

WHO ARE THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

People everywhere, often without realizing it, have been influenced by the cultures and achievements of indigenous peoples—through the foods on our tables, the words in our languages and the medicines we use daily for everything from headaches to heart disease.

Many of the world's staple foods, such as peppers, potatoes, lentils, peas, sugar cane, garlic and tomatoes, were first cultivated by indigenous peoples. From the various indigenous languages of the Americas come familiar words like canoe, barbecue, squash, powwow and moccasin. An estimated 75 per cent of the world's plant-based pharmaceuticals, including aspirin, digi-

Indigenous People

talis and quinine, have been derived from medicinal plants found in tribal areas. Indeed, the contribution of indigenous peoples to modern civilization is pervasive.

Indigenous peoples are descendants of the original inhabitants of many lands, strikingly varied in their cultures, religions and patterns of social and economic organization. At least 5,000 indigenous groups can be distinguished by linguistic and cultural differences and by geographical separation. Some are hunters and gatherers, while others live in cities and participate fully in the culture of their national society. But all indigenous peoples retain a strong sense of their distinct cultures, the most salient feature of which is a special relationship to the land.

How many indigenous peoples are there, and where do they live?

The world's estimated 300 million indigenous people are spread across the world in more than 70 countries. Among them are the Indians of the Americas, the Inuit and Aleutians of the circumpolar region, the Saami of northern Europe, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia and the Maori of New Zealand.

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A Veddha tribesman—by artist G.S. Fernando

More than 60 per cent of Bolivia's population is indigenous, and indigenous peoples make up roughly half the populations of Guatemala and Peru. China and India together have more than 150 million indigenous and tribal people. About 10 million indigenous people live in Myanmar.

What are the living conditions of indigenous peoples?

Despite their diversity, they face similar problems. Under the march of colonialism, the spread of non-indigenous religions and the relentless pace of development and modernization, indigenous groups have seen their traditional cultures eroded and their landholdings confiscated or signed away as part of the economic coercion to which they were subjected. This legacy has helped to make indigenous peoples some of the most disadvantaged groups on Earth.

Most of India's tribal people live below the poverty line.

The life expectancy of indigenous people in northern Russia is 18 years less than the national average.

Unemployment among Australia's Aborigines is five times the national average.

More generally, indigenous people who are integrated into a national society face discrimination and exploitation in housing, education and in matters having to do with language and religion. Those remaining in their traditional territories face disruption of their cultures and forced displacement as their lands and natural resources are claimed for national development. It is no exaggeration to say that some indigenous peoples live under the threat of extinction.

What is the status of indigenous people?

The growing awareness about human rights in the post-war era of the past 40 years or so has not been matched by parallel progress in enhancing the rights of indigenous groups.

However, a new activism by Indian, tribal and aboriginal groups in the last decade or so has produced signs that a different attitude is developing.

In 1979, the Parliament of Denmark granted self-government to Greenland and jurisdiction over education, health care, social welfare and economic development.

Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia and Mexico have adopted far-reaching laws on the rights of indigenous people.

The Government of New Zealand and the National Maori Congress are engaged in a constructive dialogue that aims to resolve a number of disputes, including the issue of self-rule.

In Canada, one million indigenous people, among them Mohawk, Cree and Inuit, have increased their visibility, attained a level of political power previously unimagined and used their newfound position to protect their lands and carve out new social and economic gains.

Still, despite these successes and their growing political and organizational competence, indigenous peoples continue to lose their lands, resources and identities.

What are the concerns of indigenous peoples?

Among the issues that concern indigenous peoples are:

land and resources, human rights, internal colonization, self-development, environment, discrimination, health, education, language, cultural survival, intellectual property rights, social and economic conditions.

Indigenous people see themselves as the legitimate claimants to their territories and natural resources, and consider control over local economy, social planning, land use and taxation essential to their existence. Thus they are seeking greater degrees of autonomy and self-rule.

The lives of the 50 million indigenous people who inhabit the world's tropical rainforests are threatened by deforestation. But while indigenous people are on the front lines of environmental degradation, they also have a vital role to play in environmental protection. For centuries, they have engaged in sustainable land management and land use in the areas in which they live.

What are indigenous peoples doing to achieve their goals?

Indigenous peoples have been demanding justice from the international community for many years. They have organized locally, nationally and regionally and are active in the international diplomatic arena, seeking respect for their cultures and ways of life and full participation in the decisions that affect them.

