



**CONVENTION ON
BIOLOGICAL
DIVERSITY**

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AD HOC OPEN-ENDED INTER-SESSIONAL WORKING GROUP
ON ARTICLE 8(j) AND RELATED PROVISIONS OF THE
CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

First meeting
Seville, 27-31 March 2000

REPORT OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON INDIGENOUS AND
SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE ON THE SUSTAINABLE USE OF PLANTS

Note by the Executive Secretary

At the request of WWF-World Wide Fund for Nature and the Indigenous Peoples' Centre for Documentation, Research and Information, the attached report of the International Conference on Indigenous and Scientific Knowledge on the Sustainable Use of Plants, held in Geneva in October 1999, is being circulated for the information of participants in the first meeting of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Inter-Sessional Working Group on Article 8(j) and Related Provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity. It is being made available in the original language only.

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**International Conference on Indigenous and Scientific Knowledge
on the Sustainable Use of Plants
An open forum on the commemoration of doCip's 20th anniversary
8 October 1999
Botanical Gardens of Geneva, Switzerland**

Resolution

Remembering that this year is the mid-point of the UN International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, and noting with appreciation that much has been done to further the cause on which the Decade was founded, but that much more remains to be done,

Referring to the Draft Declaration on Indigenous Peoples, a fundamental document for the protection, preservation and promotion of indigenous knowledge, which is still under discussion in the UN Commission of Human Rights,

Referring also to the ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, which contains important provisions relevant to indigenous knowledge and natural resource management, and noting with concern that it has been ratified only by a small number of governments,

Noting that the Convention on Biological Diversity and other international treaties and agreements concerning the sustainable management of natural resources increasingly recognize the importance of respecting the rights of indigenous peoples to the sustainable use of those resources and to the conservation and protection of their traditional ecological knowledge,

Noting with apprehension that the degradation of the environment has resulted not only in the loss of natural resources, but also in the erosion of traditional ecological knowledge and the loss of traditional management practices that helped maintain many of the most valuable ecosystems of the Earth,

Thanking doCip for the opportunity of bringing together indigenous experts on plant-related knowledge with scholars and academics of the Western disciplines, in order to find a common ground and mutual exchange of knowledge for the survival of indigenous knowledge and the enhancement of cooperation,



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We, participants at the **International Conference on Indigenous and Scientific Knowledge on the Sustainable Use of Plants**, recommend unanimously that:

1. All necessary legal measures be urgently developed, promoted and instituted at global and national levels to ensure the survival and protection of indigenous knowledge systems and traditional management practices, as part of the inalienable heritage of humanity, and in particular to provide adequate legal protection to the rights of indigenous peoples in relation to their knowledge systems;
2. The inextricable link between the survival of traditional ecological knowledge and the rights of indigenous peoples to their lands and resources be recognized, and appropriate measures be taken to ensure full respect for those rights and security of land tenure and access to resources;
3. Appropriate programmes and institutional facilities at global, national and local levels, in partnership with indigenous peoples and institutions, be developed and put in place to encourage and support the preservation and revitalization of indigenous institutions relevant to the conservation of traditional knowledge, including the founding of clearing-house mechanisms or cultural memory banks of indigenous knowledge;
4. Dissemination of indigenous knowledge in partnership with indigenous peoples in indigenous and mainstream fora and processes, including research, school and university education and curricula, seminars, conferences, mass media and other exchange platforms, and that the decisions to disseminate indigenous knowledge be taken up at programme level;
5. The conclusions and recommendations of this Conference, as contained in the attached Summary of the Proceedings, be forwarded to all relevant international institutions and fora, for consideration and inclusion as appropriate in programmes of action and relevant decisions.



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**International Conference on Indigenous and Scientific Knowledge
on the Sustainable Use of Plants
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SUMMARY OF THE PROCEEDINGS

Participants

- **Mrs Galina Diashkova**, Chukchi People, University of Moscow, Russia
- **Mr Felipe Molina**, Yoeme People of Arizona, Native Seeds Project, USA
- **Mr Benedict Topin**, Kadazandusun People, Ethnobotanist, Malaysia
- **Mr Claude Auroi**, Agro-economist, Professor, Graduate Institute of Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland
- **Mr Gonzalo Oviedo**, Anthropologist, Head of the People & Conservation Unit at WWF International, Gland, Switzerland

Moderator

- **Mrs Pierrette Birraux-Ziegler**, Ethnogeographer, Scientific Director of doCip, Geneva, Switzerland

Summary

Galina Diashkova

The Chukchi People number around 11,500 and inhabit the Arctic and tundra regions of the Russian Federation. Their main livelihood is reindeer breeding and sea mammal hunting. Around 800 plants have been inventoried, 200 of which are specific to the region (e.g. *rabitsus tchuktche*) and around 400 varieties are listed in the Red Book of the Russian Federation and of IUCN.

