

Q&A with Helen Augare

Interviewed by Joelle Seligson

The director of the Blackfeet Native Science Field Center on traditional knowledge, Western science, and understanding our place in the world

In high school, she took an interest in science; at the University of Montana, she pursued business. Today, Helen Augare utilizes her modern studies while staying true to her roots. As director of the Blackfeet Native Science Field Center in Browning, Montana, she helps youth learn both Western science and traditional knowledge while connecting to the natural world. As a Native American, she emphasizes respecting the land and beings around us, recognizing that—even as we continue to pursue knowledge—humans can't control everything.

What is your philosophy on Native science and how does it connect to your work at the Blackfeet Native Science Field Center?

I guess the philosophy is thinking about how we traditionally are scientists. I guess just the way that we think and learn and how we're connected to the earth and the place that we're in—just naturally scientists, being able to understand the relationships around us.

How does that connect to the work that you do?

I think it's really important for us to help our children learn about who we are as Blackfeet people and to be able to carry that forward into the future with confidence knowing that they have that identity and they're able to use their traditional knowledge to help further their future. It's really important especially in tribal communities to be able to understand both Western science and traditional science because we have to make decisions for our community and balance those decisions in both worlds. And we can only do that if we're teaching them the values and the language and keeping that identity strong and helping them understand all the relationships that we have with our place in the world.

What led you to this work helping young people connect both to their heritage and to Western science? Why is it important to you personally?

I started out in high school really looking at a career in science. I took a lot of science courses and things like that. But the inquiry approach to things is just so natural. It's so natural for me, and I guess just knowing that as I pursued my own career I wanted to help my community, and I always knew I was going to come back to the reservation and work. As I got more and more into the business area that I graduated from University of Montana, I started realizing that community work and education was what was important to me. So when I returned home and started working at the community college and [saw] the important role that the community college plays as far as education and educating our people to feel comfortable with the language and traditional knowledge—that really helped me, because when I went to college, that's what really boosted my confidence in being a Native student. It means a lot to me to be able to help students at a younger age realize how important our identity is because it boosts that self-esteem and that confidence in pursuing careers, and knowing that you are capable of balancing but still uphold[ing] those values that you have as a Native person.

Why would you say the marriage of those Native values and Western science is important to the field at large, the field of science centers and museums?

I would say it's important because we as human beings tend to complicate things. I know that with a lot of—as we go into furthering Western science and thought, it's harder and harder to draw the line, the boundary lines. How far do we go before we lose respect for the life of everything? I think that part of Native science and understanding those traditional values is you're able to realize that everything has a spirit, everything is living, and you have to respect that. You have to be able to still explore and pursue knowledge, ask questions, whatnot, but understand that there are those boundaries and you can do it in an ethical way of understanding those relationships you have within the natural world and even beyond, the universe. Being able to understand the real creation story—how important it is to live a good life and to just be well balanced as far as spiritually, emotionally, physically, mentally...

What would be your best bit of practical advice to a staff member at a science center or a museum, an educator, who's trying to navigate those two paradigms?

I would say start with their local communities. Even when I go out and visit different areas, different cities, it's always nice to visit with people about: What was here before the concrete? What did the land look like? Really understanding the people and most of all the land, the natural native plants, the waterways. Why were these things here and how do they function together? What types of animals, birds...observing just the natural environment and being able to find a place in that environment... Even off the reservation here in Montana, there [are] so many different cultural sites and we ask ourselves: Why did our people live here? And that's how we start to explore all these different areas that our people would camp at, and understanding that they fit into that surrounding and they didn't impose themselves as far as trying to control it. I think too many times we as humans believe that we control everything around us or that we have a way of controlling it, when really we only have to figure out how do we fit in, what are our relationships with all these living things that are around us, and then we find our place.

In your work what would you say is your biggest goal? What would give you the greatest sense of accomplishment with the youth you work with?

I guess just knowing that I helped them to gain a sense of understanding so that they could pursue their dreams, their opportunities. That's the biggest thing for me is just being able to be in the community and see the kids that we work with and know that I have a relationship with them now, whereas if I wouldn't have been doing this, I would have never gotten to know who they are, who their families are. And also to be able to watch them grow and succeed in themselves. That really makes me feel proud, makes me feel good, that we can help educate these younger ones and watch them grow stronger and stronger. And they'll have that identity of who they are and where they come from, no matter where they go in the world. Just knowing you were part of their life.

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