

Protecting indigenous culture in the Amazon

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“Reviving indigenous and traditional knowledge and culture” has become an important catchphrase in the of meetings and international fora on rainforest conservation. The role of indigenous peoples in the management of their own territories and protected areas is increasingly recognised as is their contribution towards environment and sustainability indicators and biodiversity targets. But how is it actually done? How does the reviving of knowledge and culture take place?

Across the eastern flank of the Colombian Amazon, indigenous communities from the Tanimuka, Letuama, Yukuna, Matapi, Makuna,

Barasana, Eduria, Tatuyo, Tuyuca, Niamepacu and other ethnic groups have been, during the last decade, reviving their mythology, customs and rituals, rebuilding their malocas (community long-houses) and rediscovering traditional varieties of domesticated crops. They are now stepping up to take responsibility for ecological governance of the Colombian Amazon, along with the unenviable task of warding off mining companies. And their achievements are encouraging local communities in neighbouring rivers and faraway continents.

Without doubt, the legislative context in Colombia has been a prime factor.

The Political Constitution provides a framework for indigenous rights, backed by the endorsement of key international agreements such as the ILO Convention 169 and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The lands where they have traditionally lived (now referred to as resguardos) are recognised on a par with other territorial entities, such as municipalities and provinces; thereby local indigenous organisations become public entities responsible for managing their resguardos and receive state funds for this purpose.

This opens a wide window of possibilities for setting up indigenous health, education and other services that provide for the real needs of the local people, without further eroding their cultural identity and knowledge. Gaia Amazonas has enabled communities in the Colombian Amazon to take advantage of this window. It encouraged them to take time and look back at how their ancestors lived, to compare this to how they are living now, and why; and finally to chart a path towards how they would like to live in the future.

One of the problems they encountered was that the younger generation were not only fast losing their traditional knowledge, but they had lost the custom of sitting up all night in the mambadero, listening and memorising the teachings of the elders. But it was the communities themselves who came up with a solution: the younger generation, many of whom had received a non-indigenous education at Catholic schools, would become researchers of their own traditions.

‘The elders would say, “what is happening here? Why aren’t the young respecting us? Why are they underestimating the sacred sites and our traditional knowledge? It is because they go to school where another vision of the world

is imposed". This led us to analyse where the essence of the problem was and to start researching our tradition with the elders". Tarsicio Vanegas, Maestro comunitario / Etnia Itana

Armed with tape recorders, cameras, pens and paper and computers, men and women from the small villages dotted along the banks of the Apaporis, Pirá Paraná. Mirití, Isana, Tiquie and other rivers, began to track down the most knowledgeable elders, transcribe interviews, draw maps, take photographs and gather a rich tapestry of information, history, geographical data, myths, seeds and knowledge which they wrote up and systematised.

They started 15 years ago. Today the fruits of the process are increasingly evident. The work has been mainly carried out in groups, divided up according to ethnicity and gender, and overseen by a shaman or elder woman. Men focused on the origin of the territory, sacred natural sites, the myths and rituals; the women investigated the origin of cultivated food, seeds, and their own myths and rituals. Soon they had developed their own, new, methodologies of mapping this information. Circular calendars capture the cyclical movement of the constellations and the seasons. They are a dynamic and beautiful way to chart the times and spaces of the forest, the ebbs and flows of nature and the rivers, the seasons, the breeding patterns of fish and animals, the times when hunting is allowed and when fruits should be harvested, and the health of the community and times when sickness prevails. Over 300 researchers were involved.

In the words of Guillermo Rodriguez of the Majiña ethnic group: "We started taping the elders, transcribing and getting organised by ethnic groups. It was tough. The elders didn't focus on what we wanted to know. We would tell them" tell us like this". Eventually we managed. We

saw the results and we were happy, we were entering our real education: where we came from, where we received the sacred elements to care for our territory, how to bring up our children, how to care for our gardens. The women also participate in this research..."

As the researchers began to unearth and revive their culture, so they revived the (often neglected) community spaces, alongside new ways for transferring this knowledge from one generation to the next. Soon they were drafting study plans and organising community schools where the local language and culture is prevalent, and developing health programmes that draw on the traditional medicinal plants and wisdom.

The intangible results are equally valid, such as the growth in self-confidence and the re-valuing of language and cultural identity. In 2008, indigenous communities along the Apaporis River called on the Government to create a national park over their territory – a park covering one million hectares of tropical forest - to keep gold mining out of their territory and to protect one of the region's most important sacred natural sites. Over 50 indigenous researchers have been producing maps and texts of their sacred natural sites, their rituals, and traditional ways of living in harmony with the forest. In a landmark agreement with the National Parks office, the indigenous inhabitants have responsibility for the Yaigoje Apaporis National Park, and have established 'reviving indigenous and traditional knowledge and culture' as its central axis.

Along the Pirá Paraná River community research also has an important role in putting the breaks on mining concessions, providing the compelling substance for a successful application to the Colombian Government, and then to UNESCO, to register their cultural



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View of La Pedrera village from the Caquetá river.

knowledge and practices as Intangible Cultural Heritage in urgent need of safeguarding. Indigenous communities of nearby Isana and Tiquié Rivers were inspired to start their own process of reviving their cultural memory, to then chart their path ahead. As a result, a major bi-national agreement has been established between Colombia and Brazil to safeguard indigenous intangible cultural heritage across more than 70 million hectares of tropical rainforest in the northwest Amazon.

The wildfire of cultural revival in the eastern Colombian Amazon has spread across to traditional communities in Africa. Thanks to an exchange visit, in 2009 Amazon indigenous leaders had the opportunity to share their experience and hold a training workshop on what their African colleagues have since termed "talking tools". The workshop in Venda, northern South Africa, planted the seed for community research projects for the revival of knowledge and culture, ongoing in South Africa, Kenya and Ethiopia, and emerging in Benin and Zimbabwe.

"Now the people have become aware, they are starting to think that to live in the forest they must understand it, they must have the knowledge of our elders. I think this research will never end."

Juan Buitrago, Barasana Shaman