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**Local & Indigenous Knowledge of the Natural World:  
An Overview of Programmes and Projects**

An Information Note by the Secretariat of  
UNESCO

## **BACKGROUND**

If recent years have seen a widening interest in the contribution of different knowledge systems to the understanding of the natural environment and biodiversity management, UNESCO's recognition of the importance of this theme dates back more than half-a-century. Assessments of traditional water use practices in arid and semi-arid zones featured in several symposia and reviews of research during the 1950s. During the same period, in the humid tropics, an ethnobotanical survey in Southeast Asia was carried out under the aegis of the UNESCO Office in Jakarta.

From the early 1970s on, the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme has contributed to work on traditional ecological knowledge, through a series of field studies on local and indigenous peoples and their decision-making and resource-management systems. Projects encompassed such topics as: traditional medicinal plants in Caribbean and Mediterranean islands; the use of a traditional, community gathering – the Maori Hui – for discussing research and development plans in a coastal marine area in New Zealand; leadership, channels of communication and decision-making among pastoralists in northern Kenya, as ingredients for shaping extension programmes; understanding and adapting traditional energy-efficient agricultural systems ('chinampa') in wetland areas in Mexico; and people-forest interactions in East Kalimantan in Indonesia.

Within the coastal and marine sciences, cooperation with the International Association for Biological Oceanography included a 1983 study on 'Traditional knowledge and management of marine coastal systems'. In the same year, a regional seminar on that subject in Asia and the Pacific was organized by the UNESCO Regional Office in Jakarta, with follow-up materials including an anthology on traditional marine resource management in the Pacific.

The People and Plants initiative was launched in 1992 by the World Wide Fund for Nature, UNESCO-MAB and the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, with the aim of promoting ethnobotany and the equitable and sustainable use of plant resources. In co-operating with local, national and regional institutions of research, community development, higher education and park management, People and Plants sought to promote local community development programmes on the improved management of plant resources, to encourage greater involvement of local people in devising and implementing strategies for the conservation of

biological diversity, and to increase local capacities and capabilities for research, training and management of natural resources.

### **RECENT INITIATIVES INVOLVING UNESCO**

The World Conference on Science (Budapest 1999), organised by UNESCO and ICSU, brought the issue of the interrelationship between ‘Science and Other Systems of Knowledge’ to the fore. Paragraph 26 of the Declaration notes: *“traditional and local knowledge systems ...make and historically have made, a valuable contribution to science and technology, and that there is a need to preserve, protect, research and promote this cultural heritage and empirical knowledge”*. It was further recommended at the WCS that special action must be taken to conserve and cultivate this fragile and diverse world heritage, in the face of globalization and the growing dominance of a single view of the natural world as espoused by science. In addition specific recommendations (paras 85-87) were advanced in order to encourage governments and non-governmental organizations to promote understanding of, and sustain and support, traditional knowledge and its transmission including recognition of the vital contribution made by women.

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD, Johannesburg 2002), traditional knowledge was successfully mainstreamed throughout the Plan of Implementation. Specific entries on ‘traditional/indigenous knowledge’ or ‘indigenous and local resource management’ appear in no less than 19 paragraphs covering a broad range of concerns: poverty eradication [6e, h]; natural disaster mitigation [35f]; climate change [36i]; agriculture [38d, h, r]; mountain ecosystems [40e]; biodiversity [42h, j, k, l, p]; forests [43h]; health [47h]; Africa [57, 58d, 64c]; and science and technology [103a].

At the WSSD, the High-level Round Table on Cultural Diversity and Biodiversity, organised by UNESCO and UNEP, highlighted indigenous knowledge as a bridge between these diversities. UNESCO is following up through a Joint Main Line of Action on the Linkages between Biodiversity and Cultural Diversity.

### **CURRENT PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS ON TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE**

Currently, traditional knowledge is explicitly included as a partial or main programmatic focus of the following programmes and projects within UNESCO:

- The Division of Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue

- The Intangible Cultural Heritage Section
- The Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) Project

Traditional knowledge may also be addressed from time to time in other programming areas of UNESCO, particularly where indigenous peoples have been involved in activities undertaken.

#### Division of Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue

UNESCO defends and promotes a cultural approach to development. The goal is to integrate culture as a prerequisite and a basis for development project design, in order to endeavour “change in continuity”, to respect peoples’ way of life and thought, and to build a mutually agreed upon and sustainable development. In this context, UNESCO emphasizes the role of culture as a mainspring for development.