Twelve indigenous peoples' organizations have consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

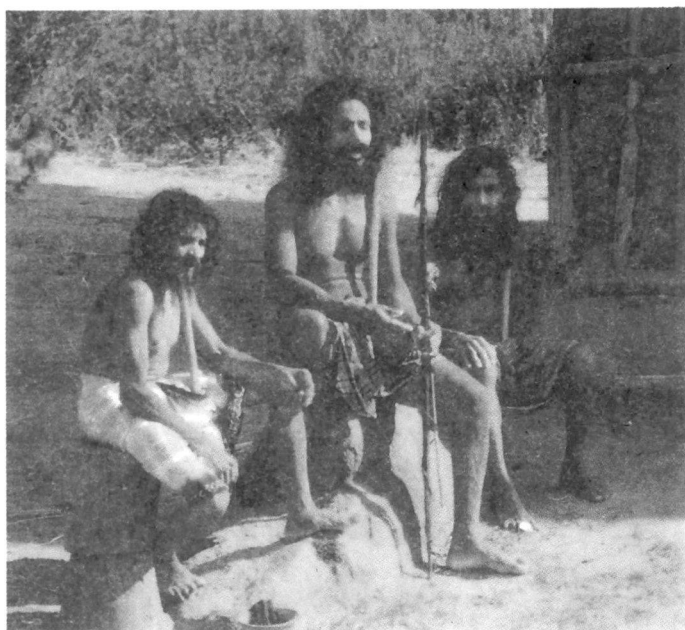
What is the United Nations doing for indigenous peoples?

The United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations is the centre of indigenous rights activities within the United Nations system. The Working Group:

- reviews Government policies covering the protection of the human rights of indigenous peoples;

- makes recommendations to the United Nations Sub-commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities and to the United Nations Commission of Human Rights, which Promote action on issues related to indigenous peoples; and

- is drafting, as part of its mandate to develop international standards concerning the rights of indig-



A group of Dambana Veddass

enous peoples, a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which is expected to be completed in 1993.

Increasingly, indigenous organizations make use of the United Nations complaints procedures for human rights violations. For example, the "1503" procedure established by ECOSOC enables indigenous organizations to voice their concerns before the United Nations and to appeal for redress.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) was the first international body to take steps to promote the rights of indigenous groups. The ILO has also launched a number of technical assistance programmes.

What is the purpose of the International Year?

The 1993 International Year for the World's Indigenous People was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly "to strengthen international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by indigenous communities in areas such as human rights, the environment, development, education and health".

The Year was requested by indigenous organizations and is the result of their efforts to secure their cultural integrity and status into the twenty-first century. It aims above all to encourage a new relationship between States and indigenous peoples, and between the international community and indigenous peoples- a new partnership based on mutual respect and understanding.

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To assist with the Year's programmes and activities, and to foster educational and cultural events, the Secretary-General of the United Nations opened the Voluntary Fund for the International Year for the World's Indigenous People, to which Governments are invited to contribute.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

"I am trying to save the knowledge that the forests and this planet are alive, to give it back to you who have lost the understanding"—

-a Kayapo (Brazil) Indian leader

In their farming and in their faith, indigenous peoples exercise vital stewardship over the Earth's resources and environment. Their traditional agricultural methods promote land conservation and biological diversity. Their religious practices often involve setting aside forests and other lands as sacred preserves for wildlife, spirits and deities. Where most of humankind tends to seek dominion over the natural world, indigenous peoples generally favour a holistic approach that is the very essence of sustainable development - development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

With such crises as global warming, deforestation, desertification and depletion of the ozone layer surging to the top of the international agenda, indigenous peoples find themselves in an ironic position. Once dismissed as too "primitive" to cope with modernization, and for centuries the victims of discrimination, land seizures and worse, indigenous peoples have begun to be recognized for their prowess at environmental management and acknowledged as key players in the global effort to chart a more hopeful course of development for the future of humanity.

The contribution that indigenous peoples can make to sustainable development, and the link between sustainable development and the need to respect the human rights of indigenous peoples, are subjects certain to gain considerable attention during 1993, the International Year for the World's Indigenous People.

Indigenous Peoples at the Earth summit

Indigenous peoples adopted a high profile at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992. Many indigenous groups attended the Earth Summit, while others voiced their concerns at the Global Forum,

a series of events, seminars and exhibits held across town from the Summit.

Increasingly at ease in the world of international diplomacy, indigenous peoples left an imprint on two of the Summit's main achievements: the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, a broad statement of principles outlining the rights and responsibilities of States towards the environment; and Agenda 21, a far-reaching blueprint for action.

