

## On the Value of Conserving Human Cultural Diversity

The machine does not isolate us from the great problems of nature but plunges us more deeply into them.

— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des Hommes* (1939)

As cultural beings, our perceptions of and attitudes toward the environment are structured not just by our own upbringing and personality, but by the deep history of our ancestors' relationships with the harsh environments in which they managed to survive. This knowledge has been passed down to us, the land's fleeting occupants, from the preceding generations through the inheritance of both hard-coded genetic material and cultural traits, such as our norms and values. These act as a filter over our vision of the world around us, dictating how we receive and respond to the information with which we are constantly presented. Every interaction with the environment and each other is structured by this dual biological and cultural inheritance.

With this view comes the understanding that our reasons and methods for utilizing, conserving, and managing natural resources are not inherently the best or only solutions. They are merely the ways in which our culture approaches the issues and conflicts that accompany society's interactions with our environment. Other cultures, whether they share our ecology or whether they live elsewhere in the world with an entirely different set of challenges, often possess contrasting views. Because these ideas are cultural and structured by a people's own particular histories and values, they cannot be judged in the light of our own histories and values. Cultural relativism, the principle that cultural beliefs are objectively neutral when divorced from cultural systems of moral judgment, is a difficult but important concept to keep in mind, our lives laden as they are with layers of cultural meaning. The variety of human cultures in any one area has an equally varied array of attitudes toward the natural environment and how it should be utilized. Every human population

on Earth depends on the environment to survive, some to such a degree that the continuing survival of their people and way of life wholly depends on sustainable resource use. Thus, consideration of cultural diversity bears as much relevance as that of biological diversity to the management and conservation of natural resources.

Cultural groups that are intimately entwined with the surrounding environment on which they depend for day-to-day survival are the ones most at risk. Indigenous peoples, hunter-gatherers, and other small-scale human cultures have historically occupied a majority of the world's protected lands. They live alongside and within some of the most productive and species-rich ecosystems that remain on our planet, as they have for many generations (Adamson et al. 2013). Indeed, there is evidence that their subsistence activities not only retain but enhance biological diversity (Gadgil et al. 1993). It is an unfortunate reality that many of these cultures and their traditional lands are today under severe threat. Indigenous groups are, by nature of their subsistence, the most dependent upon the natural world. Despite having contributed the least to industrial drivers of climate change such as greenhouse gases, these groups often bear the brunt of its effects (United Nations 2009). Worldwide changes not just in mean climatic conditions but in their variability suggest that many of these cultures will not be able to withstand the resulting changes in their environment and its biota.

The detrimental effects of climate change, themselves a product of the spread of Western industrialized culture, are compounded for indigenous peoples by localized pressures from other cultural groups, often seeking economic

gain through the exploitation of natural resources (Macchi et al. 2008). Major issues include deforestation, intensive resource extraction, development, and the imposition of administrative and property laws. The encroachment of westernized cultures into traditionally indigenous areas has the effect of making any possible response, such as migration out of the area or a switch to alternative resources, difficult or impossible for most indigenous groups (Macchi et al. 2008). People are then left with a choice between two extremes: to assimilate into Western society, usually in a position of marginalization accompanied by severe social stigma, and contribute to the same system that displaced them, or to remain and watch their culture and people fade into history. Whatever the outcome, the result is a tragic loss for the world's cultural diversity, with all of the language, tradition, art, history, knowledge, and perspective of that culture vanishing along with it. Inevitably, this carries implications for the balance held with the region's other distinct cultural groups, the diversity of its flora and fauna, and the health of the broader ecosystem.

We cannot ignore the importance of cultural diversity for the sustainable management of natural resources any more than we can ignore the value of the biological diversity of species and

ecosystems. From an evolutionary perspective, biological diversity is one of the most important factors for the continued survival of a population and the community in which it exists. Because of the complex network of interactions between biology and culture over the span of our species' evolutionary history, such is also the case for human cultural diversity. Although each unique cultural group is a valuable contributor to cultural diversity, indigenous groups in particular often fulfill a role that other groups do not, acting as caretakers and conservators of local geographic and ecological knowledge. They work to preserve their own ecosystems and are especially vulnerable to the overexploitation of natural resources. By allowing the basic rights of a human cultural group to be violated such that their way of life and relationship with the natural world are fundamentally altered or erased entirely, we may be dooming ourselves to the same end. Continued unsustainable development will invariably lead to the complete collapse of local ecosystems, followed by cascading effects on regional and global environments. It is only by conserving cultures, as well as conserving species, that we can learn from the diversity of our human experience and use this knowledge to secure our collective future.

## Literature Cited

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