

Indigenous Stewardship Preserves Biodiversity at Less Cost

BY REBECCA L. ADAMSON, FIRST PEOPLES WORLDWIDE; AND ALIFERETI TAWAKE, PROJECT MANAGER FOR THE LOCALLY MANAGED MARINE AREA NETWORK, UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

It is no coincidence that 80 percent of Earth's remaining biodiversity areas are also indigenous homelands. For centuries, indigenous peoples have successfully managed these lands, waters, and wildlife without recognition. It is time for conservationists and environmental funders alike to realize the value of indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge in the sustainable use of resources, as well as the lower costs inherent in indigenous conservation.

Photo: First Peoples Worldwide



Peru: An instructor teaches a technical workshop designed by First Peoples Worldwide.

The Conservation Crisis

Over the past 40 years, the area of protected global surface has expanded from 2.4 million to more than 20 million square kilometers, according to a 2004 study by the United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre. Nevertheless, this figure represents only about 12 percent of the Earth's terrestrial surface and less than 1 percent of its marine systems, falling short of goals adopted by the 6th Conference of the Parties to the Convention of Biological Diversity to protect 15 percent of terrestrial and 30 percent of marine ecosystems by 2010. Meanwhile, costs have increased: Since the mid-1990s, funding for administration and management of protected areas has more than doubled, to about \$6.5 billion US, according to a 2003 report by IUCN, the World Conservation Union. Yet the consensus among conservation groups is that current spending is grossly inadequate for meeting the costs of maintaining existing sites, much less ensuring the type of global system envisioned to protect the areas necessary to preserve the majority of Earth's biodiversity — estimates for which range as high as \$45 billion annually over 30 years.

Funding Not Reaching Targeted Areas

Indigenous people hold land claims to up to 24 percent of the Earth's surface. If only half of these territories were protected, the area under protection would double.

Indigenous people hold land claims to up to 24 percent of the Earth's surface. They should be included in the control and management of protected areas where they already reside.

But currently, most of the monies governments and private donors earmark for protected areas are in developed countries, despite that developing countries have more area set aside to protect. When funds do make it to developing countries, the money rarely reaches indigenous peoples. For example, a 2006 preliminary report by First Peoples Worldwide on four major conservation organization-funded projects in Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, and Polynesia-Micronesia found that less than 1 percent of the financing supported conservation efforts by indigenous peoples.

Conservation projects that do target indigenous areas have other expenses to consider, such as financial compensation to indigenous people moved off their lands to establish protected areas. While this practice is relatively rare, a 1994 study by the Conservation Finance Alliance projected that such costs could reach as high as \$90 billion over a 10-year period.

The Indigenous Solution

A more financially viable, and environmentally sensible, alternative is to include indigenous peoples in the control and management of protected areas where they already reside. After all, they possess a wealth of traditional knowledge they have used to preserve their lands for millennia. Because most indigenous peoples prefer to remain on their lands, engaging them in land-conservation initiatives creates a win-win opportunity for both conservationists and these communities.

Unlike the conventional science-based model widely practiced by conservation groups — which aims to leave areas in pristine condition and without such vestments of human habitation as settlements, agriculture, and hunting — the indigenous stewardship model practiced by traditional communities sees people not as separate from, but an integral part of, the landscape. Indigenous people perceive protection of their lands to mean avoiding their destruction through sustainable use, rather than avoiding their use altogether. Otherwise, indigenous approaches to conservation are often similar to conventional management models.

Greater Protection at Lowered Costs

Indigenous-led projects throughout the world are already setting high standards for cost-efficient management of protected areas. These projects provide measurable and significant benefits for entire communities because entire communities are involved in their implementation.

