

**“MITAKUYE-OWASIN” I AM RELATED TO ALL THAT IS LIVING**  
**Ramona Kitto Stately and Priscilla Buffalohead**

“Mitakuye owasin” is a phrase often used by speakers of the Dakota language. Translated into English it means, “all my relatives”. To English speaking Euro-Americans, the phrase, “all my relatives” would mean those people related to one another through the connecting link of mothers and fathers. To a Dakota speaker, “all my relatives” is a much more encompassing phrase. It includes all human life and all forms of plant and animal life. The Dakota see all life as closely connected.

The idea of the close relationship between life forms is a part of the spiritual philosophy of all Native nations. This philosophy is reflected in the Native habit of addressing animals as brothers and sisters, acknowledging the natural world, the sky and earth; All life forms are considered sacred because each has a spirit and each fulfills a special purpose in an orderly world. Each life form is also seen as having an equal place in the scheme of things. Humans are not superior to other animals, and in fact humans are often seen as the last and lowest of creation. This is why Native hunters apologized to the spirit of the animal they hunted and honored the animal by using every single part of it. Plant life is also sacred. When birchbark was needed to make a canoe or a basket, the gatherer would say “Your leaves must feed me now, but someday my body will return to the soil to feed your roots.”

When making tools, bags or clothing, the Dakota would decorate items with information that important such as designs of medicines, which helps everyone know and remember what they looked like and what they were for. “There is no word for art in our language” says Ramona Kitto Stately of the Isanti Dakota Nation. “We made things beautiful to mirror the way the Creator made the beautiful landscape and to transmit knowledge to future generations.”

Modern scientists have just begun to appreciate what Native people have been saying for centuries. It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Western scientists like Charles Darwin, proposed the idea of biological evolution. Like Native spiritual philosophy, the theory of evolution also proposes that all life is related, and that each evolves out of a common parent form. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ecologists began to take a closer look at the relationships between life forms. They have learned that plants, animals, and people are not only related, but depend on one another in very special ways. One example of this relationship can be seen in the behavior of bees. Bees gathering honey fertilize flowers so they can bear fruit and seeds. The fruit and seeds are eaten by birds and other animals.

Through their excrement the seeds return to the earth to grow again.

While there is no term “ecology” in Native languages, Native spiritual philosophy expresses the same teachings. Native people tried to live in harmony with nature so that the delicate balance which exists between life forms would not be upset. Their efforts must have paid off. When European explorers reached the American continents they found vast lands with clean air and water, lush forests and grasslands and an abundant variety of plant and animal life.