The Convention on the Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Contents and Artistic Expressions, to be examined at the next UNESCO General Conference in October 2005, is an important instrument for ensuring the rights of indigenous peoples to create and disseminate in a fair environment their cultural goods and services, as well as their traditional expressions. The Convention provides a framework for Member states to formulate policies in favour of the plurality of cultural expressions. It aims at ensuring that indigenous peoples can continue to benefit from their traditional knowledge and culture, while also adopting external cultural elements.

The Division contributes to the Joint Main Line of Action on Linkages between Cultural and Biological Diversity, as part of which an Experts Meeting was recently organised on “Safeguarding the Transmission of Local & Indigenous Knowledge of Nature” (April 2005, Aichi).

#### Intangible Heritage Section: Programme activities regarding traditional knowledge

Traditional knowledge (knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe) is one domain of the intangible cultural heritage covered by UNESCO’s Programme for the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Several of the proclaimed Masterpieces in the 2001 and 2003 Proclamations are expressions of traditional knowledge. The proclamation requires the elaboration of an action plan ensuring the safeguarding, protecting and revitalizing of the Masterpieces.

In the framework of the promotion of the 2003 Convention, UNESCO will assist Member States (with special emphasis on LDCs and countries in post-conflict situation) in strengthening capacities to prepare and implement effective actions for the safeguarding of their intangible cultural heritage. Capacity-building activities will enhance and renew transmission systems of intangible cultural heritage, especially to the youth, sustain the practices of woman bearers of intangible cultural heritage, and highlight the role of intangible cultural heritage in economic and social development. Assistance will be provided to Member States so as to develop safeguarding measures for the domains of intangible cultural heritage enumerated in the Convention (social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, skills related to traditional craftsmanship, oral traditions and expressions, traditional music, dance and theatre).

In its preamble, the 2003 Convention recognizes that “communities, in particular indigenous communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, play an important role in the production, safeguarding, maintenance and recreation of the intangible cultural heritage”. The Convention states that “the State Parties shall endeavour to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management” (Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, Article 15). UNESCO invites indigenous peoples to take a proactive approach towards greater involvement at all stages of safeguarding their intangible cultural heritage.

UNESCO’s Offices in Havana and San José, who coordinate a project to inventory the intangible heritage in nine countries of Latin America, provide one concrete example of the Organization’s efforts to safeguard and protect intangible heritage. The study carried out jointly with the national commissions of the countries concerned, focuses upon knowledge related to important cultural manifestations. Nahoá, Mayangna, Chortis, Lenca, Miskito, Paya and Garifuna communities in Honduras and Nicaragua are working with UNESCO to inventory their intangible heritage. The Garífuna culture is inscribed as one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage. In Guatemala, the project involves

the four peoples who are the foundations of the country (Mayas, Xincas, Garifunas and Mestizo), and in Panama, the cultural manifestations of groups such as the Gnobe-Buglé, have been carefully recorded and described. The Congos and the Kunas from Panama have also participated in activities such as the Tower of Babel project that has involved them in disseminating information about their cultural heritage.

Within the Endangered Languages Project, a survey is being carried out of national or local cultural policies aimed at protecting, preserving, and reassessing linguistic diversity, both the language as such as well as oral traditions, focusing in particular upon those of the more vulnerable Indigenous communities. The result of this study will be published as part of the publication on endangered languages and oral traditions in the Amazon sub-region.

#### Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) Project

UNESCO launched the Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) project in 2002 as one of a new generation of cross-cutting projects to heighten interdisciplinary and intersectoral action (cf. [www.unesco.org/links](http://www.unesco.org/links)). Contributing to the Millennium Development Goals of poverty eradication and environmental sustainability, the project aims to empower local and indigenous peoples in biodiversity governance by advocating full recognition of their unique knowledge, know-how and practices.

The LINKS project was born in part out of the debate generated by UNESCO's inclusion of indigenous knowledge on the agenda of the "World Conference on Science" (Budapest 1999). Placing scientific and indigenous knowledge side-by-side triggered considerable discussion about the status and validity of these 'other knowledge systems' (Nakashima 2000). Responding to these concerns, the International Council for Science (ICSU), with the support of UNESCO-LINKS, produced a report on "*Science, Traditional Knowledge and Sustainable Development*" that was launched in Johannesburg during the World Summit on Sustainable Development, and that clarifies the relationship between science, traditional knowledge and pseudoscience (ICSU/UNESCO 2002).

