

Primitive Skills, Earth Skills & Ancestral Skills

The terms “*primitive skills*” “*earth skills*” and “*ancestral skills*” are often used interchangeably by practitioners and outdoor educators, but they can come from different perspectives and carry different meanings.

Subsequent cultural changes among some have determined the use of “*primitive*” to be inappropriate, so the less “*offensive*” terms – *Earths Skills* and *Ancestral Skills* – have been adopted by some to address the same skill-set without appearing insensitive. *

PRIMITIVE TECHNOLOGY –

Primitive Technology or “*primitive skills*” came into the vernacular in 1989 with the incorporation of the *Society of Primitive Technology*. This was a pre-internet (1993) introduction to the concept. The name was decided upon by the board over the term “*prehistoric technology*” since the later locked the skills into a specific time period.

In 1999, the Society of Primitive Technology published a compilation volume of articles from its semi-annual *Bulletin – Primitive Technology: A Book of Earthskills*.

In 2000, the Society of Primitive Technology published a second compilation volume of articles from its semi-annual *Bulletin – Primitive Technology II: Ancestral Skills*, thus including the use of all 3 terms.

*Primitive Technology is our shared inheritance...
it is a world heritage that knows no race, creed or color.
It is foreign to no one.
It is the thread that links us to our prehistory
and binds us together as human beings.
Steven M. Watts*

Primitive Technology - The practical knowledge and skills used by pre-industrial peoples to make tools, shelter, clothing, and other necessities directly from natural materials using simple tools and traditional methods.

In other words, primitive technology is about learning how people actually made and used things before modern industrial technology, by [apply]ing the materials, tools, and processes they had available.

Errett Callahan, 1987

Primitive Technology - "*The original digital technology*". Watts, 2000

Primitive Technology - "*First, not worst*" Scott Silsby, 1998

“Primitive technologies are skills, tools and knowledge with worldwide prehistoric context, employed to solve simple and complex problems, utilizing resources found in nature; as such, techniques applying them may vary with location.”

David Wescott, 2019

pri-mal – 1. relating to an early stage in evolutionary development;
2. essential; fundamental.

prim-i-tive - 1. of or existing in the beginning or the earliest times or ages;
2. ancient; original.

- **prime** – a whole number
- **prime** – the best - Grade A
- **primary** – colors that when mixed, create all other colors

* Contemporary definitions translate the word “*primitive*” as being dismissive and “*colonial*,” while references to “*ancestral*” are thought to be less “*offensive*” and more “*inclusive*.”

However, even the word “*ancestral*” is now being adopted for exclusive use for indigenous people only, as it implies a direct cultural lineage.

In addition, the term “*abo*” may be found in historic documents, but is no longer used. It came about by being used as a “term of endearment” among early practitioners/adopters of primitive tech as an associated field.

Primitive Technology- From Issue #1 *Primitive Technology Newsletter*, 1995

“Primitive Technologies are based on artifacts or generalized models that may be part of or derived from prehistory. The use of appropriate materials and procedures may be aided by the use modern tools during the learning stages. Higher levels stress the accuracy of researched material, tools, and procedures.”

Objective: To produce a plausible *replication/reconstruction/reenactment* of the original artifact/template, and gain insights and make inferences to related fields - social and applied sciences including: archaeology, anthropology, sociology, living history, recreation and others.

-- Levels I-III based on an artifact or generalized model that may be part of or derived from the prehistoric/ethnographic record.

-- Level II uses appropriate materials and procedures, may use modern tools during learning stages.

-- Level III stresses accurately researched material, tools, and procedures.

-- Level III also requires the application of the scientific method, as well as documentation and reporting of the process, and provides insight into possible applications to the many fields of social and applied sciences including: archaeology, anthropology, sociology, living history, recreation and others.

reproduction - dictionary - to make a copy duplicate, or representation; through replication, reconstruction or simulation.

replication/replica - dictionary- close to or exact copy or reproduction; falls within what is the range of variation of the original, based on tangible materials.

reconstruction - dictionary- from given or available information.; falls within what is the inferred range of variation of the original, based on non-tangible materials; does not imply complete accuracy .. one of many ways it could have been done.

simulation - only approximates attributes of the original; does not fall within the range of variation of the original.

reenactment - a process in which the participants mimic the actions involved in a specific event or series of events.

