Indigenous astronomies and progress in modern astronomy

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From an anthropological point of view, the whole concept of a "path of progress" in astronomical discovery is anathema, since it implicitly downgrades other cultural perspectives, such as the many "indigenous cosmologies" that still exist in the modern world. By doing so, one risks provoking those who hold them and—as is most obvious in places such as Hawaii where the two "world-views" come into direct contact—creating avoidable resistance to that very progress. The problem is complicated by the existence of "fringe" and "new-age" views that are increasingly confused with, and even passed off as, indigenous perceptions.

In a modern world where widespread public perceptions include many that are unscientific in the broadest sense of the term, I shall argue that there are actually a range of positive benefits for progress in scientific astronomy to be derived from the mutual awareness and comprehension of "genuine" cultural world-views whose goals—in common with those of modern science—are to make sense of the cosmos within which people live. While two-way education is clearly a prerequisite, I shall argue that the necessary level of reconciliation can only be achieved through more fundamental attempts by modern astronomers to understand, and ultimately to respect, both the non-western frameworks of thought that give rise to other cultural perspectives and the heritage associated with them. One of the most obvious potential benefits could derive from common attitudes towards the natural heritage of astronomy, namely dark skies.