

International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) 2016 World Conservation Congress: A Victory for Indigenous Peoples and Paradigm Shift for Our Planet

Citizens of the United States are now witnessing the largest Native American and indigenous people's protest in recent history taking place at the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota. Diverse tribes, citizens, politicians and organizations have unified in their protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline: its construction would destroy sacred lands and cause the same environmental degradation as thirty coal plants.¹ Senator Bernie Sanders just led a rally against the pipeline construction at the White House in coordination with over a hundred other similar events around the country. The national spotlight on this ongoing struggle has intensified and expanded to support global causes highlighted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) at this year's World Conservation Congress in Honolulu, Hawaii.² It would seem a paradigm shift is occurring. Leaders all over the world are recognizing that nature conservation is also cultural conservation, ecological issues are also human rights issues, and the rights and cultures of indigenous peoples must be protected over those of exploitative corporations and their myopic interests.³

IUCN Motion 26

Ultimately, this new paradigm is crucial to the long term survival of our species on this planet; it is also a direction set by this year's IUCN World Conservation Congress. Composed of "almost 1,300 government and NGO Members and more than 15,000 volunteer experts in 185 countries," the IUCN passed a number of important motions this year aligned with this view. In particular, Motion 26 supports the creation of "protected areas and other areas important for biodiversity," especially against extractive, "environmentally damaging industrial activities and infrastructure development."⁴ Aptly and intentionally, this motion to establish "No Go Areas" and protect sacred lands from extractive industries passed during the ongoing fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline. The battle at Standing Rock Reservation provides an immediate focus for this resolution, which specifically emphasizes the benefits of prohibiting "mining, oil and gas, agriculture, and environmentally damaging infrastructure, such as dams, road and pipelines."⁵ A successful campaign in North Dakota will generate more momentum for Motion 26 and galvanize support for similar national and global conflicts over the rights and lands of native peoples.

Currently, the United Nations' World Heritage Committee establishes World Heritage Sites, or internationally protected locations. If the IUCN can provide a legal framework for marginalized indigenous peoples to preserve their sacred lands, their traditional cultures and the environments they care for will thrive.⁶ Beyond the local benefits for native communities, these protections will help achieve three interrelated international environmental objectives: 1) Aichi Biodiversity Targets of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020, 2) the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals, and 3) 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change.⁷ All three together practically address critical environmental questions, but how governments and their citizens answer them—in action—will guide the course of our civilization's future. So how can

we prevent accelerating species extinction? How can our societies grow sustainably? How will we reduce and adapt to climate change? None of these questions can be answered simply, but indigenous leaders and native peoples with the support of IUCN's Motion 26 are an integral place to start.

Rightful Representation for Indigenous Peoples

In the history of indigenous and native peoples' lives after their interactions with colonizing forces, oppression and marginalization has typically been the end result. In the United States, Native Americans were systemically decimated and culturally repressed. The wounds of these horrible injustices remain, but indigenous peoples are taking their rightful representation in governments and international organizations to speak out against further human and environmental degradation. A historic vote at this year's congress established IUCN membership for indigenous people's organizations, giving them "an unprecedented opportunity to contribute to global policy on biocultural conservation, indigenous issues, traditional knowledge and the future direction of conservation as distinct peoples."⁸

This decision has far-reaching consequences for the direction of the IUCN and beyond. Indigenous organizations will not only continue to significantly contribute to the critical conversation on how to save our planet, but they will also vote to guide policy. The IUCN's decision will expand the role of indigenous peoples at local, national and international levels, and North Dakota, would there even be a need for the protest at Standing Rock Reservation against the Dakota Access Pipeline if Native Americans had greater representation in government and corporate decisions concerning their land? After centuries of injustice and ignorance, we hope that the IUCN's decision will encourage more governments and organizations to include the voices of native peoples who "make up 5% of the world's population, and anything from 10% (according to the World Bank) to 30% (says the UN) of the world's poorest people."⁹ Indigenous communities deserve to be heard and may have the tested ancestral knowledge needed for our civilization's survival.

