



BSR Conference 2009

Reset Economy. Reset World.

Modern Issues with Ancient Roots: Update on Indigenous Rights

Breakout Session Summary

Thursday, October 22, 2009 | 11 a.m.-noon

Speakers

- » **Rebecca Adamson**, Founder and President, First Peoples Worldwide
- » **Harry Charger**, Spiritual Leader, Community Educator, Ceremonial Leader, Cheyenne River Reservation, Lakota
- » **Julia Ka'iulani Nelson**, Manager, Advisory Services, BSR (moderator)

Highlights

- » Indigenous rights are increasingly recognized around the world.
- » By proactively engaging with indigenous peoples, businesses can ensure continued license to operate and foster the transfer of traditional learning.
- » Business can learn much from indigenous peoples' belief (and related practices) that productive land must be protected, and protected land is productive.

Memorable Quotes

"My mother used to tell me, 'If you don't change directions, you're going to end up where you're headed.'" —Rebecca Adamson, First Peoples Worldwide

"The court of public opinion applies modern standards when judging past behavior." —Rebecca Adamson, First Peoples Worldwide

"I had heard that corporate America is trying to help Mother Earth. ... We've been helping her since time immemorial, [but now] we need help." —Harry Charger, Cheyenne River Reservation, Lakota

Overview

Adamson opened the session by sharing some facts about indigenous peoples. Though indigenous peoples live in more than 90 countries and comprise 5 percent of the world population, there is no internationally accepted definition of indigenous peoples. Two treaties provide defining characteristics, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. Adamson pointed out that land rights are also helpful, as they often serve as "the critical starting point for who must be involved and at what stage."

The World Resources Institute estimates that indigenous regions comprise 24 percent of the Earth's land surface, in areas that contain 80 percent of remaining biodiversity. Thus, indigenous peoples' lands are often targeted for conservation—but this often results in the eviction of indigenous peoples. "Conservationists *do not* speak for indigenous peoples," Adamson said. "Only indigenous peoples can speak for ourselves."

She went on to describe the global expansion of indigenous rights. If companies do no more than operate within legal boundaries, they may be vulnerable to charges of not engaging properly.



Adamson closed by offering the “Ten Commandments for Engagement with Indigenous Peoples”:

1. First impressions count, so start with best practices.
2. Start engagement early.
3. Allow for a lot of time: Add a 30 to 40 percent contingency on estimates.
4. Involve a broad range of local voices. Go beyond elected leaders to traditional leaders, clans, women, and others.
5. Territory rights are more than simple ownership. Pay attention to usage rights as well.
6. Ensure contractors comply with your standards.
7. Don't assume government information is accurate; do your own research and check it for accuracy.
8. Don't assume indigenous decision-making criteria and definitions of success are the same as yours. Sit down and discuss definitions of success before starting.
9. If you are using traditional knowledge, be sure to recognize it for what it is—indigenous peoples' intellectual property.
10. Listen. Then listen, listen, listen. Listening is the foundation for strong relationships based on trust, respect, and dignity.

Charger, a leader from a reservation on South Dakota's Cheyenne River, spoke next about Mother Earth, which he compared to a “beautiful, gracious, giving, and vulnerable” woman. He described how Lakota people apologize to Mother Earth for taking even “a blade of grass,” and he lamented the way oil, gas, and metals companies fail to apologize for “creating holes in her body.” “I'm not here to accuse you,” he said. “I'm only here to share what we've known for thousands of years. We obey the mysterious being's laws, teachings, and prophecies. ... We preserve Mother Earth.”

An audience member asked how companies that use natural resources like wind, sun, and water can help support and develop indigenous peoples and economies in a way that's respectful. Charger's response centered on trust. He described dishonest practices that made his people distrust outsiders. For a successful partnership, he recommended taking the time to prove the long-term benefits to his people.

Adamson then described indigenous peoples' philosophy of the interrelationship between protection and production. “We take care of our Earth because it produces for us, and Earth produces because we protect it,” she said. “Indigenous peoples' world view fundamentally incorporates these relationships. The pace may be different, the scope and scale may be different, but business is fundamentally aligned with this.” Business cannot separate production from protection in the long term, and indigenous peoples can serve as a valuable resource in striking the proper balance.

Charger closed the session with a song for Mother Earth.

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