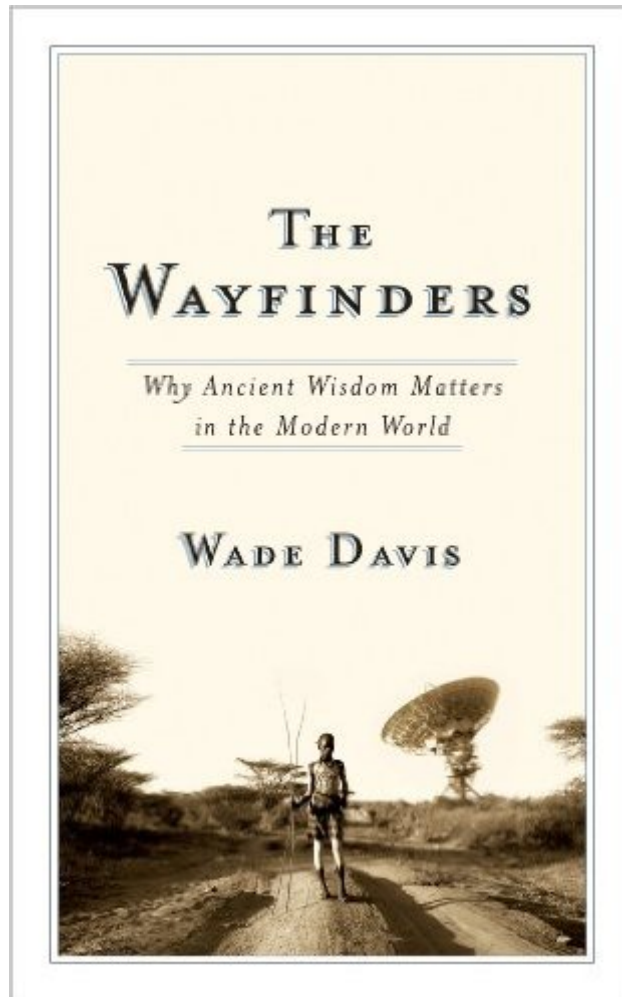


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# The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters In The Modern World (CBC Massey Lecture)



## Synopsis

Every culture is a unique answer to a fundamental question: What does it mean to be human and alive? Anthropologist and National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Wade Davis leads us on a thrilling journey to celebrate the wisdom of the world's indigenous cultures. In Polynesia we set sail with navigators whose ancestors settled the Pacific ten centuries before Christ. In the we meet the descendants of a true Lost Civilization, the people of the Anaconda. In the Andes we discover that the Earth really is alive, while in the far reaches of Australia we experience Dreamtime, the all-embracing philosophy of the first humans to walk out of Africa. We then travel to Nepal, where we encounter a wisdom hero, a Bodhisattva, who emerges from forty-five years of Buddhist retreat and solitude. And finally we settle in Borneo, where the last rainforest nomads struggle to survive. Understanding the lessons of this journey will be our mission for the next century. For at risk is the human legacy; a vast archive of knowledge and expertise, a catalogue of the imagination. Rediscovering a new appreciation for the diversity of the human spirit, as expressed by culture, is among the central challenges of our time.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Wade Davis is right, what matters most is power, landscape and imagination. We either demean the primitive, romanticize the indigenous, or abide in a state of unbelievable ignorance of the meaning of the different ways humans have lived in this world. In his Massey Lectures, which make up this

book, Davis has brought together his vast experiences of other peoples with the sheer poetry of his masterful writing to point out how much we have to learn from those whose unique understanding of the world is embedded in their means of surviving in vastly differing landscapes. It is not that people whose text-messaging-adept hands twitch while nervously fondling their cell phones are bad. But it may be that they can learn something about what it means to be human from peoples like the Australian Aborigines who lived for millennia in what we regard as a wasteland guided by Dream Time something we might only imagine in the best computer animation which does not fill one's belly except from employment in post-industrial society. And Aborigines in turn, on pain of extinction, have had to concede to our world but have miraculously managed to preserve some of their heritage, as have the indigenous of the , the Sahara, North America, and Tibet all of whom Davis tells us about. This is a very important book. Its author brings us face to face with what we are losing when we passively accept the forcing of the whole world into the mold of our lives. It is not merely some romantic past that is represented by native resistance. As Davis mentions, the last speaker of a language must bear the tragedy of the vanishing of a whole way life with its unique relationship to landscape and community.

With the converging crises of imminent energy scarcity, environmental degradation, resource depletion and economic insolvency, suddenly I'm recognizing the apogee of our modern civilization may have passed us by a few decades ago. Being on the slope of globalization's decline as opposed to its ascent or plateau is a precarious position, mainly because the evidence increasingly indicates an ever more bleak definition of the future. But that's precisely why I found Wade Davis' 2009 CBC Massey Lectures collected in *The Wayfinders* so deeply inspiring. The way we define our lives and the meaning of being a human is far from an absolute and objective answer to reality, it has been the result of numerous decisions made in a compounding form over hundreds of years. Because humanity at large expresses itself in the form of modernity is largely a result of the ever growing demand our lifestyle has on ever more hard to reach raw material inputs. Although I listened to this entire series of lectures through the CBC Ideas Podcast, Davis' presentation hit me with much more gravity the second time around. The genius and intelligence recognized by modern humanity is only in that of highly advanced technology while the genius of the cultures detailed in *The Wayfinders* takes many different forms. Each culture is far from trivial but an answer to the questions that come with being human, all of these answers just as impressive as our own. Our tendency is for to look at the naked and painted body of the native as a failed attempt at modernity. A native to be saved by induction into our economic system with all the benefits of employment and

monetary exchange. Even until the 1960's some Australian textbooks included the Aboriginals among, "interesting animals of the country".

Davis seems to have been EVERYWHERE, but never loses that sense of awe and wonder that pushes the reader to genuinely think about human experiences beyond his/her own. He notes that cultures and languages are being lost at a rate greater than biodiversity loss, and the wonders of human achievements and resilience are being wiped out. Culture is a funny thing: It can unite societies, but it is immensely fragile. Thousands of years of adaptations, oral history and knowledge, can be wiped out within a single generation of ignorance and neglect. The book explored the various ways different cultures found their way in the world. Some examples: Aboriginals practiced environmental stewardships for TENS of thousands of years, although they have no need for the concept of linear time. Polynesian navigators became human supercomputers in order to find specks of land across the vast Pacific Ocean without compasses, sextants, and GPS's. Nomadic tribes in Northern Kenya accrued huge herds of cattle as an adaptation to a land of recurring drought. These practices were all woven elaborately into the customs and traditions of each unique culture; it's all very fascinating stuff. In modern times, we have a tendency to dismiss these incredible and ingenious achievements that allowed indigenous people to survive and thrive. Sometimes it's unintentional; other times it's outright disturbing. Heyerdahl of the Kon-Tiki fame, ignited the public's imagination with his voyage across the Pacific, but dismissed the reams of evidence that pointed to this great achievement was of Polynesian origins.

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