed; From Urbanization to Planetary Collapse; The Indigenous Frontlines; A Sovereign Global Watershed Manifesto; The Present Urgency; Tenets of Resilience; Tenets of Collapse; The Past—for the Present and Future." On this journey and to this end Oppenheim states in his telling Dedication: "I learned that it is the humble in spirit who should lead us, those who have stood strong in the face of genocide and ethnocide while their wonderful nurturing cultures were nearly



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- Matt Oppenheim (1952-2025)



destroyed. These people—our people—who have shown us the meaning of hope and resilience, are the true leaders of our planet and every watershed within it. They offer us a vibrant portal into a reality that is far different than what we have been conditioned to perceive.” With this perspective in mind, Oppenheim isolates each of the eight indigenous cultures highlighted in his book into watersheds and takes us on an intimate and first person singular journey to each of them in prose that reads almost like a memoir related to his physical experiences and research. “In Guatamala, at the site of Tikal in the Peten rainforest, I remember accompanying my Mayan shaman friend Domingo Quino-Solis into the forest where he performed a ceremony to gain the blessing of Ajaw, the Great Creator. Our journey ended at an ancient shrine that had been used for hundreds if not thousands of years. Through this experience and in this place, I began to realize the power and profundity of the relationship of Indigenous peoples and the watersheds that have been and always will be essential to life on our planet.” And then he emphatically adds: “Understanding watersheds and how they vary across the planet is central to our own story, at least until we shut the watershed out of our evolution in favor of the constructed cities of the mind, which brought us to our present planetary collapse.” He, then, goes on to say, more matter of factly: “Since then, as the years have passed, the global impact of climate change has grown worse, bringing more wildfires, flooding, melting glaciers,

rising sea levels, increasingly toxic cities, desertification and the creation of millions of climate refugees.”

So, here you have the overview. What you don’t have here, though, is the intricate details of all the subjects and insinuations quoted above. Detailed descriptions and listings of rivers, lakes, plants, animals, weather patterns and the cultures that lived at one with all of it in reverence and respect. Without going into all that detail, here, I will simply quote again, from Matt Oppenheim to sum up his intentions for writing this book. He says “Now after researching, writing and lecturing about these Indigenous watershed models for over four years, I realized that by focusing on these and other examples across the planet, we can begin to reverse negative climate and ecological collapse thoroughly and rapidly. After reading this book, I hope you find inspiration and a renewed commitment to our precious planet.” And this reviewer vigorously says “Amen!” to that.

*Thomas Crowe is a poet and publisher and author of the multi-award-winning non-fiction nature memoir *Zoro’s Field: My Life in the Appalachian Woods*. He lives in the Katuah Bioregional Watershed in the Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina.*

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