Primitive Skills Technology - Denotes skills and experience gained from studying and practicing innovative human developments from ancient to pre-modern, and how they were utilized in their relevant time period, to help cultures and societies live and advance.

For example, the ability to start a fire substantially changed the way humans could live and survive on our planet, and so by studying how this skill was accomplished we can then attempt to repeat or simulate it. Includes areas of expertise like: Ethnobotany, Stone Age Tools, Archaeology, etc.

Dale Kiselyk

PRIMITIVE SKILLS –

Primitive Skills usually refer to pre-industrial or stone age technologies used by early humans, and often recreated today using only natural materials and minimal tools.

Primitive skills may also be defined as a subset of ancestral skills, when ancestral skills include later traditions like agriculture, textiles, and medicine.

EARTHSKILLS -

The term “Earthsills” was first used in 1985 as the title for *The Earthskills Workshop* - a 3-day weekend program held semi-annually at Unicoi State Park in Helen, GA, founded by Robert Slack Jr., Stephen “Snow Bear” Taylor, and Darry Wood. The gathering’s focus was on skills of the southern Appalachian ecosystem and “*started to preserve and teach traditional nature-based skills that were disappearing from modern culture.*”

In 1990, “inspired by the success of *Rabbit Stick*,” this program was expanded to a 5-day event. The spring gathering was called *Rivercane Rendezvous*, and the fall event *Falling Leaves Rendezvous* – all under the Earthskills banner.

The first advertising for these expanded events describes *the practice of “earthsills” [as being] founded upon an understanding of nature: an intimate relationship with water, wind, fire, soil & rock, plants & animals. These elements provide all the necessities of food, clothing, shelter and much more; however, the knowledge of how to use these resources begins by expending our powers of awareness toward the natural environment. Earthskills are of the hand and eye, but also of the heart and mind.*”

April 1990 Brochure – “For five years now” - *format changed to a 5-day* encampment, “*Inspired by the success of the “Rabbit Stick Rendezvous,” the earthskills gathering in the Rocky Mtns., which became a national event....*”

Oct 1990 Brochure - listed as the 10th in a series of semi-annual programs.
“*Designed to reconnect us of today with some of the tools & techniques of an Earth-oriented lifestyle*”

Late 1990s – The title “Earthsills Network” begins to be used. The earthskills network (often referring to the community of gatherings and educators sharing “earthsills” or “ancestral skills”) began in 1985 in the United States.

April 1991 Brochure – “For six years now Darry Wood, Bob Slack and I [Snowbear Taylor] have instructed and invited guest instructors for the Earthskills Workshops ...we are eagerly planning the *second annual “Rivercane Rendezvous”....*”

April 1991 Brochure - “The Falling Leaves Rendezvous at Unicoi State Park is an outgrowth of a series of programs begun in 1985, known as the Earthskills Workshops, and hosted by Snow Bear, Darry Wood and Bob Slack Jr. These small gatherings have grown into this dynamic encampment of people from all over the U.S.A. and Canada who seek an expanded awareness of the natural world and the tools & techniques for living in balance and harmony therein.”

2013 Release by Snowbear – Earthskills Rendezvous Inc. started as a 501c3 non-profit organization - **Earthsills Mission** - *Supporting sustainable lifestyles through educational gatherings, practicing experiential archaeology, primitive technology, and bioecology.* 27th year of operation mentioned - Snowbear *revises the start date to 1984.*

EARTH SKILLS –

According to Jim Lowery, founder of *Earth Skills* (established in 1987), "earth skills are a comprehensive set of nature immersion, tracking, and wilderness survival techniques designed to connect individuals with the natural world through hands-on experience. These skills are rooted in indigenous traditions, specifically focusing on nurturing a deep, respectful relationship with the environment, often described as 'reaching back to move forward'".

Jack Mountain Bushcraft (1999) used the term to define its curriculum. *What is Earth Skills Education (ESE): Defining A Discipline* From <http://www.jackmtn.com/ese.html>

The more you carry in your head,
The less you carry on your back.

Earth Skills Education recognizes that there is inherent value in learning and understanding the skills of how to live in the natural world because it is, and has always been, our home.

