



Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity



MESSAGE

From Dr. Ahmed Djoghlaif, Executive Secretary
Convention on Biological Diversity

On the occasion of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, 9 August 2008

For information only

The International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples honours the contributions made by indigenous peoples to sustaining life on earth. Indigenous peoples have a special relationship with nature in general and biodiversity in particular, which makes them crucial partners of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Indigenous peoples are stewards of the Earth's biological diversity and their diverse cultures and languages are the pillars of humanity's cultural diversity. This is especially true for indigenous women, who play a vital role in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity as guardians of traditional knowledge, and treasure keepers of seeds for their communities.

It has been estimated that agriculture currently occupies approximately 40 % of the world's land surface. In recognition of the important links between biodiversity, livelihoods, and food security, the International Day for Biological Diversity was celebrated on 22 May, 2008, under the theme "Biodiversity and Agriculture".

The Convention on Biological Diversity is unique among major international environmental instruments in its acknowledgement of the unique role that indigenous and local communities play in conserving life on Earth. The close and traditional dependence on biological resources of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles is recognized in the Preamble to the Convention. In Article 8(j), Parties to the Convention made a commitment to respect, preserve, maintain and promote the wider use of traditional knowledge relevant for conservation and sustainable use, with the approval and involvement of indigenous and local communities.

The traditional practices of indigenous women, such as food provision and agro-biodiversity, have greatly contributed to the conservation of biodiversity, and the sustainable management of natural resources. Through their contributions to agricultural biodiversity, indigenous women are helping to save life on earth, in all its rich diversity.

Indigenous women are also the key to the intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge through indigenous languages. The Earth shelters approximately 6,000 languages; however, the vast majority of these languages, like the cultures they represent, are threatened with disappearance. Approximately 97 % of the population speak about 4 % of the languages of the world. Conversely, almost 96 % of the languages are spoken only by 3 % of the population and most of those languages are indigenous languages. And 10 % have fewer than 100 speakers. These figures testify to an incredible linguistic and cultural diversity of humanity. Indeed, a child's first language is referred to as his or her "mother tongue" in recognition of the significance of the mother's role in teaching language and passing on knowledge. In recognition of the importance of traditional languages, the General Assembly proclaimed 2008 as the International Year of Languages.

The interrelated nature of biological diversity, traditional knowledge, and language necessitates a comprehensive approach to the conservation of biological diversity. Indigenous languages are treasuries of vast traditional knowledge concerning ecological systems and processes. Indigenous languages hold knowledge about how to protect and sustainably use some of the most vulnerable and biologically diverse ecosystems in the world. By far the largest share of the world's linguistic diversity is found in indigenous and local communities, where people



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continue to speak the language of their ancestors. Losing linguistic and cultural diversity has been directly linked to losing biological diversity.

I wish all indigenous peoples of the world a memorable celebration of this International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

Montreal, 8 August 2008