

# Mother Earth, Mother Sea

In managing resources, indigenous peoples, like those in the Kuna Yala region of the northeast of Panama, have long recognized and respected the interrelationship between species

According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a marine protected area is “any area of intertidal or subtidal terrain, together with its overlying water and associated flora, fauna, historical and cultural features, which has been reserved by law or other effective means to protect part or all of the enclosed environment”.

Biological, geographical and ecological criteria, such as exclusivity or rarity of species, threat of extinction, and habitat and biodiversity status, are used to delineate protected areas. Little, if any, consideration is given to other important criteria, such as the sociological and cultural characteristics of the communities in protected areas or the traditional knowledge systems of indigenous people. Ironically, effective action by indigenous peoples to conserve and manage natural resources in a balanced manner has made them the target of protected areas, whether coastal or terrestrial.

The creation of marine protected areas (MPAs) without taking into account people’s alternative visions or points of view might directly or indirectly affect the natural dynamics of indigenous peoples. Excluding, prohibiting or conditioning the use of marine systems not only restricts the right of people to food, but also often restricts their right to garner natural resources that have traditional medicinal and spiritual significance. As a result, the traditional, sustainable models of resource extraction that indigenous peoples have developed are in danger of being degraded. Many indigenous people have established their own protected areas (sacred sites or grounds) in ac-

cordance with their customary law and their traditional wisdom. Today, many of these traditional protected areas are not respected by industrial fishermen or by the tourism industry, which often masquerades under the misnomer of ‘ecotourism’.

It cannot be accepted that MPAs be established merely for the sake of conservation or protection of species and habitats. Natural resources and species and habitats can be protected and conserved only by a holistic and comprehensive management of diverse elements (humans, nature and other related components). It is unacceptable that indigenous peoples are unable to access or manage the natural resources that they have had access to, and managed in a sustainable manner, in the past.

One example is Kuna Yala, an indigenous region located in the extreme northeast of the Republic of Panama, where both marine and terrestrial natural resources are used and managed by the indigenous peoples. This region represents one of the most diverse marine areas of the Panamanian Atlantic. Approximately 93 per cent of the 88 species of marine hard corals in the country are found in Kuna Yala.

The Kuna people believe that Mother Earth and the sea are indivisible elements, that are intertwined and have a spirit, and, therefore, any action that affects the sea will have its consequences on land. Thus, beyond their economic and cultural aspects, these marine systems hold a special spiritual significance. Many of the Kuna people’s traditional practices not only protect and shape fisheries

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management in the region but also contribute to their social organization.

Taboos and traditional methods of fishing help to protect and manage the fisheries of the region. One example is the prohibition on fishing shark. According to the Kunas, sharks cannot be consumed because whoever consumes shark meat will acquire the ill temper of the species. It is that traditional belief that prevents the Kuna from consuming shark.

Despite such traditional beliefs and resource management, the Kuna Yala region has not managed to remain isolated from the rapid and constant changes generated by globalization. Ecotourism, trade and local development initiatives are fast degrading the culture and traditional indigenous systems of this millennial people.

It is of vital importance that the customary rights of indigenous peoples like the Kuna are respected in marine, coastal and terrestrial systems. In those indigenous regions where MPAs already exist or are intended to be established, it is necessary to respect the rights of indigenous peoples to manage their territories or marine systems. They should be provided the necessary mechanisms for full and effective participation at all levels of resource management programmes. An open and continuing dialogue as well as a transparent exchange of information should be established between conservationists and indigenous peoples.

To get a better vision of what can be achieved, it is necessary to go beyond biological, ecological or biogeographic criteria and encompass social, cultural, anthropological, indigenous, traditional, spiritual and socioeconomic criteria. These will help in better understanding the consequences of actions carried out within protected areas, as well as in exposing the vulnerability of indigenous peoples to development and management efforts. They will also help them learn about the impact of global processes like tourism, trade and climate change. Indigenous peoples can then adopt measures to face these problems.

While providing training for the indigenous peoples living inside protected and sustainable-use areas, it is

necessary to take into account their indigenous traditional knowledge systems for natural resource management, rather than risk mistakes by introducing new external mechanisms for development.

Such development is often transferred from industrialized countries or non-indigenous sites without any modification and without taking into account the distinctive factors or elements of indigenous peoples. Such practise will eventually erode not only the culture and traditions of these people but might also lead to environmental problems. In this sense, it is necessary that training and management actions are aimed at strengthening the already existing sustainable environment management systems, since that will not only fortify marine-coastal management systems, but also build up the social, cultural and spiritual aspects of indigenous peoples.

Finally, development efforts in indigenous communities must consider the close ties between natural systems and indigenous communities, and the close links among the marine, coastal, freshwater and terrestrial systems. Habitat fragmentation must be avoided in order to recognize the interrelationship that exists between species that depend on coastal and marine waters and those that depend on terrestrial areas, a relationship that has been assumed, recognized and respected by indigenous peoples for generations. 3

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