Three Core Indigenous Values for Saving Us

A highlight of 2016 Congress was certainly when the Indigenous Kahu'āina Guardians of Sacred Lands delivered a powerful statement explicating the common values of native peoples, and these profound points further illustrate how Motion 26 establishes much needed protections. The first value is peace, and if our multicultural society of tolerance and religious freedom is to truly live up to its principles, it "should honor our sacred natural sites as they do mosques, churches and all holy places."¹⁰ A man-made religious structure is not more sacred than a natural one, yet how many indigenous holy sites have been destroyed in the name of progress? Even without a religious attitude towards the land, secular environmentalists, or any rational residents of this planet, should peacefully honor the source of their existence and consider the fate of future generations as they determine how to live and design society; nihilism is an

irresponsible, irrational and unsustainable philosophy, even though it seems to selfishly and destructively guide many today.

Secondly, many indigenous people share a personified view of our planet, and Mother Earth also gained popularity in the scientific community after British scientist James Lovelock advanced the Gaia Theory in the 1960s.¹¹ Such a view necessitates guardianship of the land, and we would be wise to learn from indigenous people and modern science how to maintain “the balance of life through a respectful relationship with nature and her cycles.”¹² The progress that has brought such abundance in the last few centuries has advanced civilization at the cost of destroying the sacred places that compose its sustaining source, Mother Earth, and now that the scarcity of natural resources and limited time before catastrophic collapse is clearer, we should model ourselves on indigenous people who IUCN Director General Inger Andersen stresses are “key stewards of the world’s diversity.”¹³

As a foundation for cultivating peace and honoring Mother Earth, the third indigenous value of culture is “based on holistic knowledge and relational understanding of the world.”¹⁴ Through ritual and ceremony, indigenous people honor the interdependent forces of nature that work in harmony to sustain our existence. Truly, each native language describes this sacred relationship and provides a guide for worshiping Mother Earth while surviving her rage. Considering how Eskimos have 50 words for snow, indigenous people have an infinitude of knowledge to teach us, though the Guardians capture the essence of this wisdom in a much needed reminder for our unsustainable society: “When we take care of nature, nature takes care of us in a reciprocal, respectful relationship.”^{15,16} This truth underlies the message of environmentalists and indigenous peoples alike, so the IUCN and similar organizations should continue to spread their common voice for future campaigns.

Conclusion

As the oldest and leading international environmental union, the ICUN’s Motion 26 and inclusion of indigenous people’s organizations at this year’s World Conservation Congress sets a precedent for listening more to their invaluable wisdom while protecting their sacred lands. Standing Rock may stand as a sign of the paradigm shift we need, and we hope that this emerging victory for indigenous people will set a precedence for increasing incorporation of their knowledge and protection of their sacred lands. If we truly seek sustainable solutions for the environmental crises during this Anthropocene epoch, shouldn’t we listen to those cultures that have the most successful sustainable relationship with the earth? Western society returned to the classics in the 15th century, sparking the Renaissance. Why can’t we return to the indigenous wisdom with an open-minded scientific perspective that will spark a rebirth for Mother Earth?

¹ <http://www.alternet.org/activism/bernie-sanders-leads-dakota-access-pipeline-rally-front-white-house>

² <https://www.iucn.org/>

³ <http://www.alternet.org/activism/bernie-sanders-leads-dakota-access-pipeline-rally-front-white-house>

⁴ <http://www.iucnworldconservationcongress.org/news/20160910/article/iucn-congress-boosts-support-indigenous-peoples-rights>; <https://portals.iucn.org/congress/motion/026>

⁵ <https://portals.iucn.org/congress/motion/026>

⁶ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>

⁷ <https://portals.iucn.org/congress/motion/026>; <https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/>;
<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>;
http://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/international/negotiations/paris/index_en.htm

⁸ <https://www.iucn.org/secretariat/about>;

<http://www.iucnworldconservationcongress.org/news/20160910/article/iucn-congress-boosts-support-indigenous-peoples-rights>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/aug/14/indigenous-people-sustainable-development-goals>

¹⁰

<http://standingonsacredground.org/sites/default/files/WCC%202016%20Statement%20of%20Sacred%20Lands%20Stewards.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.gaiatheory.org/overview/>

¹²

<http://standingonsacredground.org/sites/default/files/WCC%202016%20Statement%20of%20Sacred%20Lands%20Stewards.pdf>

¹³ <http://www.iucnworldconservationcongress.org/news/20160910/article/iucn-congress-boosts-support-indigenous-peoples-rights>

¹⁴

<http://standingonsacredground.org/sites/default/files/WCC%202016%20Statement%20of%20Sacred%20Lands%20Stewards.pdf>

¹⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/there-really-are-50-eskimo-words-for-snow/2013/01/14/e0e3f4e0-59a0-11e2-beee-6e38f5215402_story.html

¹⁶ Ibid.