

Lori Lambert

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“The concept of sharing, connecting and relating to the environment forms the basic premise of education for American Indian people.” Lori Lambert, 2006.

Overview

Lori Lambert is a faculty member at Salish Kootenai College in Pablo, Montana, where she teaches courses on environmental health, environmental ethics and Native American Studies. Lambert, who is Abenaki and Mi'kmaq, grew up between Massachusetts and Canada. Her family had a house near the Charles River, and as a young child, she spent a lot of time outdoors with her brother and grandfather. Lambert remembers, “He [her grandfather] shared with us what he knew about the natural world, and that influenced me a great deal. He also taught us how to fish; how to thread the worm on the hook, and not be afraid.” It was during one of these fishing trips that she witnessed firsthand the perils of environmental contamination. “I remember a company that was dumping chemicals in the river. The fish we used to catch were all dead and belly up. We could no longer swim or fish—that made a big impact on me,” she recalls.

This interview was conducted in 2015.

Early Life and Education

After graduating from high school, Lambert received a nursing degree from the Cambridge Hospital School of Nursing, and then went on to get a bachelor's degree in therapeutic recreation from Temple University. After college, Lambert worked at a psychiatric hospital for adolescents. Soon after she began working with the patients there, she realized that they responded positively to time spent outdoors. It was then that she decided she wanted to focus on using the environment as a tool for healing psychiatric patients. However, she lacked the skills that would enable her to do that, so she returned to school and got her master's degree in environmental science from Arcadia University. Later, Lambert would do graduate coursework in Queensland, Australia, and get her Ph.D. in medical ecology from the Union Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Since returning to school and receiving her advanced degrees, Lambert has taught at Montgomery County Community College in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, Penn State University in Philadelphia, and Arcadia University Graduate School, also in Philadelphia. Before moving to Montana, she also served as the Director of Education at the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education. However, her true passion is for Arctic environments, to which she still organizes expeditions. For Lambert, the Arctic is the most

exciting ecosystem on the planet. “When I moved to Montana to get married, I had to re-invent myself because there is no ‘arctic’ here,” Lambert explains, laughing. “So I did a post-doc in e-learning. I still do expeditions to see polar bears whenever I can, however.”

Lambert received a post-doctoral certificate in technology and distributed learning from the University of British Columbia. She believes that, although the technology for e-learning may be relatively new, communicating across distances is something indigenous peoples have done for ages. “Today’s technology may be different, but for Native People the philosophy of communicating at a distance is not new,” she explains. “So too, mentoring for distance education was also within the scope of the lives of our ancestors, mentors who taught the youth of the tribe to read the trails, to leave picture messages on rocks, to listen for the animal calls, to read the signs in the forest, to play the drum and sing the songs. The concept of sharing, connecting and relating to the environment forms the basic premise of education for American Indian people. All humans are social animals who depend on each other for their mutual survival and their identity. We call this connecting and relating the communal experience. It incorporates values of stories, languages, customs, songs, dances and ways of thinking. The community is a place where one learns to be human. This kind of communal learning must be preserved as a component of American Indian education.”

Importance of Mentorship to Career

Mentors have played a valuable role in the development of Lambert’s career. Her core professor in her Ph.D. program at the Union Institute was inspirational, and encouraged her to finish her degree program. “There were many times when I was ready to throw in the towel, and she was wonderful to me,” Lambert remembers. “My two daughters and son were also there for me when I was in graduate school, and I was there for them when they did their master’s degrees.”

In turn, Lambert mentors other minorities in the field at every opportunity. Many of her students have gone on to get graduate degrees and are now teaching in the field. “Without having my teachers believe in me, I never would have done it,” Lambert reflects. “It’s important that teachers let students know they can do it, believe that they can, and expect high quality work from them.” Lambert has been teaching at Salish Kootenai, a tribal college, since 1994. Though she is not officially involved in any “diversity programs” as such, there is diversity at her school—53 tribes come there for their education. “Just by being here,” Lambert says, “I’m participating in a diversity program.” She is also currently a consultant for a project at the University of Washington that focuses on reducing disparities in cancer amongst Native Americans and Alaska Natives; and is an environmental health consultant on a study entitled “Yakama Nation Health Education Response to Contaminated Fish,” for the Oregon Health Science University, the Yakama Tribal Nation, and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

Highlights

There have been too many highlights over the years for Lambert to choose just one. “I’m asked to do presentations all over the world and am funded to go to them,” she offers. “Seeing my students graduate and be successful is key for any educator.” She also notes a research project that she was involved in with Native women in the Arctic, where she studied breast cancer and its relationship to the foods they eat and the toxins found in them. Lambert has also written five books.

Advice to Young Professionals

Lambert has held on to her career in the environmental field because of her students. “They inspire me all the time,” she says. “I hang in because of them, who they want to become—to work with their own people on tribal lands. That is key for me—seeing my students giving back to the communities. I give back to the community through my students.”

Lambert has this advice for minorities who are considering the pursuit of a career in the environmental field: “You must really love the environment. Look at a career in terms of going out in the field and immersing yourself—not just reading a textbook. Get all the education you can, talk to the elders and get their perspective. Be strong enough to finish your degree. Give back to the community. Don’t just do it for yourself, do it for your people.”