

Philanthropy and Indigenous Peoples: Ancient Wisdom for Today's Earth Challenges

By Evelyn Arce-White, International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) and
Cynthia Frisch, Gaia Global Consulting

In 2005, the Foundation Center reported that US foundations gave \$3.8 billion for international projects; only 0.003 percent supported indigenous-related projects. This trend must change, for, as the earth faces crises from indiscriminate and often abusive use of resources, some indigenous peoples who have sustained a deep connection with the natural world have the potential to play a critical role in our efforts to protect the planet. The Colombian shaman Don Luciano Mutumbajoy articulated this reality so clearly in a session at the 2001 EGA Retreat: “While we have a great deal to learn from you about technology in terms of saving the earth, what you need to learn from us is the spiritual technology of saving the earth.”

Spiritual Technology

In 1990, BBC reporter Alan Ereira filmed “From the Heart of the World – The Elder Brothers’ Warming,” a documentary about the Kogi tribe, a little-known indigenous community in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of Colombia who consider themselves caretakers of the earth. In one scene, the Kogi *mamas*, or shamans, say that they can see the end of the world coming, and that they, the elder brothers, need to get a message to us, the younger brothers, to do something to change. From an intimacy with their isolated and extraordinarily diverse region, they had been able to read the entire unraveling of the earth’s ecosystems caused by global warming.



Their deep concern led them to communicate with the outside world through that film and, when their message wasn’t heeded, to travel to Washington, DC and New York in 2006 for events sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme. Kogi representatives continued to reinforce their message at the 2008 UN Climate Change Conference in Poznan, Poland:

We are concerned about the path of destruction being invented by the scientific orientation and so we ask of the present governments: If the second tsunami or third hole appears in the sky, do your scientific advisers have the knowledge to avert this catastrophe? Is it that you understand fully...the secrets of the land? Do you control the winds? Do you know the power of the waters? Be respectful of what you do not know and what you cannot dominate with your rational formulations.

These indigenous leaders give just a few examples of ancient wisdom that lives in these cultures, giving us a glimpse of the “spiritual technology” that holds important keys to all of our survival. Clearly, the paradigm for how we have lived up until now cannot work forever. We need examples – not necessarily of returning to total simplicity or living in a hut but of how to live in a *reciprocal* relationship with the earth. This insight is very sophisticated, very current, and very practical– and therefore, very worthy for environmental grantmakers to explore further as part of the broader vision of grantmaking for the environmental movement.

Fundamental Principles of Life

What is this knowledge that some indigenous peoples hold that can benefit the rest of humanity? Perhaps the word “consciousness” might best express it. For some indigenous people, particularly those more isolated from modern culture, traditional knowledge is still a part of their cosmology or world view. It is a way of being, a state of being, and in some ways, a state of grace.

In the Q’ero tradition of the Andes, for example, one of the fundamental guiding principles is *Ayni*, best translated as reciprocity and respect. It implies “the conscious and willing acknowledgement of the interconnection between humans and the natural world,” as Dr. James Williams writes in *The Andean Codex: Adventures and Initiations Among the Peruvian Shamans*. *Ayni* often takes the form of ritual offerings to the earth and to all of nature, to return something for all that has been given to sustain their lives. In this way, life is a constant process of receiving and giving back in appreciation and gratitude. Historically, in traditional cultures like the Q'ero and many others, there is the general understanding that humans, plants, and animals share a common spirit-life, and that the earth is a living, breathing organism. In Western culture, it is similar to the Gaia principle. However, the difference between holding the

concept and living it fully from moment to moment can mean the difference between environmental degradation and sustainability.

For some indigenous peoples, these are fundamental principles of life, and ultimately, of survival. How we translate these principles to modern culture has yet to be defined, although offsetting one's carbon footprint is a beginning point for a Western translation of *Ayni*. In traditional indigenous communities, however, these principles are so deeply ingrained that these cultures often react to the impacts of climate change in very creative ways, drawing on traditional knowledge and other technologies for adaptation strategies that could help society at large to cope with today's earth challenges.

In Bangladesh, for example, villagers are creating floating vegetable gardens to protect their livelihoods from flooding. In Guyana, tribal people are moving from their savannah homes to forest areas during droughts and have started planting cassava, their main staple crop, on moist floodplains which are normally too wet for other crops. In North America, some indigenous groups are focusing on wind and solar power on tribal lands as the key resource for energy, replacing fossil fuel-derived energy and limiting greenhouse gas emissions.

Preserving, Communicating, and Soliciting Earth Wisdom

The indigenous cosmology has the potential to penetrate our way of thinking if we are exposed to and interface with this consciousness in a variety of ways. Addressing the preservation of this knowledge is clearly an important first step. As expressed by Dr. Mark Plotkin of the Amazon Conservation Team, an NGO that protects the rainforest and the ancient wisdom of its medicine men and women: "The most endangered species of the Amazon is the shaman." Shamans are the community's healers and spiritual leaders, and the loss of a shaman is tantamount to losing a library. The work of his organization and that of the Ringing Rocks Foundation, which conserves indigenous healing practices and cultural traditions through various initiatives worldwide, recognizes the importance of protecting this knowledge for the benefit of all before it is gone forever.

A second critical strategy is the communication and integration of traditional knowledge in ways that mainstream individuals, communities, and corporations can grasp. The Pachamama Alliance, an NGO preserving rainforests by empowering indigenous people as well as fostering a new global vision of sustainability, provides a rare example of this effort by incorporating indigenous principles into their innovative multimedia environmental symposium, "Awakening

the Dreamer, Changing the Dream,” which has been presented to diverse audiences around the world.

A third strategy involves ensuring that indigenous peoples who embody this traditional knowledge are at the table at key global environmental conferences and summits. Recognizing their emergence as important voices in defining a sustainable future and funding their ability to participate in key events can enable us to begin to integrate their sustainable cosmology into our own.

The integration of ancient wisdom that can lead to a shift in consciousness is a subtle process, one that is not easily defined. Funding indigenous projects in all of the key areas is just one way to forward our environmental agenda. With creative approaches and partnering with Indigenous leaders, no doubt more can be discovered to better understand and integrate the “spiritual technology” of preserving the earth.

Foundations are invited to the upcoming International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) Conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico, April 3-5, 2009; contact ifip@internationalfunders.org and to the Indigenous Peoples' Global Summit on Climate Change in Anchorage, Alaska, April 20-24, 2009; contact pcochran@aknsc.org. IFIP is also available to advise funders in effective funding for indigenous initiatives.