

THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION



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Biodiversity erosion is a serious concern for us—indigenous peoples—because the loss of flora, fauna, and microorganisms and the destruction of ecosystems are not just physical losses. This also means the loss of indigenous knowledge systems, cultures, languages, and our identities. Our very survival as peoples and cultures rests on how well we have conserved and sustainably used the biodiversity and ecosystems in our territories.

A significant number of the world's remaining indigenous peoples still live in their ancestral territories in spite of the tragic histories of colonization and displacement. Those of us who still do live there put a high priority on protecting and using sustainably the biodiversity in our lands and waters.

Most of our struggles are to protect and save our lands, territories, and resources and assert the right to use and control our indigenous knowledge systems and customary laws, which govern our relationship with nature and with the rest of humanity. Our contributions seek to ensure the protection and conservation of biodiversity, as well as to strengthen the links between biodiversity and the development of our culture and identity. So, as we celebrate the International Year of Biodiversity, we need to be reminded that indigenous peoples still inhabit territories that contain some of the richest biodiversity on this planet, as well as the knowledge systems and cultures that come along with its conservation and use.

Clearly, this is the proof of the long-term viability of our traditional values and practices of stewardship, reciprocity, and integration with nature. It also confirms a highly advanced knowledge of how to be in the world; the rules, limits, and practices of sustainability. Studies (Maffi 2002) have shown that “small-scale societies with a history of continued and unchallenged occupation of given territories will over time tend to develop and maintain detailed and accurate knowledge about their ecological niches, as well as sustainable ways of extracting, managing natural resources. Their ways of speaking, oral traditions, and verbal art forms will transmit this knowledge.”

Biodiversity and Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

The links between biodiversity and cultural and linguistic diversity are not lost in the biodiversity and culture debates. It should not be difficult to understand why the vitality of indigenous languages is directly proportional to the vitality of biological diversity. The disappearance of species of plants, animals, or insects and the destruction of an ecosystem means the disappearance of related languages and knowledge. These knowledge services provided by biodiversity are still very much unappreciated and undervalued. Parts of the living library of life sciences are encoded in the language and minds of indigenous peoples, who are still dependent on biodiversity for their continuing existence.

“Linguistic ecologies and biological ecologies are mutually related through human knowledge, use and management of the environment and through the languages used to convey this knowledge and praxis...” (Maffi 2002).

The multiple crises of biodiversity loss, ecosystem destruction, and overall resource depletion, as well as climate change and the global economic crisis, tell us that we cannot continue with business as usual. This is the time to shift our thinking and ways toward a holistic development path that is influenced by the ecosystems-based approach and human-rights-based approach. There are many efforts toward developing measures of progress beyond the gross domestic product. The Human Development Index, Happy Planet Index, and Gross National Happiness are just a few examples. The aim of these efforts is to factor in the wear and tear of natural capital and social costs into national systems of accounts. The shift toward a different paradigm requires us to develop ways of measuring progress, well-being, and sustainability. This is where the development of indicators comes in.

Indigenous peoples, together with the Permanent Forum, have started work toward the development of indicators of indigenous peoples’ sustainability and well-being. It is a collaboration between the IIFB (International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity) Working Group on Indicators, Indigenous Peoples’ International Center for Policy Research and Education, and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. As biodiversity loss means the loss of not only natural capital but social capital, indicators reflecting this loss have to be developed. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has ventured into developing indicators.

One proxy indicator to measure biodiversity loss is the status and trends of linguistic diversity and number of speakers of indigenous languages. For the 2011–20 targets, the IIFB is proposing two more proxy indicators for consideration. One is the status and trends in the practice of traditional occupations; the second is the status and trends in land-use patterns and land security in indigenous territories. These efforts are not just meant to add indicators, but also to reflect the inextricable link between biodiversity and indigenous peoples’ well-being and sustainability.

There is a proposal to establish an Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. This is a body like the IPCC of the Climate Change Convention. This entity should ensure that indigenous knowledge holders and experts are included as experts. Interdisciplinary and intercultural approaches in research increase the chances of producing more

holistic knowledge that accommodates other world views. Doing our own research, which is guided by our own epistemologies and our own ways of knowing and understanding, will produce knowledge that can help save the world’s remaining biodiversity and the cultural diversity that comes with it. We argue that the reciprocal interactions between the social, cultural, and ecological spheres should be examined and addressed because it is the balanced interaction between these that brings about our well-being.

The whole issue of access and benefit-sharing is another major concern of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples are actively engaging in the negotiations for an international legal regime on ABS (access and benefit-sharing) at the CBD. Our efforts focus on various issues. One is ensuring that our free, prior, and informed consent is obtained for anyone conducting research and seeking access to and use of biogenetic resources from our territories and using our indigenous knowledge. We also would like to ensure that an ABS international regime will recognize and reinforce the protection of indigenous peoples’ knowledge systems, as well as the use of customary systems of protection of genetic resources and associated knowledge.

Conclusion

The celebration of the International Year of Biodiversity provides indigenous peoples many opportunities to articulate their perspectives on biocultural diversity and the linkages between biodiversity and their own development. Our efforts to date have succeeded in creating changes in approaches as well as thinking, but much more work needs to be done. It is our hope that states, intergovernmental systems, NGOs, academia, and the private sector will increase their efforts in understanding our concerns and using the ecosystem- and human-rights-based approach in meeting the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Bibliography

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