

Mobile Indigenous Peoples travel for first time to a World Parks Congress:

A historical moment revisits South Africa with the creation of the *World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples*

On a hazy wintry seaside of Durban, huddled onto traditional floor mats of a large bright hotel room, some 30 representatives of mobile indigenous peoples in turbans to kangas come together to express their unique contributions to conservation and their special needs that have all too often been ignored. This is the Mobile Indigenous Peoples' preparatory meeting to define their formal recommendations and inputs to the Vth World Parks Congress of the IUCN.

Nomads, pastoralists, shifting agriculturalists and hunter-gatherers all find that they share similar pressures in common, posing serious threats to their cultural identity and lifestyles: reduced land area interrupting their travel routes, attempts at forced settlement and sedentarisation, pressure to "develop" and "civilise" them, and even persecution and violence, are among a mosaic of problems they have each written and pasted onto yellow and blue pastel cards on the wall in front of them. Their contributions to the environment are just as complex, from facilitating the pollination and sowing of diverse seed species, to harbouring vast ethno-botanic medicinal knowledge, upholding corridors between ecosystems, and offering sustainable production to local and national economies. The room hums with the whispered translations of overlapping interpreters of Mongolian, West Asian, African and other indigenous languages, and with energetic consultations among themselves as the issues are articulated. Everyone is alert and excited. At last, they are being heard.

Indigenous peoples have been knocking on the door of international organizations since 1920, when the first indigenous delegation arrived, also in winter, on the icy front steps of the League of Nations in Geneva (the pre-cursor of the United Nations). They were not allowed in. Since then, a very slow process that has taken decades has been recently building momentum. After two international conventions on indigenous rights, environmental instruments with special provisions on indigenous issues, we have most recently seen the establishment of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Equally comprised of government and indigenous experts, and reporting directly to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), it is placed at one of the highest levels in the UN system. The main claim of indigenous peoples may be summarized in a single word: the right to self-determination, which simply defined, is the right to be who they are.

While mobile indigenous peoples have always, to some degree, been participating in meetings of indigenous peoples, their unique needs have not yet gained sufficient recognition. Due to their very mobility, organization, communication and representation in international processes has been a greater challenge for them, and yet they are perhaps among the most vulnerable of indigenous peoples. For this reason, the consolidation of the **World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples** at IUCN's Vth World Parks Congress is a historic and long overdue achievement.

The diversity and yet commonality of mobile indigenous peoples can be seen by opening the window onto two poignant cases: one, in a concentrated area in South Asia, another in West Asia.

The mobile indigenous peoples of the Nilgiri district in Tamil Nadu, South India number approximately 25,000 and include some seven indigenous peoples who are honey collectors, forest dwellers, hunters, rotating agriculturalists, and pastoralists. Among these, the Toda peoples have always considered that Nilgiri is their heaven. They are self-sufficient with their natural resources and buffalo milk products. In the 18th century, they were given community land property. They didn't disturb nature; but conserved it in a sustainable way, using the grasslands as Sacred Land. Today, their land is being fragmented by eucalyptus plantations that have taken strongly to the soils and are invading native species, and Protected Areas were established from which the Toda are excluded. What's more, the Toda culture is different and attracts many people. However, they consider they are being picked like a flower. They don't have enough education to protect their land and economic development opportunities. The plea of the Toda people to the IUCN at the World Parks Congress is to recognize indigenous peoples' customary land values, to place restrictions on ecotourism, and to give benefits back to the people to survive on their own land with their animals. To the North, we would hear some echoes among the Banjara goatherders. Acclaimed to have been banquished from the ancient kingdom of Rajasthan and to have taken a vow never to settle again until they regain their throne, they are considered by some to be the germinating tribe of the world's gypsies. They maintain a regal traditional dress with handcrafted jewels, their own form of astrology, legends, dance and otherworldly songs that illumine their routes and camps as they travel and hold the distinctive pulse of their identity. To the Banjara, their lifestyle and relationships are sacred, and they are promised in marriage from childhood, one facet of a strong customary system that is still intact. Today, when following their traditional migratory routes, they increasingly run into privatised and agricultural lands. When their small white goats inevitably wander into crop fields, the angry locals come into their camps at night to beat the men and intimidate the families to move on. Having now suffered decades of a national forced settlement policy, they have been offered only the driest and most desolate lands, kilometres away from fresh water sources, in places where even there, they are not wanted.