The goal of Earth Skills Education is to teach and pass on the life skills of our forefathers. For more than 99% of human history, our species lived as small groups of hunter-gatherers in intimate contact with the land. Such skills and knowledge were not restricted to a portion of humanity; it existed everywhere amongst all races and cultures. The skills, techniques, and knowledge of the natural world were passed from generation to generation. But our modern world has abandoned both this knowledge and the idea of passing it on to future generations. Skills that were once common are now rare. For example, matches weren't invented until 1827, but today there are few who can light a fire without them.

Earth Skills Education as a discipline is new, and has not yet been widely recognized by the general public due to a lack of proper descriptive terminology and segmented understanding of what it entails. The terms that have fallen under its umbrella over time are many, including *traditional wilderness living skills, wilderness survival, bushcraft, living off the land, primitive skills, indigenous skills, woodlore*, and countless more. Many of these terms carry cultural baggage and are associated with stereotypes of unenlightened savages and paramilitary organizations, among other things, and as such they have hindered the acceptance and understanding of what ESE has to offer. What has been lacking is a general term to refer to the many disciplines that represent the life skills of our hunter/gatherer and early agricultural forefathers that isn't specific to one group of people. This lack brought about the beginning of Earth Skills Education as a term and an academic discipline.

While Earth Skills Education has some things in common with both Environmental and Outdoor Education it is a fundamentally different discipline. Outdoor education seeks to use the natural world as a vehicle for personal and group development. Environmental Education seeks to teach people about the environment as if we were removed from it. Both of these disciplines seek to separate us from the natural world, while Earth Skills Education encourages immersion into it. It has been our home since our species originated, and knowing how to live in it without harming it is a critically needed skill in this day and age.

ANCESTRAL SKILLS – ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE

Of the schools and organizations who have adopted the term to describe what they do, none adequately define the term.

Ancestral skills are practical knowledge, crafts, and survival abilities that people historically relied on to survive and thrive before modern industrial technology. These skills were typically passed down through generations and are closely connected to living with nature, self-sufficiency, and traditional ways of life, helping people meet basic needs such as food, shelter, health, tools, and social organization. (Chat GPT)

The term “ancestral skills” is used by a specific modern subculture and movement, mostly in North America, Europe, and Australia. It’s commonly used by teachers, schools, gatherings, and “rewilding” communities that focus on traditional land-based skills and traditional lifeways, wilderness skills, and crafts —not usually by historians or archaeologists. (Chat GPT)

A Simple Definition:

Ancestral skills are traditional practices and forms of knowledge developed by earlier generations and transmitted through families or communities to help people live sustainably with their environment.

They often emphasize:

- Direct relationship with nature
- Hands-on knowledge learned through experience
- Cultural traditions and community teaching
- Low-technology or pre-industrial methods

Ancestral Skills focus on skills inherited from one’s cultural ancestors or traditional societies, not necessarily only Stone Age technology... nature awareness, primitive technology, and traditional earth based living [survival] skills.

Ancestral skills: Knowledge and practices passed down from our ancestors. Ancestral skills refer to the traditional knowledge and practices passed down through generations of a specific culture or people. These skills are tied to heritage, culture, and place.

Practicing ancestral skill lifts the veil between humans and the natural world. Meeting your daily needs from the land requires you to know the personality and gifts of all the tree, plant, animal, water kin. To truly know them, you must gather many layers of shared stories. In these stories we make mistakes, learn, feel guilty, make interconnections, find awe and wonder, get filthy, and develop competency. There is so much learning behind the big moments when we finally make impressive clothing from deerskins we tanned, or successfully birth a friction fire coal in the pouring rain. All these stories we live out speak to the transformative process of becoming part of the land.

“Throughout history our ancestors have lived within nature and tended to the lands. Learning about how our ancestors lived reminds us that we can still know, honor, and tend to the land as our home. Connect with trees and other plants that can provide everything we need to stay alive: shelter, food, fire, and tools. Learn survival skills through hand-on ancestral living activities and exciting games while developing virtues such as mindfulness, self-confidence, and a grateful perspective on modern world conveniences.”

ABORIGINAL SKILLS REWILDING