Principle 22 of the Rio Declaration states, "Indigenous people and their communities...have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should recognize and duly support their identity, culture and interests and enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development".

Agenda 21 also views indigenous people as fundamental to environmental recovery and recommends using their experience and knowledge in sustainable development. Among other things, the document calls for greater empowerment of indigenous communities, more and better safeguards against environmentally unsound activities that could affect indigenous peoples, or their lands, and improvements in the overall quality of life of indigenous peoples.

Victims of Environmental Degradation

An enormous gap remains, however, between the goals set forth in Rio and the plight of indigenous peoples. In the last 40 years, indigenous lands have come under relentless pressure as Governments, development banks, national and transnational corporations and entrepreneurs search for resources to meet the growing demands of high-consumption industrialized societies and the needs of fast-swelling populations in developing countries. Once largely inaccessible, these regions and their mineral deposits, hydroelectric potential, hardwoods, oil and new farm and pasture lands have been put within reach by modern technology. The long tenure of indigenous peoples upon their lands has proved to be little protection.

Mercury used by gold-miners has poisoned nearly 1,500 kilometres of the Amazon river systems. Miners have also brought unfamiliar diseases to the region; many of Brazil's Yanomami Indians have died as a result of conditions for which they lack immunities. In Ecuador, decades of petroleum exploration and drilling have caused widespread environmental damage affecting that country's Indians.



Vedda mother and child from one of his drawings appearing in Times of Ceylon, Christmas number, 1930

The toxification of society is also a problem. Every year in Canada, five million gallons of hazardous waste are dumped into the St. Lawrence River, which Mohawk Indians (as well as non-indigenous communities) depend on for fishing and drinking water. Waste-dumping in oceans, wetlands and coastal areas has tainted the traditional fishing grounds of many indigenous peoples, including the Inuit of North America. Acid rain has killed thousands of lakes and vast forest tracts in North America and northern Europe, particularly Scandinavia, home to Saami and other indigenous peoples. Nuclear testing has exposed Pacific islanders to unacceptable levels of radioactivity.

By far the most grievous environmental catastrophe to have befallen indigenous peoples, one that threatens not only their livelihoods and social fabric but their very existence, is the ongoing destruction of the world's tropical rain forests. Home to 50 million indigenous

people, rain forests are being logged to feed a lucrative export market and burned to clear new land for grazing or crops.

The results have been devastating: flooding, loss of biological diversity, desertification, destruction of sacred sites, disruption of traditional economic activities such as fishing and hunting, forced relocation and displacement. The fallout has also included poverty, mental anguish, alcoholism, prostitution and high suicide rates, the latter especially pronounced among the young.

At the current rate of deforestation, the virgin forests of Malaysia, where the Kenyah and Orang Ulu people live, will disappear within a decade. Indigenous peoples else where in Asia-Indonesia, India and Nepal, for example—as well as in South America and Africa, are also at risk. Development projects such as dam-building and irrigation schemes have had similar effects.

One reason indigenous peoples are on the front lines of environmental degradation is that they inhabit some of the world's most valuable lands. Most of the significant mineral deposits in Australia are on Aboriginal territories. The Guajiro of Colombia are sitting on one of the largest undeveloped coalmines in the world. Asia's largest iron-ore mine is in the heart of Dandami territory in India. Another reason is that indigenous peoples also inhabit many of the world's most vulnerable ecosystems—the arctic and tundra, tropical rain forests, boreal forests, riverine and coastal zones, mountains, and semi-arid range lands.

The global nature of many environmental problems adds yet another layer of urgency. The rapid disappearance of the world's forests, for example, means there will be fewer "sinks" to moderate global warming by absorbing carbon dioxide, making it in everyone's interest to preserve forests and other habitats of indigenous peoples.

The Road from Rio

In a sense, indigenous peoples constitute an early-warning system for environmental problems. Because "Mother Earth" is the core of their culture, the provider of everyday material.

Preservation of indigenous peoples is indissolubly linked to the fate of their lands and natural resources. The bond between sustainable development and respect for human rights is, perhaps, just as close. As indigenous peoples continue their fight to live with

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dignity and greater self-sufficiency, they await redress and resolution of a host of concerns. Environmental issues offer the best opportunity for States and indigenous groups to find common ground.

The role of indigenous peoples in the practice of sustainable development was the focus of attention as representatives of Governments and indigenous groups, and independent experts on indigenous peoples, gathered in Santiago, Chile, in May 1992 for a Technical Conference held as part of the run-up to the Earth Summit.