As we move towards the wetlands of West Asia, we find the pastoralist Kuhi of Iran, who are offering a possible model towards solutions for sustaining a mobile lifestyle. The Kuhi are among some twenty subtribes of the Shish Bayli tribe of the Qashqais in the south of the country. Over the past several decades, land reforms and top-down policies have sought to nationalize natural resources, including rangelands, forests, water and wildlife, fragmenting and destroying their summer and winter pastures, imposing settlement on the Kuhi, and alienating them from their traditional common property lands and customary rights. However, scientific evidence and recognition is now growing that the Kuhi's lifestyle is well-adapted to ensuring the regeneration and biodiversity of their wetlands and rangelands, wherein their very mobility with the herds stimulate soil fertility and aration, prevent exhaustion of the ecosystems' species, and provide many other ecological services embedded in their complex social and cultural institutions. Today, they are among those who overwhelmingly admit that under present conditions, they would be eventually forced to give up their traditions and livelihoods, much to their regret and enormous cultural and material loss to the country. However, recent actions via a series of interwoven projects are offering them hope and empowerment by legislation for their customary law, restoring the natural resources of the tribe to common property ownership/control, and establishing their council of elders for overall consultations. As an alternative to a proposed landhold division for agricultural use of their traditional lands, the Kuhi have shown how one of their community conserved wetlands from time immemorial provides for water reserves, handicrafts and tent making, fish, medicinal plants, micro-climate control and wildlife. They have now petitioned relevant authorities to formally declare the wetland and surrounding rangelands as a Community Conserved Area (CCA) with use rights to be regulated by the elders. Under the IUCN categories, the overall CCA could be considered as a Category V area, and the wetlands as a Category II area, with a key objective of ecosystem management.

The mobile indigenous peoples coming together in Durban presented their own set of recommendations to the World Parks Congress (5.27, full text available on IUCN website), entitled “Mobile Indigenous Peoples and Protected Areas”, which include ten points that were adopted by the Congress. In summary, these call for recognition of and respect for: self-management; equitable benefits; customary law; collective rights; community conserved areas; transboundary mobility; seasonal and temporal rights; corridors for movement; traditional knowledge and institutions; restitution of traditional lands, territories and resources; free prior and informed consent; restoration of mobility where appropriate; and cross-cultural dialogue and conflict resolution among and between mobile indigenous and sedentary peoples in and around Protected Areas.

Finally, mobile indigenous peoples urge governments simultaneously meeting in Geneva to swiftly adopt the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1994), and for those peoples who want it, to ratify and effectively implement ILO convention 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples.

At the close of the World Parks Congress, Mobile Indigenous Peoples held a press conference and issued a press release where they presented their recommendations, endorsed the Dana Declaration on Mobile Indigenous Peoples (Dana, Jordan, 2002), and announced the establishment of their new World Alliance. Here, they presented their problems and vision in a core message:

- Policies of sedentarisation are a threat to mobile indigenous peoples’ cultural identity, to our capacity to manage land properly and lead to poverty.
- There are strong links between the lifestyle of mobile indigenous peoples and biodiversity.
- The problems of mobile indigenous peoples are very similar throughout the world.
- Mobile indigenous peoples have our own institutions, leadership, decision-making mechanisms, sanctions and law.
- The right to maintain our own social structures and norms should be respected, and those who want social services should be given equal access in culturally appropriate mobile ways.
- Mobile indigenous peoples have flexible and adaptive management systems requiring movement across different ecological zones and sometimes transboundary movement.
- The rights of mobile indigenous peoples in many countries have been abused, including rights to our culture, to maintain control and access to our resources, and our right to mobility.

Mobile indigenous peoples also fully aligned themselves with the recommendations on Indigenous Peoples and Conservation (5.24), calling for the recognition of indigenous territories as Protected Areas, the establishment of a Commission on Indigenous Peoples in the IUCN system, and (following the example of South Africa) a Commission on Truth and Reconciliation to deal with cases of forced eviction of indigenous peoples and other damages resulting from a problematic past in the establishment of Protected Areas. In this sense, the Vth World Parks Congress calls for the dawn of a new era in the very conception of Protected Areas.

In their official message spoken before the plenary of Vth World Parks Congress, a Kuhi representative of mobile indigenous peoples issued a call to the Congress and the international community:

“Together, we can be very powerful allies for conservation. Alone, we are likely to act at cross purposes and waste the best of our energies. Please help us maintain our nomadic lifestyles. This is not only the heart of our livelihoods. It also creates the bio-cultural corridors that you conservationists need as much as we do. Stand on our side in opposing the forcible settlements of our people and herds. Allow us to preserve the splendid genetic diversity of our herds, as well as the wildlife diversity that depend on it. Help us preserve our cultural integrity and build our capacities. Talk to us, involve us in decisions, refuse to understand us by stereotypes, and tell us how we can help you. We, the mobile indigenous peoples and pastoralist communities of the world, are prepared to be your strongest allies in conservation. *Are you?*”

- Mónica Castelo, IUCN Social Policy
Written in consultation with mobile indigenous representatives present at the
Vth World Parks Congress, Durban

For further information:
www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/tilcepa
www.cenesta.org
www.danadeclaration.org