

THE UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

TOGETHER WE ACHIEVE

Backgrounder – Conservation and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

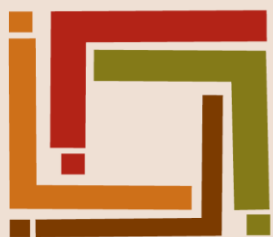
Protection, preservation and management of ecosystems, natural habitats and animal species and maintaining biological diversity is a cross-cutting issue. It is also linked with many global problems facing us today such as deforestation, desertification, depletion of fisheries, soil erosion, misuse of crop lands and threats to animal habitats and populations. It is estimated that indigenous peoples own and/or occupy approximately one quarter of the Earth's surface. This land area holds most of the earth's remaining biodiversity. It also intersects with about 40 per cent of all protected areas. Some estimates suggest that 50 per cent of protected areas worldwide have been established on the traditional territories of indigenous peoples. This is even higher in the Americas, where over 90 per cent of conservation areas in Central America are on indigenous territories. This highlights the great contribution of indigenous peoples to conservation.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples provides a framework for the dignity, survival and well-being of indigenous peoples. It also reiterates the rights of indigenous peoples to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally, owned, occupies or otherwise used or acquired. Further that indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and productive capacity of their lands, territories and resources, and that States shall give legal recognition and protection to these lands, territories and resources with due respect to the customs, traditions and land tenure systems of the indigenous peoples concerned. Further that indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development or use of their lands, territories and other resources, and participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights.

Challenges

A fundamental challenge to the vital role of indigenous peoples in conservation of their lands, territories and resources is that many countries do not recognize the rights of indigenous peoples to their lands, territories and resources, and as custodians of the environment and ecosystems. Where





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co-management of national parks or other protected areas does take place, unequal power relations often mean that indigenous peoples are not granted their rights. Indigenous areas are often included or demarcated as national parks or other conservation areas, with indigenous peoples rights to their lands, territories and resources ignored; customary livelihood activities restricted or even declared illegal; and/or the potential for future resource-extraction that carries negative health and environmental risks.

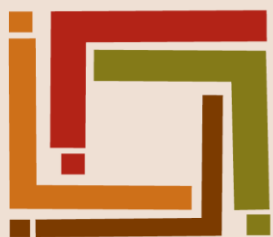
Another key challenge is the prevailing paradigm that humans and their activities are perceived as incompatible with wildlife conservation and damaging to nature. Conservation programmes based on this concept of exclusion not only fail to recognize that indigenous peoples, through their traditional livelihoods and practices, have engaged in land management and conservation practices for millennia, but also frequently lead to gross violations of the rights of indigenous peoples. These include forced displacement and evictions from their territories; criminalization and destruction of livelihoods; loss of rights to lands, waters and resources and sacred sites and violence and extrajudicial killings of environmental defenders.

The interests of indigenous peoples may conflict with conservationist goals. Conservation projects may be unsuccessful at best and risk perpetuating colonial legacies at worst.

To develop appropriate conservation measures, indigenous peoples must be equal partners throughout any processes that may affect their lands, territories and resources. Conservation partnerships will only be successful if the rights, knowledge systems and practices of Indigenous peoples are fully acknowledged and included in conservation projects and plans to ensure environmental sustainability.

A UN DESA expert group meeting on conservation in Nairobi, Kenya in January 2019 emphasised the importance of the effective participation of indigenous peoples in decision-making at the international level, as well as at the national and local levels. Experts noted that indigenous peoples had made some progress in international forums relating to conservation, such as the Working Group on Article 8 (j)





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and Related Provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The meeting also highlighted the need to promote the participation and capacity-building of indigenous peoples, especially indigenous women, in the design, implementation and management of protected areas. Indigenous peoples' representative institutions were recognized as a key prerequisite for successful conservation, as they help ensure that indigenous people can participate effectively in conservation efforts, but also to ensure that indigenous peoples have access to fair benefits of the sustainable use of natural and other resources.

Benefits and good practices in conservation

There are many benefits arising from indigenous-led or co-managed conservation projects and processes. States gain additional insights through indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge of local areas and long-term resource strategies adapted over thousands of years. Indigenous peoples can gain legal recognition of land rights, recognition of the value of traditional knowledge and practices, employment opportunities, and self-determination over lands to which they are spiritually and culturally connected.