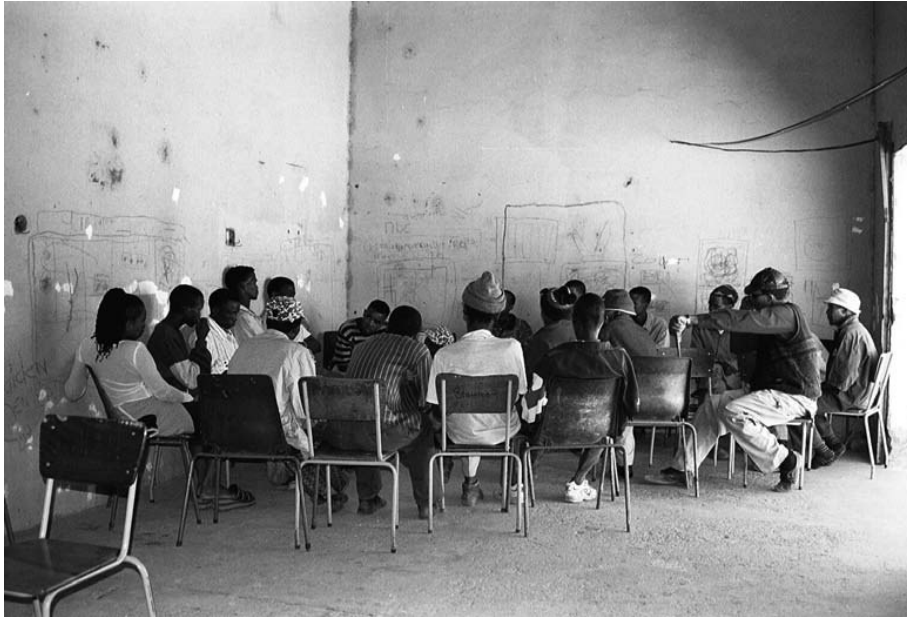
In Fiji, for example, coastal communities working with university scientists are saving marine species one village at a time by employing a traditional method of designating marine replenishing areas — called *tabus* — within the village's indigenous fishing grounds. From April 1997 to August 2000, the population of the kaikoso clam increased by 1,353 percent in the *tabu* area and 523 percent in the area adjacent to the *tabu*.

The coastal water zones that surround the *tabu* areas are called locally managed marine areas (LMMAs). In 2006, Fiji had 177 LMA sites with 108 *tabu* areas. Another 100 LMMAs are in the process of being established in Fiji and have been set up in other areas in the Pacific. A 2006 report by Tawake Alifereti and Dr. Bill Aalbersburg



Photo: Cable Brand

Botswana: A San woman makes traditional crafts.



South Africa: Locals attend a technical workshop designed by First Peoples Worldwide. Its Indigenous Stewardship Initiative focuses on helping indigenous communities achieve the capacity to engage in conservation initiatives on their homelands.

of the University of the South Pacific indicated that the total investment in Fiji's 7,010 square kilometers of LMMAs was \$4 million over 10 years, or just \$5.70 per hectare and \$91 per *tabu* area.

Additional Community Benefits

For the past 10 years, the government of Australia has asked indigenous landowners to declare their lands protected and then to manage them. In exchange, it provides a no-frills core budget (\$3.1 million, or 2.1 cents per hectare, for 2006–2007). The Indigenous Protected Areas Program (IPAP), as it is known, has resulted in an additional 22 protected areas totaling 14.9 million hectares. Because conservation activities are performed by indigenous peoples on their own homelands, no costs are involved in obtaining the land, no legal battles are enjoined, and no public outcry is heard. In January of this year, the government announced that it was doubling funding for the project.

The IPAP's benefits go far beyond the scope of ecological conservation. A study by Brian Gilligan for the Department of the Environment and Heritage, Australia found that 99 percent of the project's indigenous-protected-area communities reported economic participation and development benefits from involvement with the project; 60 percent had positive outcomes for early childhood development; 85 percent saw improved early school engagement; 74 percent reported a reduction in substance abuse; and 74 percent noted restored relationships and reinforced family and community structures.

A Model for Conservation Transition

Clearly, grassroots efforts to restore traditional ties between sustainable use of assets and environmental and cultural stewardship practices represent a promising means of promoting environmental renewal, food-systems restoration, and cultural rejuvenation. The vast knowledge of indigenous peoples could be put into practice on a much wider scale to conserve biodiversity for centuries to come. But this effort will require financial and technical support to succeed.

Programs such as the First Peoples Worldwide Indigenous Stewardship Initiative (ISI) have the power to change the way conservation is practiced throughout the world. The initiative focuses on helping indigenous communities achieve the capacity to engage in conservation initiatives on their homelands. Besides offering technical assistance and training, ISI also directs these communities to funding sources, including its own Indigenous Stewardship Fund, which gives small, targeted grants directly to communities.

As other funders become more aware of the cost savings to be achieved by engaging indigenous stewardship as part of their conservation strategy, it is hoped that they will reach out to these communities and make more resources available to them. Never in the history of modern conservation has there been a more exciting opportunity to achieve so much for so little. ■