Commitment to indigenous archaeology

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As a tribally-based Maori activist, who also happens to be a trained archaeologist, I have long wanted to attend a conference of the World Archaeological Congress. Unfortunately, my particular perspective on archaeology, and especially my own advocacy role in land claims and heritage debates, has served to keep me marginal to mainstream New Zealand archaeology. By contrast, WAC's stated commitment to indigenous archaeology and issues has always impressed me. Having missed the 1999 conference in South Africa, I made it a goal to attend the next one - in Washington D.C. Fortunately receipt of a Fulbright Travel Grant, and support from the university where I am currently completing a doctorate made attendance at the latter possible.

There were a number of highlights at this conference. For me, and I suspect for many other indigenous participants, top of the agenda was the encouragement the gathering offered for us to remain active in the discipline, pursuing personal and collective objectives through the practice of archaeology. Another feature was meeting such a broad range of indigenous archaeologists from established professionals and academics to emerging students, and representing so many cultures and nations. The participation of so many Native Americans - in a sense, our real hosts - was most appreciated, as was the presence of a delegation of Australian Aborigines, all active and experts in a traditional rather than professional sense.

That the majority of indigenous archaeologists present seemed to be women was also a pleasant surprise - particularly given that most of us are from cultures which emphasise gender-based roles, and where the physical locations we deal with in our everyday work are spiritually charged and thus problematic for women. On the other hand, I was particularly intrigued to hear the experiences of the Navaho women present, and to realise that their experiences with ancestral sites almost mirrored my own in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Significant too was the commitment shown by so many Pakeha (white) archaeologists towards their indigenous colleagues. The feedback they provided for our papers, and their general friendliness and collegiality, was a great encouragement. For the first time ever I found myself attending an archaeology conference where I felt surrounded by like-minded people, who understood what I was saying, and who were not threatened by what I said - and who did not seem intent on excluding me from the profession and any opportunities it might provide.

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