One expert pointed out that indigenous peoples live under two types of economic regimes: the dominant economy, which sees the environment as property and as profit-generating raw material, and their own informal economy, which sees the environment as a renewable resource and life-support system to be conserved for posterity. Reconciling the two, said this expert, means establishing equity between indigenous peoples and outsiders so that the latter will have to negotiate with indigenous peoples and seek their collaboration in matters affecting their lands.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL PROPERTY RIGHTS

The annual market value of pharmaceutical products derived from medicinal plants discovered by indigenous peoples exceeds \$43 billion, but the profits are rarely shared with indigenous peoples.

Non-indigenous film-makers have filmed, in secret, the traditional ceremonies of the North American Hopi Indians, violating their religious and cultural beliefs.

The legends, songs and lore of indigenous peoples, passed down orally for many generations, are written down, recorded and sold by others.

The recent history of indigenous peoples is filled with examples of exploitation. The examples cited above only begin to suggest the myriad issues that arise around the question of protecting the intellectual and cultural property rights of those peoples. The 1993 International Year for the World's Indigenous People thus provides an unprecedented opportunity for the international community to examine existing injustices and to demonstrate its commitment to helping indigenous peoples realize their rights in both areas.

Intellectual property rights encompass the preservation of indigenous knowledge bases in fields such as

medicinal plants, agricultural biodiversity and environmental management, and compensation to indigenous people for the use of their expertise. However, the contributions of indigenous peoples in these areas are only slowly being acknowledged, and mechanisms to provide compensation are at very preliminary stages.

Cultural property rights focus on enabling indigenous peoples to preserve and control the use of their relics, archaeological sites, textiles, skeletal remains, rituals, songs, legends and other materials. The repatriation of cultural material to several indigenous groups is a sign that some cultural rights have been recognized, but numerous issues await resolution.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS THE PROBLEMS

Medicinal Knowledge

The discovery by the nomadic Punans of Indonesia that the root of the Jileng plant could be boiled and used as a cure for tuberculosis is being pursued in Britain and the United States for potential drug production. Pharmaceutical companies are working to develop a new anticoagulant based on the tikiuba plant used by the Uru-eu-Wau-Wau people of the Brazilian Amazon. Indeed, most of the 7,000 natural compounds used in modern medicine have been employed by traditional healers for centuries, and 25 per cent of American prescription drugs contain active ingredients derived from plants.

The study of traditional medical practices to select plant species for further pharmacological research and the development of marketable products is known as ethnopharmacology. Increasingly used by pharmaceutical companies to overcome the expensive and time-consuming practice of random plant screening, this scientific process offers numerous advantages: indigenous peoples have already identified appropriate species for medicinal use and know their locations, the proper time for their collections, the parts of the plant to use and methods for preparing, storing and administering the medicine.

CULTURAL PROPERTY RIGHTS

In the ancient world, the only cultural property that enjoyed a position of privilege was religious property. During the Middle Ages, cultural property was viewed as properly owned by the victors of battle. It was not until the renaissance that the notion of rights over what we now call cultural property began to be recognized.

The term itself was coined by the 1954 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Hague Convention The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

The First in-depth description of cultural property is found in the landmark 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which defined it as "property which, on religious or secular grounds, is specifically designated by each State as being of importance for archaeology, prehistory, literature, art or Science".

For centuries, cultural artifacts have been stolen from indigenous peoples, sold and displayed in violation of their beliefs. While some redress has been possible through international conventions, there is concern among indigenous people that the UNESCO definitions do not comprehensively reflect the areas in which they have legitimate rights. For instance, the Conventions make no reference to skeletal remains, which are frequently displayed in museums in a manner seen by indigenous peoples as undignified and sacrilegious.

The 1970 Convention is limited to cultural property that is illicitly obtained or trafficked. In order to deal with cultural material taken during colonial times or under foreign rule, the United Nations General Assembly has passed a number of resolutions. The most recent, passed in October 1991, appealed to States "to cooperate closely with the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the return of Cultural Property to Its Countries of Origin or Its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation and to conclude bilateral agreements for this purpose".

Indigenous Peoples Respond

Since 1988, representatives of the Aymara community of Coroma, Bolivia, have been pursuing the repatriation of sacred weavings that disappeared at the time of visits by North American ethnic art and antiquities dealers in 1978. For the Aymara community, theft of this communal property represents the destruction of the history recorded by the weavings and a breakdown of religious beliefs and spiritual ties to ancestors. The UNESCO Convention, to which both Bolivia and the United States are signatories, has given the Aymara the support of international law.