



**Opening statement by
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Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity
on the occasion of the
Eighteenth session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Theme “Traditional knowledge: generation, transmission and protection”
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Honourable members of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, distinguished delegates, representatives of the world’s indigenous peoples,

I would like to start this morning by thanking the Elders of the Haudenosaunee League of Nations for providing us with their traditional blessing and for welcoming us to Turtle Island (North America).

It is a blessing that is repeated by the Mohawk Elders at the opening of every meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity’s Working Group on Traditional Knowledge in Montreal. For me, it has a sense of familiarity, a sense of place. Over the years, it has ensured a good outcome for our work with indigenous peoples. Thank you!

I am so pleased to be with you today for the opening of this esteemed body given this year’s theme: “Traditional knowledge: generation, transmission and protection” and given the lead role that the Convention has played internationally regarding the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous peoples.

I am also thrilled to see so many strong indigenous women in the room. I want to acknowledge my Sisters as the Guardians of the Seeds and the Keepers of Traditional Knowledge. This fourth full moon of the year is auspicious for indigenous women in North America – it is the celebration of Grandmother Moon.

I first came to appreciate the importance of biodiversity and related traditional knowledge — and its essential life-giving qualities for human society — as a young girl through my grandparents. They were family farmers in my native Romania, who used traditional agricultural methods that had been passed down for centuries to till the soil and provide for their families and their community.

My grandmother made everything by hand — I can still remember her weaving a traditional dress stitch-by-stitch out of the natural fibres that came directly from the animals she nurtured. Her hand-stitched garments would sometimes take months of work and produced a beauty and a cultural heritage that remain with me – and provide me warmth – to this day.

My grandparents were not alone — all of our ancestors have always lived off the land and waters in one form or another. And their traditional knowledge, often transmitted especially through women...grandmother to mother to daughter...have enabled us as a species to thrive for millennia.

We are now living in a world that, while still ultimately dependent on biodiversity and nature as the essential infrastructure supporting our lives and livelihoods, far too often loses sight of that simple truth.

That traditional knowledge is essential for our existence, our sense of identity and place.

The Permanent Forum’s theme this year addresses critical aspects of traditional knowledge: transmission, generation and protection. I will focus my remarks on these elements.

Let me start with the transmission of traditional knowledge.

The importance of transmitting traditional knowledge was brought home to me in a discussion with my colleague at the Secretariat, Ms. Viviana Figueroa, who hails from the Omaguaca-Kolla people of Northern Argentina.

Last year, she made a difficult decision to leave her United Nations post after almost a decade in Montreal and return, with her husband and two young daughters, Miski and Mayten, to their traditional community of Ocumazo¹ in the Argentinian Andes.

When I asked her what made her decide that, she took a deep breath and said her daughters must grow up on their traditional lands and receive their ancestral knowledge, to become the Keepers of Seeds and have access to their traditional lands and resources.

I was impressed with such a commitment to ensure that the ancestral knowledge of her community is transmitted to her daughters.

Indigenous women in that region sort and store seeds for the next year's crops, identifying healthy seeds, seeds that are drought-tolerant or water-resistant or pest-resistant.

It is through the sorting of the seeds that traditional knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next.

But it is also in this process that new knowledge is generated.

And this brings me to the second element of this year's theme, which is the generation of traditional knowledge.

It is through this process of generation of knowledge, along with innovations and new practices, which further enhance the links between nature and culture, binding communities together and fostering resilience cultures and ecosystems, that food diversity and security is preserved.

Separation of nature and culture is not possible for the indigenous peoples of the Americas, who regard themselves as descendants of the Maize, or the Squash, or the indigenous peoples of the Pacific, who are descended from the Taro.

In fact, the separation nature and culture is not possible for any traditional community or indigenous peoples since their very histories and values have developed in an intricate relationship with nature over millennia.

The transmission and the generation of traditional knowledge and culture, as well as the generation of innovations and practices, requires access to traditional territories, rights to customary sustainable use of nature's resources, and diverse and living indigenous languages.

I would be remiss in addressing knowledge transmission and generation if I did not add the significance of this year as the United Nations International Year of Indigenous Languages.²

Closely related to the loss of biodiversity — the intimate human languages of place — indigenous and local languages — the vehicles of diverse world views and value systems and cultural expressions — essential components of the living heritage of humanity — are all in danger of disappearing.

As you know, the Sami have more than 200 words for snow, but what they actually have are 200 words describing the quality and condition of the snow – its soul!

