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Protecting Indigenous Languages and Knowledges: Biocultural Keys to Climate Justice



“Indigenous languages are not languages from the past but from the present.”

United Nations General Assembly-
High Level Event on The International
Year of Indigenous Languages.

On February 1, 2019, the United Nations General Assembly in New York City hosted a high-level event to launch The International Year of Indigenous Languages. Resolution 71/178 of December 2016, appointed the year 2019, as the international year of Indigenous Languages. Heads of state, indigenous groups, non- governmental organizations and member states gathered at the plenary session to talk about the importance of protecting Mother

Earth's biocultural diversity heritage through the preservation of indigenous languages and the knowledge embedded in them. Indigenous languages are being eroded by multiple drivers, including acculturation and forced assimilation into settler colonial and Eurocentric modernist societies. The great majority of indigenous nations have been known for sustainably cultivating and nurturing the lands on which they depend, for thousands of years. But with the dispossession of land at the hands of states, settler societies and corporations, often comes the destruction of indigenous language, culture, autonomy and institutions which are the carriers of indigenous ecological knowledge and the basis for communal forms of integrated ecosystem management. Intergenerational transmission of indigenous identity is also complicated by the displacement of indigenous youth from their ancestral cultural and territorial relations, thereby rendering the social reproduction of indigenous land based cultures and their ecosystems vulnerable to ethnocide and ecocide (see Maffi and Woodley's *Biocultural Diversity Conservation: A Global Sourcebook*, 2010). As a native citizen of Ecuador, my heart must speak in advocacy of our beautiful Amazon rainforest and the Andean mountain range, with

their spectacular and unique variety of Earth regulating climates, with dramatically contrasting ecosystems that range from rapidly melting glaciers in mountainous areas to tropical jungles threatened by extractivism. And it is only through engagement with the indigenous peoples of the Andean-Amazonian region and their communities that we are able to understand, communicate and learn the sacred value of one of Pachamama's (Mother Earth) most bioculturally diverse, yet vulnerable regions. If we do not acknowledge and protect these cultures, the fragile ecosystems that they have nurtured for thousands of years, and which we all depend on, will cease to exist—and along with them, so will we. Acknowledging that our livelihoods are ultimately dependent on the capacity of Mother Earth to maintain healthy regenerative cycles, which are the basis of indispensable common goods, like water and forests, on which we all depend, is the first step to understanding the value priorities of indigenous cultures and knowledge systems. These value systems are embodied in Indigenous languages, which contain practical knowledge intimately interwoven with the nurturance of the local biological diversity with which they have co-evolved. Indigenous languages and

knowledges are thus crucial in teaching us how we connect to the Earth and to basic resources without which we cannot live.



In Ecuador, one of the most biodiverse places in the world, the Yasuní –ITT (Ishpingo-Tambococha Tiputini) National Park sits over approximately 900 million barrels of crude oil. After a series of campaigns to protect the national park, often led by indigenous peoples, the extraction of oil has nevertheless already taken place. This instantly has translated in communities undergoing cultural change, which in turn reflect language loss and practices. The original languages and knowledge systems are being eroded and continue to face these threats. The

indigenous nations of the region, mainly the Wuaorani, but also the Kichwa, Shuar, Cofán, and Secoya, whom have been known for sustainably nurturing and looking out for their land are threatened with the loss of their land-based identities and ecosystem-based livelihoods (see <https://proxy.eplanete.net/galleries/broceliande7/indigenous-people-yasuni> and <http://www.ejolt.org/2012/05/yasuni-good-living/>). Regardless of us being urban or rural dwellers, it is crucial to recognize the era of the Anthropocene as a planetary and ecological crisis bringing all sorts of economic and environmental consequences. Accumulation of wealth by dispossession of indigenous lands is eroding our species ecological memory and biocultural heritage of which indigenous peoples and languages are the oldest living repositories. The environment, languages and its speakers, all connect to the synergy of biocultural diversity preservation. Linguistic diversity or *language diversity* is a principle of nature conservation we ought to embed our societies in. Around the world more than 90 percent of the indigenous languages are threatened. We forget languages are the systems of comprehension, appreciation, alternative sustainable solutions and

knowledge of our environments.

Indigenous languages are a key ingredient to fight climate change, the transmitters of medical solutions and most importantly the revitalizing tools of ancient practices, incentivizing inclusion and bringing forward all the applicable mindful ways of using resources sustainably and appropriately. The relationship between biodiversity and languages is unique; it is essential to defend it. The Anthropocene era shows the depletion of natural resources by human kind; how ecoregions around the world have been taken over by an extractivist model reliant, for example, on large scale industrial logging and mining, land grabs, use of pesticides, deforestation, and overfishing. Indigenous languages are encoded with historical and unique indigenous grounded experiences of land-based spirituality. In fact, when these areas lose the sacred values given to them in indigenous languages and spiritualities, they become desacralized and easily commodified, thereby losing their wholeness as they are reduced from living spaces to mere natural resources for economic growth. Indigenous languages are the pathway to climate justice. Societies, governments, educational institutions and grassroots organizations have the duty to

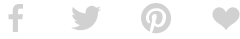
advocate for the revitalization of indigenous knowledge and languages, without which ecosystems on which are the futures depend, are compromised. Restoring communal self-determination for indigenous peoples through support of indigenous social movements as well as social, environmental and public policies that will protect biocultural diversity is fundamental to address the biodiversity and climate crisis of the Anthropocene. This planetary crisis must be addressed through biocultural ethics and through firm advocacy. Additionally, biocultural ethics should intersect with culture, and the physical and biological dimensions to help protect and defend our Pachamama.



2019 | INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF
Indigenous Languages

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