

## **Funding Indigenous Conservation**

### *International Funders for Indigenous Peoples Strives to Protect Pristine Environments*

by Evelyn Arce-White, International Funders for Indigenous Peoples

Land preservation efforts by indigenous peoples are a struggle that spans the generations. Yet the plight of ancient peoples to preserve pristine ecosystems generally goes unnoticed. This is the reality of the nearly 370 million indigenous peoples in more than 70 countries worldwide, whose involvement stems from a deeply inherent and sacred relationship with the land.

For the United Nations and most of the international community, indigenous peoples are defined as those who predate any other ethnic group in an area and have a unique spiritual connection to land that is expressed in their culture. This definition, however, fails to understand the significance and importance that the land has for indigenous cultures. There is no comprehension of the ancient proverb stated nearly 200 years ago by Chief Seattle that “Every part of this Earth is sacred to my people.” Little understanding of the deep connection and hallowed respect for the land by Indigenous Peoples and the integral role it plays in their very existence.

For many funders, indigenous peoples are exotic and their projects far removed from typical grantee portfolios. But indigenous peoples are the largest minority in the world. In every country, indigenous populations are typically the most impoverished and underrepresented group. Despite the fact that much of their traditional territories contain vast natural resources, oil and gas exploration does little but bring large-scale disruption to once pristine environments and traditional ways of life.

Clearly, a global approach to address indigenous issues is essential. Of primary importance is protecting and preserving more than 80 percent of the world’s remaining biodiversity, which is generally found within indigenous peoples’ lands and territories. This and other issues led to the formation of International Funders for Indigenous Peoples to more effectively manage efforts to support indigenous development efforts.

### Networking International Funders for Indigenous Peoples

International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) is a United States-based affinity group that grew out of First Nations Development Institute’s twenty-four years of work promoting Native American self-determination and economic self-reliance. It has quickly become an internationally recognized forum within which funders can exchange ideas and experiences, as well as interact

with representatives of indigenous communities. All these efforts contribute to giving funders direct access to information relevant to their grantmaking activities.

Since its establishment in 1999, IFIP has provided a voice within the Council on Foundations for increased, dedicated funding for international indigenous initiatives and a venue for communication and resource sharing among international funders of indigenous peoples. This is accomplished through a variety of existing and proposed workshops, a bi-annual newsletter (“The Sharing Circle”), research reports, a website ([www.internationalfunders.org](http://www.internationalfunders.org)), regular communications, a monthly e-newsletter (“The Sharing Network”), and an annual conference (Linking Circles).

### Conservation Funding and the Indigenous Divide

At IFIP's 2004 Linking Circles conference, president of First Nations Development Institute and founder of IFIP Rebecca Adamson revealed research indicating that funding for conservation projects that goes directly to indigenous communities from large multilateral organizations—such as the World Bank and USAID—is less than six-thousandths of one percent. This finding underscores the need for IFIP's increased role in ameliorating the economic hardship of indigenous communities throughout the world.

“We need to build the awareness of the capacity on the ground because what we also have seen in our research is that indigenous people are some of the best conservationists out there,” stated Adamson. “It is cheaper conservation; it's better conservation; it's cost effective.”

The summer 2004 edition of “The Sharing Circle” included an article by Jennifer Golarz of the Garfield Foundation, who attended last year's IFIP conference. She wrote of a session on environmental conservation and indigenous stewardship in which case studies were presented demonstrating that, typically, large international conservation efforts disregard indigenous ancestral and land tenure rights. She wrote that few foundations recognize the significant role that indigenous peoples play in sustaining the planet's biodiversity.

### Linking Circles, Linking Environments

At IFIP'S fourth annual Linking Circles conference, held at the Open Society Institute in May 2005, which was hosted in conjunction with the United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples in New York City, grantmakers were afforded a greater understanding of global indigenous concerns and issues. A glance at the conference's workshops leaves little doubt that a key area of IFIP's concern is in the field of conservation. Sessions included Biodiversity and

Conservation, Indigenous Peoples and Water, Indigenous Peoples and Extractive Industries, Human Rights and Environmental Strategies for Accountability and Change, to name a few.

Since IFIP held its first Linking Circles meeting in 2001, interest has grown from two dozen indigenous leaders and funders to nearly 100 in 2005. IFIP's network of funders, dedicated to more effective grantmaking in international indigenous communities, continues to grow.