The Chukchi People live on reindeer meat and other mammals in the region. Many legends and tales are linked to food: the reindeer represents man, and plants represent the woman. When a



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man meets a woman in the forest and asks her "what are you eating?" she replies by saying "the plants in the forest". Even today, women use plants as specific tools in the daily life of the community: as garments, as dye to colour reindeer skin, etc.

The Chukchi People believe that all the elements of nature and Man are linked to the cosmos, including the seas, the forests and the skies, and that Man is considered the master of these elements. The Polar Star is considered as the centre of the universe to which offerings are made.

Reindeer food, including its fat, is considered sacred. Traditional feasts are interlinked with animals and plants: the "salex" leaf is used in public feasts to symbolize the feeding of the Chukchi People. In the same breath, their culture is intricately linked with animals and plants. For this reason, radioactivity is a great danger to the Chukchi People, in particular, and to the region and the whole world in general.

Felipe Molina

Traditional knowledge of plants is passed on by the elders, to whom much gratitude is given for having taught all the necessary knowledge on the value and use of plants. Traditional knowledge is accompanied by the knowledge of traditional language; the two are vital to the study of plants and are therefore important to teach to young children.

In Arizona (USA) and Mexico, in the Yoeme community, a dictionary has been developed to bring these knowledge to the classroom, to children from 5 to 17 years old. Other tribes in the areas are also trying hard to bring back their culture and knowledge to the classroom in order to bring back the knowledge of plants into the community and be more appreciative of the plants around their homes.

The work in Arizona was undertaken together with scholars and scientists whose interest in the culture has helped preserve some of their knowledge about plants. One of the methods used was a visit to the elders and communities. The data gathered from the research will be useful for the next generations to continue the work.

Respect is a major value in the Yoeme culture, which helps in appreciating the use and beauty of plants; this respect extends to plants. The present formal educational system does not teach these values; it is therefore important to teach the younger generation those values.



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Benedict Topin

The holders of indigenous knowledge are often the community's elders. This is the experience of Kadazanduzun community when they started the first comprehensive indigenous dictionary. Certain words that only the elders spoke no longer exist in the vocabulary. Some of the words signify specific relationships with nature, as nature is an expression of being and a means of communication between the Creator and his creation. Each specific name of a plant is connected with the belief system of rituals and each has a value.

In this regard, the younger generation no longer recognizes certain tastes and food practices. If they die of hunger today, it is not because food is not abundant but because they are not able to recognize the plants that are available in the forests.

Today, there is tension (conflict) between the traditional belief system and the formal educational system. Some believe that anything that is not studied scientifically is not worthwhile. Moreover, "white" people are considered the authority; even governments tend to respect more those who go abroad and attend conferences. Nevertheless, international conferences are important places to recognize one another's work and give the possibility to exchange seeds for future use in cases where a community's resources disappear because of an ecological disaster.

Gonzalo Oviedo

The People & Conservation of Unit of the World Wide fund for Nature (WWF) is responsible for WWF's coordination of WWF's policies and activities related to the role of indigenous and local communities in nature conservation.

WWF is engaged in international processes that seek to conserve biological diversity and traditional knowledge. Within these international mechanisms, it is important to identify the possible ways through which the loss of both biodiversity and indigenous knowledge can be prevented. There are two fields where opportunities are open: i) the legal field related to intellectual property rights, and ii) the ecological and cultural field, where the issue of the loss of traditional knowledge has to be dealt within the context of cultural continuity.

Today, it is safe to affirm that most international environmental instruments and processes are based on the recognition by the international community of the following elements:



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- 1) traditional ecological knowledge and traditional ecological management practices are useful for sustainable development;
- 2) the international community has a duty to keep, preserve and maintain such traditional knowledge and traditional management practices;
- 3) traditional knowledge and traditional management practices should be used, when appropriate, for the benefit of humanity as a whole;
- 4) the use of traditional knowledge and traditional management practices should be done with the approval of the holders of such knowledge, i.e. indigenous and traditional peoples; and
- 5) the benefits of the use traditional knowledge and traditional management practices should be shared in a faire and equitable way with the holders of the knowledge.

The essential element that is still to be clearly recognized by the international community in this context is that traditional ecological knowledge and management practices are inextricably linked with the fundamental rights of their holders, mainly with land and resource rights.

The major existing international instruments that – in connection with their environmental objectives – are meant to help preserve, maintain and develop traditional ecological knowledge and practices are:

- 1) Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the most important instrument that sets the overall framework for the conservation and protection of traditional biodiversity-related knowledge, innovations and practices;
- 2) Inter-Governmental Forum on Forests (IFF), which is developing policy components on traditional forest-related knowledge;
- 3) Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, which adopted recently the "Guidelines for the Involvement of Indigenous and Local Communities in Wetland Management"; and
- 4) Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD), which is also producing guidelines for governments on the use of relevant indigenous and local communities' knowledge and management practices.

