Walking arm-in-arm

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This article is part of the Antiquity coverage of the Fifth World Archaeology Congress (WAC-5), held in Washington DC in June 2003. Please see our other articles from WAC-5

The biggest difference I noticed between WAC-4 and WAC-5 is that there was a larger contingent of Indigenous peoples from around the world. They all had a common goal, shared the same concerns, and everyone supported each other. My paper was on sharing and shaping the future and this appeared to be a common aim for Indigenous peoples from all over the world.

The networking of an evening was not only fun but also important. People from Labrador, the Africans, the Argentineans, the Native Americans and the Australians were all very keen to visit each others' countries. Some of the younger Indigenous participants said that they would like to go to University in Australia. So, maybe they were looking to us and how we do archaeology to see how they can go back and shape a better future for their own countries. This applies not only to fieldwork but also to the legislation used to protect burial sites and other sites. It was a big surprise to me that in their countries they do not have the same protection that we have in Australia.

This was evident at WAC-4 when a San bushman spoke about wanting to protect a small burial area in a national park. He was chased out by the government and wanted to go back with bows and arrows. He was very passionate about protecting this burial site, in the same way that we are. Similarly, in a small Canadian village I visited there was no legislation to stop a power line going through a burial site. In Australia, we at least have the legislation to do that.

This is why it is very important for Indigenous peoples to attend meetings such as WAC-5, so that they can learn what is going on in each others' countries, both in terms of fieldwork and legislation, and compare this to their own situation.

There was great interest in the paper given by the Muthi Muthi people, who are the traditional custodians of the Mungo lady, dated to around 26,000 BP in Australia. This was the first time that these Aboriginal people had presented their story to an international meeting. Many of these Indigenous speakers, including Mary Pappin, spoke about walking arm-in-arm, not only with archaeologists but also with each other, in a partnership of respect.

Indigenous people can't look into the future until we have gone back to the past. This is the message that we are getting off our elders, even my own mother. We need to learn about Dreaming stories, which are our creation stories, and our rock paintings and respect for our burials, our stone tools, our bush foods and our bush medicines. These are important not only to us, but also for teaching in schools and for tourism. Unless this is done, our past will be lost forever. The past is our future.

Through WAC-4 and WAC-5, we are able to pass on our knowledge. People are starting to sit up and take notice. This promotes better understanding and respect worldwide for Indigenous peoples. I see my own role as helping other Indigenous people to become confident and willing to engage in international debate. Often, Aboriginal people are frightened to present their ideas, because they feel they might be challenged, but after they have given their presentations they feel strong.

I feel that I have only achieved these goals in my own life through WAC-4 and WAC-5. Even if people in our home towns do not understand the importance of what we are doing, the world is now listening to our stories. An important part of this is that these stories are being published, making them available to a global audience. Finally, we really are walking arm-in-arm.

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