### Congo: Conservation vs. Indigenous Peoples

Roger Muchuba, a lawyer with the Heritiers de la Justice in Bukavu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, was a panelist in a Linking Circles session titled "Indigenous Stewardship, Biodiversity, and Conservation," which focused on indigenous peoples' relationship with their land as one of environmental stewardship. The session discussed indigenous efforts to promote and practice many of the desired objectives outlined in the mission statements of conservation organizations, although many environmental conservation organizations have shown little regard for indigenous peoples' ancestral land tenure.

Muchuba spoke of the Twa (pygmies), indigenous people of Congo who are being forcibly evicted from their land. Nine national parks are being created in the Congo, and the Conservation Law of 1982 states that no human activities can take place in the parks. As displaced people, they lost all properties and have experienced casualties, injuries, and violence. All community structure was destroyed. Some observers, Muchuba said, have concluded that the Congolese are victims of their own wealth of natural resources.

### Language to Protect the Environment

In a Linking Circles presentation entitled "Greenbacks in the Garden of Eden," Simon Counsell, executive director of the Rainforest Foundation UK, spoke to the conference about the tensions between conservation and indigenous peoples in developing countries.

He states that the conservationists' language has changed to one of "participation" and "people-centered processes," but without significant organizational change or realignments of political, scientific, and bureaucratic powers. In other words, some of the large conservation groups are telling donors what they want to hear, but they are actually just carrying on "business as usual." He further said that, in many instances of conservation funding, as the money has flowed in, indigenous people have flowed out.

Commenting on the role of IFIP, Ecuador's former Ambassador to the US Raul Gangotena, a Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow at the International Forum for Democratic Studies, stated,

“Although the strongest indigenous movements rely mostly on their own resources, IFIP provides opportunities for networking and the tools to make indigenous assets yield benefits for indigenous people and their communities. This is certainly the sustainable way to defeat poverty and deter discrimination.”

### Genocide Of Botswana’s Bushmen Tried Before the International Criminal Court

Many of you may know that there is a largely unpublicized genocide occurring in Botswana.

The Gana and Gwi San Bushmen of Botswana were forcibly evicted from their homeland, the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR), in 2002 to make way for diamond concessions and to be “mainstreamed” away from their hunter-gatherer culture. Since then they have languished in resettlement camps while their leaders attempt to sue the government to be allowed to return. The government has broken their own laws to move the Bushmen. The court case is going nowhere, as the Bushmen’s lawyers are dependent on donor money, which runs out every time the government stalls the case. Meanwhile the women, unable to gather food and with no work, are forced to prostitute themselves. HIV and AIDS, almost unknown before the people were moved, are now taking a lethal toll. Sexual abuse of children in schools and rape are daily realities. The men, unable to hunt (their licenses to hunt were rescinded before the evictions) drink and fall prey to alcohol-related violence. Those that try to hunt are arrested and sometimes tortured.

These abuses have been going on unchecked for more than three years, and the community is dying at an unsustainable rate. Of the 242 Bushmen (out of a total population of about 3,000) who signed the land claim currently in the Botswana courts, at least 10 percent have died. And the death rate appears to be accelerating. Meanwhile the government claims that it will never allow them to go home and that they will “perish like the dodo” if they resist. The irony seems to be that, with no choice but to sit in the camps as the government dictates, they are perishing anyway.

There is hope, though. Despite the government’s effective blocking of the land claim in the Botswana courts, and their ignoring of the international outcry in the media and among human rights groups, the Gana and Gwi have managed—through the Indigenous Land Rights Fund—to secure the pro bono services of the international lawyers of the Public International Law and Policy Group (PILPG), in Washington, DC. If evidence of cultural genocide can be gathered, the PILPG will bring the case before the ICC free of charge. US\$60,000 is needed to send a team of 15 evidence gatherers out to the resettlement camps this November and December, with the ICC case poised to begin in the New Year.

The Bushmen only want the right to go home to the CKGR—land that was specifically set aside for them in 1961. They are not asking for mineral rights and telling the government not to mine their land. They simply want to live on their ancestral land with the same high level of self-determination that they had before.

Evelyn Arce-White (Chibcha descent) is executive director for International Funders for Indigenous Peoples, an affinity group of the Council of Foundations.

For a complete report of the conference, or to determine if there could be unintended consequences in your conservation funding that do not support indigenous peoples' rights, International Funders for Indigenous Peoples can be contacted for advice at email [ifip@internationalfunders.org](mailto:ifip@internationalfunders.org)

For further information and how to give emergency donations, please contact Evelyn Arce-White of International Funders for Indigenous Peoples at [ifip@internationalfunders.org](mailto:ifip@internationalfunders.org).

For info on the benefits of becoming an esteemed member, visit [www.internationalfunders.org](http://www.internationalfunders.org).