



**STATEMENT OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY  
OF THE  
CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY  
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ON THE OCCASION OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES  
THEME: INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES  
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The celebration of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples presents an opportunity to draw attention to the contribution of indigenous peoples to the conservation and sustainable use of the world's biodiversity.

It allows us to tell the story of how these communities, environmental managers with immense ecological knowledge, have been stewards of biodiversity for millennia, responsible for preserving and even increasing biodiversity through their traditional management practices.

On this International Day, I call on governments and civil society to act in full partnership with indigenous peoples, respecting their unique and diverse ways of life, their languages and traditional knowledge, and their role as proponents of both biological and cultural diversity.

Constituting a relatively small portion of the world's 7.3 billion people, indigenous peoples and local communities<sup>1</sup> represent the largest portion of linguistic and cultural diversity on Earth and their traditional lands and waters overwhelmingly contain the greatest remaining reserves of biodiversity.

As we have heard from the recent IPBES<sup>2</sup> report, 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.

But the loss extends to biocultural diversity - the links between biological and cultural diversity with the result that the resilience of human communities and local ecosystems are under grave threat.

We cannot forget that indigenous peoples' local and traditional communities' languages are representative of diverse world views, value systems and cultural expressions.

These diverse languages are essential components of the living heritage of humanity and for the intergenerational transfer of ancestral knowledge.

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

Diversity – the rich tapestry of life's intricately interlaced phenomena, processes, and relationships— in all its wonderful forms - is being degraded by modern reductionist forces of homogenization, globalization, and more recently climate change.

The loss of indigenous, traditional and local languages<sup>3</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Indigenous peoples are estimated to be 7 per cent of the global population or about 400 million people

<sup>2</sup> The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

<sup>3</sup> 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)

“There are nine different Maya words for the colour blue in the Porrúa Spanish-Maya dictionary, but only three Spanish translations, leaving six butterflies that can only be seen by the Mayas, which proves that when a language dies, six butterflies and six shades of blue, disappear forever from the Earth’s consciousness.”<sup>4</sup>

According to UNESCO’s<sup>5</sup> *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 indigenous languages as the vibrant colours of the tapestry of life.

To that end, the preservation, revitalization and promotion of indigenous languages may very well underpin the long-term success of our work in maintaining both biological and cultural diversity.

Let me address the role of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) regarding the protection of traditional knowledge and the promotion of biological and cultural diversity.

The Convention, which you may know, is the international agreement responsible for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and the equitable sharing of benefits. It provides the clearest recognition of the links between traditional knowledge and biodiversity conservation through obligations on the 196 Parties to the Convention to: respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous peoples and local communities.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, Aichi Biodiversity Target 18 of the CBD’s Strategic Plan for Biological Diversity 2011-2020 provides that:

By 2020, the traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and their customary use of biological resources, are respected, subject to national legislation and relevant international obligations, and fully integrated and reflected in the implementation of the Convention with the full and effective participation of indigenous and local communities, at all relevant levels.

To assist Parties in implementing their obligations under the Convention, the Governing Body (CBD COP) has adopted by consensus, principles and guidelines for implementation at the national level which includes an extensive set of guidelines and principles adopted under the CBD that address traditional knowledge and customary sustainable use of biodiversity.

Many of these guidelines embody and promote important global principles including that traditional knowledge is accessed with the free prior informed consent of the original knowledge holders and its use is based on mutually agreed terms guaranteeing an equitable sharing on benefits.

From a policy perspective, nature and culture have been artificially separated for too long – to the detriment of our work.

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<sup>4</sup> Anthropologist Earl Shorris, 2000

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

<sup>6</sup> Article 8 (j) is closely linked with other articles of the Convention, in particular Articles 10 (c), 17.2 and 18.4.

I believe that nature and culture are inseparable and only by recognizing their intrinsic value and by addressing them in synergy, we can pave the way forward to achieve the Convention's 2050 vision of living in harmony with nature.

Coherence could be found through the establishment of an international alliance for nature and culture.

This is why at the 14<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 14) in Egypt, held in November 2018, I proposed together with our partners, UNESCO and IUCN, an initiative which was welcomed by the Parties to the CBD, to work towards the establishment of an international alliance for nature and culture.

Such an alliance is a natural extension of a decade of joint efforts between the CBD, UNESCO, IUCN and governments, in understanding the links between biological and cultural diversity.

As proponents of both cultural and biological diversity indigenous peoples have a special role to play, and I would invite all cultures to reflect on their relationship with nature – to bring nature and all cultures together in the post 2020 global framework for biodiversity.

In the broad consultations underway to develop the global biodiversity framework, I have been tasked by the Parties to provide options for possible elements of work to bring about a rapprochement of nature and culture.

To that end the door is wide open to receiving ideas from indigenous peoples on new elements of work of relevant to indigenous peoples, as well as new institutional arrangements for indigenous people's participation in the work of the Convention post 2020.

In our vision of humanity living in harmony with nature by 2050, let us create ample space in the interplay of nature and culture – for the transmission, generation and protection of traditional knowledge. Its contribution to human well-being and the conservation and sustainable use of nature, is immeasurable.

I seize on the opportunity of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples 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.

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