

Arctic Indigenous Language Symposium

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Indigenous Languages:

An Important Key to Protecting the Arctic Environment

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I would like to start off with a little story, which most of you probably will recognize, and that I hope will illustrate our relationship with the nature.

Cloudberry picking with my mum is our arena of transferring local knowledge and language. When we are walking, she would talk all the time and tell about the places we pass and what to keep in mind to we find our way. She will repeat the same every time when we take that very route. Knowing it is difficult to remember it all at once and that I might not always pay enough attention.

During one of our trips some years ago, we were staying over night in the fells. We were sitting and chatting in the evening, after a day of berry picking. It was a clear August night. I asked what our plans should be for the next morning, where else to find the berries, now we had been picking all day already and it was five of us. Well, she said, we should go and check out this and that area. There use to be berries. After talking through this, she watched the clear sky above us, and added: if he does not get the berries himself first.

I have heard this kind of expressions many times before. There is something or someone out there you can not control. It is expressed quite often. On the background of my Christian upbringing, and without further reflection, I used to think this is a reference to the Christian God. But this time, however, it struck me that our language is much older than the Christianity in our area. And the reference was made to a power or something, outside of our control. I realised

that this was not simply a Christian God, but an expression of the relationship with nature. We are part of it and we depend on it, but we cannot control it or the gifts we get from it. If we are fortunate and we are meant to get the berries - the frost will not hit them over night.

I think this world view also represents respect for the nature and the environment. The understanding, the respect, the perspective, the connection, the knowledge - is passed on from my mum to me through the language.

Exactly the unique relationship between traditional knowledge contained in the indigenous languages and biological diversity is recognized internationally by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), to which also Hugues Sicard from UNESCO briefly refer to yesterday.

So what is this convention about? It is signed by 150 government leaders at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the Convention on Biological Diversity is dedicated to promoting sustainable development. Conceived as a practical tool for translating the principles of Agenda 21 into reality, the Convention recognizes that biological diversity is about more than plants, animals and micro organisms and their ecosystems – it is about people and our need for food security, medicines, fresh air and water, shelter, and a clean and healthy environment in which to live.

The objectives of this Convention, to be pursued in accordance with its relevant provisions, are the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources, (...)

One of the articles of the convention, Article 8(j), is concerning the traditional knowledge, innovations and practices, it says:

“Subject to national legislation, respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge innovations and practices.”

In short we say: protection of traditional knowledge, innovations and practises.

As you can imagine, it is a huge undertaking to try to reach the objective of this convention, but as a step on the way the Parties to the Convention committed themselves (at COP 6, 2002) **to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level as a contribution to poverty alleviation and to the benefit of all life on Earth.**

Two years later (COP 7, in 2004) the parties adopted a **framework** to facilitate the assessment of progress towards achieving the 2010 Biodiversity Target. The framework includes **seven focal areas**, including: Protecting traditional knowledge, innovations and Practices. For each of the focal areas, goals, sub-targets and indicators have been identified.

As a proxy for informing on the focal area “Status of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices”, it was recommended (by SBSTTA) to work on an indicator on **“Status and trends of linguistic diversity and numbers of speakers of indigenous languages”** by this recognizing the fundamental linkage between language and traditional knowledge related to biodiversity.

As Hugues mentioned yesterday, UNESCO has kindly offered to undertake the task of gathering and developing data on this indicator.

The rationale behind this indicator is that the extinction of each language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural, historical and ecological knowledge. Indigenous peoples have elaborated complex classification systems for the natural world, reflecting a deep understanding of local flora, fauna, ecological relations and ecosystem dynamics. The indigenous language is a crucial vehicle for expressing and transmitting this traditional ecological knowledge.

When young people no longer learn the language of their ancestors, or know it only partially and instead learn and use another majority or dominant language, the special knowledge incorporated in their ancestral language is often not transferred to the dominant language that replaces it. Commonly, this is because the dominant language does not have the vocabulary for this special knowledge, or even because the very situations in which this kind of knowledge is relevant for survival do not occur in the dominant culture.

Information on status and trends of numbers of speakers of indigenous languages may therefore be used as a proxy for measuring trends in the status of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices.

The work on this indicator is a huge undertaking and by 2010, the basis for predictions will most likely be regional case studies.

Conclusion

I wanted to take this opportunity to address the work of the CBD, to emphasize that the indigenous languages are important keys to protecting also the Arctic Environment, being the title of this session and that this understanding is internationally recognized.

There are already close linkages between the work of the CBD and the Arctic Council, this being another one we could pursue. Even though all Arctic states are not parties to the convention.

But I'll ensure you, there is a growing participation of indigenous peoples' participation speaking at the CBD meetings, and there is an ad hoc network established to facilitate the indigenous contributions, the International indigenous Biodiversity Network (IIFB). Last COP in May around 300 indigenous representatives participated at COP and also attended the IIFB caucus.

The information presented here, is gathered from the CBD web side and UNESCO working documents.

Giitu / thank you
