# [***TWO WORLDS, ONE PLANET***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:61DB-FSX1-DYTH-G2GF-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

The following information was ***released by Defenders of Wildlife***:

Mitakuyepi! (Greetings to all my relations!)

I sincerely hope each of you reading this are healthy and remain so throughout these unknown, challenging times.

For many people, November is a month that brings nostalgia and good memories of family traditions and gatherings, often surrounding the Thanksgiving holiday. As an Indigenous person, however, November entails a different experience than the average American. Indigenous Nations (Native Americans ***Tribes***) in the U.S. use this month to honor and celebrate our ancestors, our beautiful lifeways that are being practiced, taught and revitalized by our indigenous relatives throughout Turtle Island, and our future generations. Over a century ago, some leaders in the U.S. began the movement to acknowledge the contributions of the first, original inhabitants of this land now called America. From these early leaders' vision came the creation of Indian Day, which, over time, has developed into today's Native American Heritage Month (also known by other similar names). This month also presents a great opportunity to educate others, not only of our historical existence and contributions, but also to give insight to what our current status is. Even if it is just to let the world know that we are still here.

As an Indigenous woman, who is also the biologist for my Oyate's (Nation) Department of Natural Resources, I am in a unique position to help be a voice for those often-unheard segments of our population, such as Indigenous People and the environment. My perspective comes from my educational background in ecology and a lifelong love of science; but my views, particularly regarding the environment, are even more heavily influenced by my personal circumstances growing up as a Lakota during a transitioning generation. I find it important to note, however, that my perspective is not and cannot be representative of all Indigenous People, rather, it is only reflective of my own personal relationship with the world around me... and I happen to be Lakota too.

There are currently 574 federally recognized Native American ***Tribes*** in the U.S. with the most recent, gaining federal recognition just within this last year. (Big virtual round of applause for all the hard work and effort made by The Little Shell ***Tribe*** of Chippewa Indians of Montana!) While some nations may be similar in language, land base and traditional customs, each has their own unique identity. Indigenous (Tribal) Nations, across the U.S. and beyond, are in differing stages of revitalizing, and in some cases relearning, their traditional practices and lifeways. Each is finding their own way to being able to implement new norms in an effort to create bridges between our traditions and the modern world. In this way, we are honoring our ancestors' sacrifice for us to not only exist, but to thrive in two worlds. Many Indigenous Nations are using this relearning process to revitalize their beautiful Indigenous lifeways, but by doing so, many are healing generational wounds while giving our next generation an opportunity to find their true identity. We are learning that we can exist in both our Indigenous world and the bigger American/global society that we no longer have to choose to fit in one or the other.

With today's current racial tension, I find it especially important to highlight the positives that come from diversity, from people to nature. I like that we can draw similarities to nature and ecosystems in that we all have very similar basic needs for sustaining life, but based on our unique situations (habitats), each of us have evolved differing strategies for meeting those needs. We could learn more from natural processes, particularly in these ever-changing times of this pandemic. Evolution and the process of natural selection favors those that are most adaptable to change. Since many of us have been forced to slow down a bit recently, it may be to our advantage to use this time to reassess how and why we do things a certain way. This reevaluation could be done on a personal, programmatic, governmental or environmental scale. Finding a solution to some of the new challenges we face may be a little easier if we stop trying to recycle old ways, but rather think of something totally different. Always remembering the importance of our connections to all things, including those factors the western world may view as non-living. "We are all related" is an underlying value in most Indigenous Nations and includes everything from humans and animal relatives, to the water, wind, trees and more. Such a pause of the fast-paced world we are used to living in may actually provide an opportunity to reflect on what is really important in our lives and what we are truly grateful for. After all, at the root of this holiday season, is the idea of being thankful for the good in our lives, despite the negative.

Along the lines of unification, many Indigenous Nations are finding that cultural restoration and preservation goals often coincide with those of ecological conservation. For many of us, the surviving ties between our people and nature, may actually be the mechanism or "vehicle" that enables us to save and protect both our traditional and ecological lifeways. Examples of which may include ecotourism efforts and other conservation based economic activities that are centered on cultural restoration, while also providing a service to local communities and a means for financial sustainability.

Many Nations are incorporating ecological conservation with cultural preservation in projects like the varying buffalo (bison) restoration efforts. Pairing grassland and buffalo reintroduction efforts with goals involving language and Indigenous lifeway teachings is a creative way to accomplish multiple conservation objectives, including the preservation of our varying and unique Indigenous teachings. Native Nations have found greater strength in numbers, and are forming treaties and alliances among each other. Nations within our region are coming together to bring concepts of grassland conservation and buffalo restoration on a larger scale in an effort to broaden, and effectively speed up, the positive effects this would have on the prairie grassland ecosystem.

The Buffalo Treaty was first signed on September 23, 2014 on the Blackfeet Territory in Montana. For the first time in 150 years, 13 nations from eight reservations came together for this cross-boundary indigenous agreement. Defenders of Wildlife was asked to sign in 2018 as a supporting signatory and conservation partner. The Treaty acknowledges that if Indigenous ***tribes*** and First Nations work collectively, rather than individually, we will have more power to restore prairie habitat and return bison back to the land. It is important to note that our grasslands are an endangered ecosystem and in some areas are being lost (converted or altered in some way) at a rate faster than the Amazon rainforest. It is empowering to know that the movement to protect our grasslands and this disappearing resource is led by many of our Native Nations and allies.

For too long, our stories have been told from a viewpoint and voice that is not our own. It is time that we tell our history and share what we want the world to know of us. Our lifeways are beautiful and unique and rooted in the teachings of our ancestors; but our lifeways are also alive and, as we learn and evolve, they change along with us. We are allowed to live in homes with electricity and still have our tipi or inipi lodges out back. We can be equally proud to wear our hand-made traditional attire or something purchased from a store. Our traditional knowledge and lifeways, particularly that of ecological and environmental importance, IS science just as any western concept like biology, chemistry, etc. is science. Often we are told that in order to be Native or American Indian or Indigenous, we had to look or talk or act a certain stereotypical way. The time has come for us to define what the standards of being an Indigenous person, a Lakota, should be for ourselves ... and I foresee our skin tone, dwelling structure and (hopefully) blood quantum will not be the main factors of determining our identity in the future.

My parents lived during a time when it was illegal to be Lakota, or at least one that wanted to live our lifeways openly. Many in their generation, like their parents before them, internalized this into shame of our way of life. So, they wanted a future with more opportunities for their children. This, in many instances, translated to assimilation. As a child born into this new era, only six short years after the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, this is what I referred to earlier by saying a transitioning generation. Many of my life experiences have helped me to better understand that we must do more than just learn and conform to the non-Indigenous world. We must take that a step further and blend those teachings into what our Indigenous thought and philosophies teach us. The sacrifice of our people before us was so that we, and our beautiful lifeways, could survive and be carried on into the future. After all, balance is a main component to our way of life. As a product of this transitioning, I see my role as helping to set the foundation for which our future generations can build upon and become the living example of what it means to live in two worlds... not just to survive, but to flourish in them both.

Mitakuye Oyasin We are all related.

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