Hawaiians have more than 40 words for rain.

Bedouins have more than 160 words for camels, and more than 1,000 words related to the horse.

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

Indigenous languages, these intimate expressions of place and vehicles of diverse world views and value systems, are an essential part of the living heritage of humanity. They are in danger of

¹ "Miski" is an indigenous Quechua name meaning "sweet", "Amancay" is the name of a flower from the Andean region and "Mayten" the name of a tree).

² <https://en.iyil2019.org/>

disappearing and, with them, the knowledge, practices and cultural expressions that sustain biodiversity.

Each language represents a world view prioritizing that which is most important to those people. Sadly, these diverse world views are disappearing and, with them, the knowledge, practices and cultural expressions that sustain biodiversity.

We cannot promote nature-based solutions to the sixth extinction crisis, the Sustainable Development Goals or climate action unless culture is on the table and indigenous languages are healthy.

And this brings me to the third element of this year's theme, the protection of traditional knowledge.

Let me address the role of the Convention on Biological Diversity concerning the protection of traditional knowledge.

The Convention on Biological Diversity, which you may know, is the United Nations body responsible for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and the equitable sharing of benefits.

The Convention 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 and local communities.³

Additionally, Aichi Biodiversity Target 18 of the Convention's Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 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, and fully integrated and reflected in the implementation of the Convention

To assist Parties in implementing their obligations under the Convention, the Governing Body, the Conference of the Parties, has adopted, by consensus, principles and guidelines for implementation at the national level which include an extensive set of guidelines and principles 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 of benefits.

Overall, the guidance and principles adopted under the Convention highlight the need for the effective participation of indigenous peoples in all matters of direct relevance to them.

Therefore, these guidelines and principles are substantial contributions to protecting traditional knowledge as envisaged under Article 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions ...

Towards closing, I would like to leave you with two important messages about future work.

As the current Strategic Plan ends in 2020, the next two years are critical, as the Parties to the Convention consider the architecture and elements for a post-2020 global biodiversity framework, in order to achieve the Convention's vision of living in harmony with nature by 2050.

This is also a unique opportunity to further strengthen role of traditional knowledge and indigenous peoples in the future work of the Convention.

My first message is that, in the broad consultations on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework ... between now and the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties, in November 2020, in China ... the door is wide open to receiving ideas from indigenous peoples and the United

³ Article 8(j) is closely linked to other articles of the Convention, in particular Articles 10(c), 17.2 and 18.4.

Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples that are proposing new elements of work of relevant to indigenous peoples, as well as new institutional arrangements for indigenous people's participation.

In our consultations thus far, I see exciting proposals from indigenous peoples that can be shining lights in the post-2020 era.

For example, indigenous community conservation areas, as well as the in situ conservation of traditional crops and animals for local food systems and food security are very attractive proposals that have already been received from the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (which acts as an Indigenous Caucus to the Convention). I find these all very valuable.

I am also cognizant of indigenous peoples' strong desire to move beyond "observer" status under the Convention to achieve a new status recognizing them as "partners" in the implementation of the Convention.

My second message is about the importance of biological and cultural diversity, or nature and culture for ecosystem and community resilience, and, indeed, for the healthy transmission, generation and protection of traditional knowledge.

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

I believe that nature and culture are inseparable and only by recognizing their intrinsic value and by addressing them in synergy can we 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 fourteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties, in Egypt in November 2018, I proposed, together with our partners, UNESCO and IUCN, an initiative which was welcomed the Parties to the Convention 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 CBD, UNESCO, IUCN and Governments in understanding the links between biological and cultural diversity.

The alliance will serve as an inclusive multilevel platform for Parties, Governments, United Nations entities, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations, academia, faith-based communities to work on issues relevant to nature and culture, to have robust discussions and provide some possible elements for the consideration of the Conference of the Parties at its fifteenth meeting, aimed at bringing policymaking on nature and culture together in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

An international alliance for nature and culture could consider further strategies to ensure nature and culture are addressed together in the post-2020 era, including perhaps by calling on the General Assembly to declare an international decade for nature and culture, 2020 to 2030.

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 policy framework for biodiversity.

Shoulder to shoulder I stand with my indigenous sisters and brothers. 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 the traditional knowledge. Its contribution to human well-being and the conservation and sustainable use of nature, is immeasurable.

“Embracing our vulnerability and humility, let us
declare our utter dependence on the Earth, and on
each other: You are, therefore I am.” —

(Satish Kumar)
