

UNKNOWN PODCAST

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Indigenous Origin Stories

Lynne Kelly: Our species is curious and connected. We all crave answers. Which plants are safe to eat and which will kill us? What are those sparkling lights in the night sky? Where did we come from? And why are we here? Our ancient ancestors crafted origin stories to answer these questions. For most of humanity's history, our communities were separated by vast distances, so our stories are all different based on the environments in which our ancestors lived. Though they're populated by different characters and animals and performed in different ceremonies, these stories all seek to answer the same questions.

Indigenous peoples crafted stories that helped them preserve knowledge about their world. These stories were the records of whole knowledge systems, systems which helped people recall hundreds of different plants and animals, which were safe, and which were deadly. These stories told new generations where to look for resources. They told people how to process lethal plants into useful medicines and how to learn from animals around them. For example, across the very northern areas of the planet, such as Alaska, there's a bird called the loon. The mythology will tell you that you should sing the call of this bird before you go out to sea. There's a very good reason for that. If you're caught in a storm at sea, as long as you can pick the loon's call out from the other birds and follow it, you will find your way back to the land, because loons always return to land at night while other birds stay out at sea. The stories remind you to practice that call and that may well save your life.

Indigenous knowledge systems also store information about their communities, such as complex genealogies to know exactly how you're related to everybody else. There's extensive knowledge of health to recognize diseases, but also how to bind wounds and broken bones and protect the vulnerable. And there's navigation which can't just depend on the stars, because you have to be able to navigate during the day and on cloudy nights. And all this knowledge is integrated, although there are specialists, Indigenous knowledge systems are integrated, so you know which plants relate to which animals and relate to particular seasons and weather conditions and also where to navigate to them.

There's a location in Colorado known as Chimney Rock, which the Ancestral Pueblo used to mark the 18.6-year lunar standstill cycle. These were deep, complex records, all carefully held in the collective memory of communities across centuries. How has this helped their communities develop and pass on information?