Since its inception, LINKS combines field-based action with efforts to raise awareness and build dialogue among indigenous knowledge holders, scientists and the public at large. A number of field projects have been established. In the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve in Nicaragua, the Mayangna people have requested that their knowledge be recorded in the form

of an ‘encyclopedia of nature’ that would serve both to educate their children, as well as affirm their status as knowers and managers of their lands and resources. Work has begun in the community of Arandak with an initial focus on elucidating the economically important category of ‘things of the water’, that encompasses numerous types of fish, but also extends to turtles. Another Latin American project is underway with the Mapuche Pewenche in Chile. Working with the Asociación de Comunidades Mapuche pewenche Markan Kura, a local indigenous NGO, this project focuses on the many facets of Mapuche knowledge. The project is centered on the Monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria imbricata*), a keystone species for the ecological system, and a core element in Mapuche society.

Other LINKS field projects have been initiated with the fishers of Charan District, Bangladesh, the Cree First Nation hunter-trappers of subarctic Quebec, Canada, the Even and Koryak herders and hunters of Kamchatka, Russia, and the Pacific island peoples of Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Palau. In the framework of the latter field project, LINKS launched the first volume in its publication series *Knowledges of Nature*. This book, entitled “*Reef and Rainforest: An Environmental Encyclopedia of Marovo Lagoon, Solomon Islands*” (Hviding 2005), provides a meticulous documentation of Solomon Islander knowledge of reef and land topography, and of marine and terrestrial animals and plants. Containing more than 1200 Marovo terms with descriptions in both Marovo and English, it is destined for use in local schools, where there is a dearth of indigenous language materials, and provides a first basis for dialogue between scientists, managers and the Marovo peoples.

In addition to empowering local & indigenous communities in biodiversity governance, through their recognition as knowledge-holders, the LINKS project also seeks to maintain the vitality of local knowledge within communities. Indigenous and local rural peoples are often marginalized by mainstream society. In the formal school system, this results in the exclusion, and even denigration, of local knowledge, values and worldviews. The resulting alienation, loss of identity and self-esteem, is devastating for indigenous youth and for the society as a whole. In several of its field projects, LINKS seeks to strengthen ties between elders and youth in order to reinforce the transmission of indigenous knowledge and know-how. One approach targeting youth has been the use of new information and communication technologies, such as multimedia CD-ROMs, as a vehicle for conveying traditional knowledge. The LINKS CD-ROM series thus far includes two interactive CD-ROMs, the first on Aboriginal Australian life-worlds entitled “*Dream Trackers – Yapa Art and Knowledge of*

*the Australian Desert*” (Glowzewski 2000), and the second, on Pacific Islander knowledge of ocean navigation and the arts of canoe construction and sailing, entitled “*The Canoe is the People*” that is to be launched on 12 October at UNESCO’s General Conference.

Despite broadened support, the issue of local & indigenous knowledge continues to be contentious and is plagued with misconceptions and false stereotypes. To build awareness and promote dialogue and mutual understanding, the LINKS project has organized international seminars and workshops, and prepared publications on the theme. In the framework of the World Water Forum (WWF), LINKS organised workshops on water and indigenous peoples at the Second WWF in The Hague in 2000, and at the Third WWF in Kyoto in 2003<sup>1</sup>. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg 2002), LINKS organised a session with ICSU on “Linking Traditional and Scientific Knowledge for Sustainable Development”. A further international seminar, “NGOs, Indigenous Peoples and Local Knowledge”, was organized with the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS-France) in UNESCO Headquarters in 2003, leading to the publication of a thematic issue of the *International Social Science Journal* (ISSJ) on “*NGOs and the Governance of Biodiversity*” (Roué 2003). An earlier issue of ISSJ was produced on “*Indigenous Knowledge*” (Agrawal 2002). Most recently, LINKS organised, in cooperation with CNRS, and in the framework of the international conference on “Biodiversity: Science and Governance”, a workshop on “*Sustaining Biological and Cultural Diversity: The challenge of local knowledge, practice and worldviews*”.

Rural populations and indigenous peoples are often marginalized from governance processes, such as decisions pertaining to access, use and management of land and resources. Yet such decisions are critical for their economic, social and cultural well-being. By promoting local and indigenous knowledge systems, the LINKS project argues for the rights of local & indigenous peoples to not only participate in these processes, but also shape them to their own needs and aspirations.

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<sup>1</sup> in collaboration with the Académie de l’eau (France); National Museum of Ethnology (Osaka, Japan); Kyoto University (Japan); Central America-Global Water Partnership (Costa Rica); Center for Respect of Life and Environment (USA); United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America; Fundacion Solon (Bolivia); Tebtebba Foundation (Philippines); Wageningen University (Holland).