Apart from these environmental instruments, the ILO Convention 169 has important provisions concerning the protection of the environment of indigenous territories, as well as the protection of cultural values and practices, which is compatible with the CBD.

In the context of UN human rights' processes, the Sub-Commission for the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities, and the Working Group on Indigenous Populations have produced proposals and documents that would also contribute to the



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conservation and revitalization of traditional ecological knowledge. Important in this regard are the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the WGIP Chairperson's report on the "Protection of the Heritage of Indigenous Peoples".

All these instruments and process have the potential to become useful tools in the direction of helping maintain traditional ecological knowledge and management practices. Therefore, the opportunity has been created for indigenous peoples' organizations and groups supporting their interests, to develop proposals and provide appropriate policy inputs to further improve these processes.

Claude Auroi

A scientific programme to introduce a number of varieties of potatoes in the Andes in Peru revealed among others how traditional farmers view hybrids of potatoes. If they believe that a certain potato – even though it is not a native potato – is useful and productive enough, then the traditional farmers were willing to adopt the hybrid potato or an improved potato variety. The traditional farmers were able to distinguish between which varieties were important for them and those which were cultivated for its scientific and/or commercial value.

It is therefore important to note that this experience 15 years ago revealed that traditional societies are able to keep informed of scientific activities. The significant difference is that today, crossbreeding of species have reached dangerous levels, whose long-term effects are not yet clear. The kind of biotechnology practiced at present puts in danger traditional societies and farmers. The civil society must therefore be aware of these dangers and keep close track of the activities of scientific and business interests who attempt to disturb the natural cycles of life, and in the process destroy traditional cultures.

Conclusions:

1. Traditional knowledge of plants and its use spring from community elders, who are the traditional holders of knowledge. The study of plants cannot be undertaken without consulting the elders. It is therefore of utmost importance to preserve traditional cultures through education in order to ensure continuity in the transfer of traditional knowledge from one generation to another, for the benefit of humankind.



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2. Individual and collective relationships, family and kinship systems, social institutions, traditional justice, music, dances, ceremonies, ritual performances and practices, games sports, language, narratives, mythology, stories, names, land, sea and air resources are intrinsically connected to nature, which reveal human beings' relationship with plants and animals. Their relationship extends not only to their physical environment but also to the cosmic universe. Such relationship is expressed, among others, in traditional rituals using plants and animals as an offering to the cosmic universe to preserve nature and man.
3. Nature is an expression of being and the medium of communication between the Creator and the creature. In many indigenous societies, the specific name of a plant itself encompasses a whole belief and value system. In order to preserve traditional knowledge of plants, it is important to engage the international and scientific community to work together with indigenous peoples in cataloguing their plants.
4. On the use of scientific knowledge of the use of plants, indigenous and local communities know exactly how to discriminate between which methodology is useful and that which is destructive for them. This skill emanates from their capability to recognize natural life cycles. The civil society must therefore remain watchful that science and big business do not endanger these natural cycles.
5. Traditional knowledge is part of traditional culture, and plants represent a basic element of the ecosystem. When biodiversity is threatened or destroyed, then plants are clearly affected. Such destruction eventually destroys traditional knowledge and in the end, humankind itself.
6. Today, the international community recognizes the role and importance of traditional knowledge and traditional management practices in the achievement of sustainable development. Some international instruments, e.g. Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, have set a framework to consider traditional management practices and the participation of indigenous, local and coastal communities in resource management.
7. It is important for indigenous organizations and other non-governmental organizations to make use of existing international instruments. New proposals are needed to preserve wildlife, plants and species and to protect holders of traditional knowledge.

Specific recommendations for action



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1. Introduce the study of a number of plants every year in the school curriculum starting from primary up to secondary school.
2. Enhance exchange of information on the use of plants through the use of modern communication technology, e.g. creation of Web sites, use of the clearing-house mechanism within the Convention on Biological Diversity.
3. Support existing networks created by and/or for indigenous peoples that seek to prevent the loss of biodiversity.
4. Develop international instruments to protect holders of traditional knowledge and traditional resource use.
5. Support the creation of an international volunteer cooperation programme that will assist in the scientific study of plants among indigenous communities.
6. Support the creation of a "cultural memory bank" by or in partnership with indigenous peoples.
7. Conduct educational seminars on the national level to identify useful traditional and scientific knowledge with or in partnership with indigenous peoples.
8. Lobby the international community to provide new financial resources to help preserve traditional knowledge and traditional management practices.
9. Identify new approaches and strategies to support the work of ongoing international processes, -e.g., CBD, Ramsar Convention.

(Ends)