



## **The Past is Our Future: Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge in Disaster Preparedness**

Presented by: **Mr. Christopher Sheach, CEM, MA, Paul Smith's College, Disaster Management and Response, Assistant Professor**

**Presentation Abstract:** In 2006, in the aftermath of the deadliest catastrophe of the 21st century (and one of the worst in recorded history), the people of Simeulue Island, Indonesia responded to warning signs in their environment and rapidly evacuated their homes. Only seven people died, in contrast to the thousands in villages on the neighboring island of Sumatra. This response was precipitated by an oral tradition, passing down early warning information for almost a century. The human ecology tradition of disaster research argues that human influence on the environment can increase disaster risk. This has driven the rhetoric of development and disaster risk reduction to disregard traditional practices. However, a growing body of evidence, especially in the fields of anthropology and sustainable development, suggests that, as on the island of Simeulue, indigenous cultures and traditions around the world show resilient adaptations learned from historical disasters which contain valuable, contextual, and relevant tools for disaster response management. Drawing from personal experience on Simeulue and neighboring islands in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, and implementation of community-based disaster preparedness planning around the world, this presentation

will discuss the importance of indigenous knowledge and the influence of cultural traditions on community engagement. It will provide practical examples and tools for engagement relevant to both the domestic and international context.

**Speaker Bio:** Chris Sheach, CEM® has twenty years of experience in disaster management, organizational leadership and humanitarian response. He has led disaster response operations for international NGOs on four continents, including hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunami, as well as in conflict zones. During his career, Chris has served on working groups with the Global Food Security and Global Shelter Clusters. He is a member of the Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP) and IAEM. Chris received his BA in Intercultural Studies from Houghton University (NY) and a MA in Disaster and Emergency Management from Royal Roads University (Canada). He is currently completing a PhD in Fire and Emergency Management Administration from Oklahoma State University and is Program Coordinator and Assistant Professor of Disaster Management and Response at Paul Smith's College in the Adirondacks of New York.