

Editorial

Indigenous Perspectives on Ecosystem Sustainability and Health

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Indigenous peoples have been guardians of our global environment and its medicines for millennia—built on a communal view of humanity and its links to the ecosystem. Yet as the new millennium rolls out, Indigenous peoples are among those most marginalized within many nation states, they have the worst health indicators, and their knowledge continues to be threatened as the land and resources they depend on are appropriated, developed, degraded, or destroyed.

During the United Nations Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples (1995–2005), one response to these concerning trends was increased scholarly and policy attention to fields such as traditional ecological knowledge, indigenous health, traditional medicines, and bioprospecting (Janes, 1999; Berkes et al., 2000; Merson, 2000; Subramanian et al., 2006). Yet at the end of this UN decade, an invited *Lancet* series offered a sobering reminder of just how much more needs to be done to improve and promote the health status of Indigenous people worldwide (see Stephens et al., 2006). A significant obstacle to meeting this challenge has been the predictable tendency to study and analyze indigenous perspectives and priorities along traditional disciplinary lines, in effect disaggregating holistic understanding into academic or thematic silos with minimal interaction and a disconnect from pressing, interconnected realities of health, culture, and ecology.

This edition of *EcoHealth* has been put together with explicit interest in (re)integrating indigenous perspectives on ecosystem sustainability and health. It is timely that the issue was finalized the same week that the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, after almost 13 years since the draft declaration was proposed in 1994 (United Nations, 2007). The nonbinding declaration passed despite objections from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, who cited inconsistencies with existing national laws.

The controversies and lengthy negotiations to pass the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples exemplify the challenges of diversity and context which characterize indigenous issues and demand ongoing attention. The notion of indigeneity is complex and highly contested. The term Indigenous is used in some contexts to refer to the aboriginal population of a nation or area—those who were the first-recorded human inhabitants. In Australasia, North America, and to a large extent Latin America, this interpretation is clearer, drawing a distinction between native peoples and European colonial settlers. In other areas, including Asia and the Middle East, distinctions are less clear. Colonization took place between ethnic groups within and between countries, and in some cases native populations were almost entirely eradicated. In other contexts, social hierarchies such as the Indian caste system establish categories of social position at birth, with some groups recognized as Indigenous or tribal on a sociocul-

tural basis. Nowhere is the idea more disputed than in the African continent, where all Africans claim indigeneity against comparison with white colonists.

Currently, Indigenous peoples number over 350 million individuals in more than 70 countries and represent more than 5000 languages and cultures (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2001). They are a diverse group of peoples, with very different views of the world. In this edition of *EcoHealth* you will find perspectives from Alaska, Australia, Burma, Cambodia, Canada, Guatemala, Kenya, Laos, Namibia, New Zealand, and Peru. Beyond their diversity, indigenous cultures converge toward a multifaceted view of human health that includes the health of the ecosystem in which humans live. These perspectives are grounded in ancient wisdom that is both timely and prescient when considering our present struggle to understand and respond to the intricate interrelationships between ecology and health.

Contemporary ecological, health, and social sciences have much to learn from the holistic philosophy of Indigenous peoples and their traditional expertise derived from centuries of refining knowledge about the links between ecosystems and health. These perspectives also present challenges for the scientific community. Not only is science challenged by the close interplay between spiritual, environmental, and cultural factors and their influence on indigenous well-being, but also by the increasing imperative and levels of accountability in relation to Indigenous participation, partnership, and equity in research. Ironically, exploitation of the land of Indigenous peoples has often been the result of scientific curiosity about—and high international demand for—resources that Indigenous communities have carefully managed and protected for centuries, including medicinal plants, forest products, and natural mineral resources (King, 1996; Fabricant and Farnsworth, 2001; Merson, 2000; Trotti, 2001). As international attention to the Rights of Indigenous Peoples gains momentum, those with interests in the interplay between health, ecology, and sustainability of natural resources will be obliged to develop new knowledge, attitudes, and skills to work with and learn from Indigenous peoples—moving well beyond the extractive tendencies of the past.

A special focus on indigenous perspectives on ecosystem sustainability and health provides a forum to profile

synergies within indigenous knowledge systems that can inform how we construct knowledge, make decisions, and live our daily lives. It also serves as a rallying cry and a provocation, challenging researchers, practitioners, and educators to consider how traditional expertise and Indigenous peoples can be respectfully included as part of the emerging ecohealth community. Our hope is that indigenous perspectives will form part of the fabric of *EcoHealth*, identifying and harnessing opportunities for innovation, integration, and application to reduce the burden on increasingly fragile ecosystems, and foster sustainable, healthy prospects for future generations.

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