

**STATEMENT OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
OF THE
CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY
Dr. CRISTIANA PAŞCA PALMER
ASSISTANT-SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS
ON THE OCCASION OF THE
OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE 2019
INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES
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Indigenous peoples', local and traditional communities' languages are representative of diverse world views, value systems and cultural expressions. They are essential components of the living heritage of humanity.

However, despite their importance, these languages are in danger of disappearing. The colourful tapestry of life is fading like water colours in the rain.

Concurrently, biodiversity loss continues in every region of the world. We continue to lose forests, wetlands and other ecosystems, particularly in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The links between biological and cultural diversity, the resulting biocultural diversity and the resilience of human communities are under grave threat.

The loss of indigenous, traditional and local languages¹ is closely related to biodiversity loss. Indigenous and local languages are intimate expressions of place and diverse world views and value systems. Each language represents a world view prioritizing that which is most important to those people.

The Sami, for example, are said to have more than two hundred words for snow. The Hawaiians are said to have some 200 words for rain. The Bedouins are said to have more than 160 words for camels, and over 1,000 words related to the horse. If these languages disappear, so does the knowledge, practices and cultural expressions that sustain biodiversity.

According to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, at least 43 per cent of languages spoken in the world today are endangered.

Let us commit ourselves to restoring the vibrant colours of the tapestry of life.

In meeting the Convention's overall 2050 vision of Living in Harmony with Nature, let us ensure that there is ample space for the interplay of traditional words, languages and songs, with the sustainable use of local traditional crops, fish and animals, food preparation, spirit, culture and place. The contribution all of these make to human well-being and resilience, as well as the conservation and sustainable use of nature is immeasurable.

¹ The CBD, through Decision XI/3 B, has adopted four indicators for status and trends in traditional knowledge:

- a) Status and trends in indigenous peoples' and local communities' languages and linguistic diversity ;
- b) Status and trends in land-use patterns in the traditional territories of indigenous and local communities;
- c) Status on Trends in the Practice of Traditional Occupations and
- d) Trends in which traditional knowledge and practices are respected through their full integration, safeguards and the full and effective participation of indigenous and local communities in the national implementation of the Strategic Plan (B)

Accordingly, in my capacity as the Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and in close collaboration with our partners, the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, the Assembly of First Nations (Canada), the American Museum of Natural History, the Centre for Indigenous Conservation and Development Alternatives, McGill University and the Université de Montréal, I am honored to announce the First North American Dialogue on Biocultural Diversity the First North American Dialogue on Biocultural Diversity, which will be held in Montreal, Canada, from 5-8 May 2019.

This initiative is being launched in support of the International Year of Indigenous Languages. Its timing is also an important milestone in the lead-up to the International Day of Biodiversity on the 22 of May.

Amongst other pertinent themes, this first Dialogue will focus on the *restoration, revitalization, maintenance and transmission of indigenous languages and traditional forms of knowledge and culture, and the integration of knowledge systems.*

The North American Dialogue is part of a series of events organized within the framework of the UNESCO-SCBD joint programme of work to explore the meaning and values of the links between biological and cultural diversity at the regional level, and implications for solutions for global problems facing humanity (such as climate change, desertification, and unsustainable use of natural resources).

The goal of the North American Dialogue is to encourage the 196 Parties to the Convention to consider the links between biological and cultural diversity and the concept of “biocultural diversity” in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, as well as its possible contribution to broader global commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

The Dialogue aims to identify the links between biological and cultural diversity in North America and to identify the major drivers of biological and cultural diversity loss. Importantly, the discussions will identify solutions and best practices for protecting and restoring biological and cultural diversity, including the role of indigenous languages.

To fully address complex environmental and social challenges in today's world will require interdisciplinary approaches and systems-level perspectives that recognize and build on the interlinkages between humans and nature.

The North American Dialogue will convene a range of actors to exchange knowledge and explore the meaning and value of biological and cultural diversity in Canada and the United States.²

Indigenous Peoples are leaders in protecting the environment. Their languages are at the heart of the links, drivers, and solutions that the North American Dialogue aims to identify. To that end, the preservation, revitalization and promotion of indigenous languages will underpin the discussions.

Along with our partners of the First North American Dialogue on Biocultural Diversity, I seize on the opportunity of the International Year of Indigenous Languages to highlight the centrality of traditional and indigenous languages in strengthening the links between biological and cultural diversity for attaining the global 2050 vision of humanity living in harmony with nature.

Directly related to this regional initiative, as the Executive Secretary of the Convention, in close collaboration with UNESCO and IUCN, I was pleased to announce a global initiative at the High-Level Segment of the fourteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties, that will help us further explore this question of Nature and Culture in depth and its implications for international policy making.

The initiative seeks to bring together Parties, Governments, International Agencies and indigenous peoples and local communities, during 2019 and 2020, to consider the usefulness of an International Alliance for Nature and Culture, as well as possible elements for a programme of work on Nature and Cultures, as an integrated part of the Post-2020 Biodiversity Framework.

The Goal of an International Alliance for Nature and Culture, which is very close to my heart, is to bring about a coming together, or a rapprochement of Nature and

² North America is defined as Canada and the United States following UNESCO's country grouping, which does not forcibly reflect geography.

Cultures in the Post-2020 Era, to achieve the Global Vision of Humanity “*Living in Harmony with Nature*” by 2050.³

The platform will allow for robust discussion and provide some possible elements of work for the consideration of the Parties at COP 15, aimed at bringing about a rapprochement of Nature and Culture in the Post 2020 Era. I am confident that the North American Conference will make a worthy contribution to these global discussions.

So, let us be both optimistic and ambitious in 2019, in exploring the crucial role that indigenous languages and linguistic diversity play in biocultural diversity, as we strive towards our common goal of living in harmony with nature.

³ Related to this initiative UNESCO is currently hosting **the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022)**, see: <https://en.unesco.org/decade-rapprochement-cultures?language=es>