

# Fishing for Traditions

The resource management practices of the indigenous Kuna people of the central American Republic of Panama are based on a world-view of interconnectedness

To understand the systems, institutions and traditional practices of a *comarca* (territory, traditional region or local administrative subdivision) of the indigenous Kuna people in the central American Republic of Panama, you must, first of all, understand their world-view. According to that, nothing in this world is isolated or secluded; rather, the opposite is true: everything is interconnected and in motion. Humans, plants, animals and spirits represent dynamic parts within a much greater, more complex, system known as *Nabguana*, a Kuna term that refers to Earth as nature in its widest sense.

One of the five indigenous *comarcas* in Panama, the Kuna Yala *comarca* is situated in the northeast of Panama and is administered as a special spatial regime, established under Law 20 of 31 January 1957. The Panama government recognizes the rights of the indigenous Kuna people over their lands and forms of traditional culture. The governing bodies of the *comarca* are the General Congress of Kuna Culture, the General Kuna Congress, the Saila Dummagan, the local Congress and the Sailagan.

In 2000, the Anmar Igar, the codification of Kuna norms, was published. It sought to fill the gaps in some Articles of Law 16, above all, those that related to the administrative boundaries of the *comarca*. The Anmar Igar also contains certain Articles concerning fisheries. Article 44 of Chapter VII deals with natural resources: “The General Kuna Congress, through the authorities and organs that were established for this purpose, will protect, conserve and guard over the natural resources, such as the flora or forest cover, the fauna, the soils, the waters, the marine and freshwater species, and all biodiversity, in co-ordination with the respective traditional authorities and private organizations”.

Article 45 states: “There will be a closed season for all animals threatened with partial or total extinction, as determined by the regional authorities; large-scale techniques for exploitation will not be used in ways that put the existence of the seas, coasts and lands of the Kuna Yala in danger”.

## Protected areas

According to Article 46: “The General Congress will declare marine or land spaces as protected areas and adopt

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For the Kuna people, all elements have their space, time and function within *Nabguana*. A work by Valerio Núñez, titled *La Obra de Baba* (‘God’s Work’), describes the earth as “the mother of all, the Great Mother. She is the guardian and she takes care of everything with loving attention; she is spirit and we live in her. The great Mother Earth has an attractive force that enables us to keep in balance. Our fathers taught us that the world has eight spiritual layers that contain gold, iron and many other minerals, which serve to sustain Mother Earth. If we allow all of this to be exploited, the trees will dry up and production will diminish. Because of this, we must guard them and not kill them.”

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other measures for the conservation and reproduction of species”.

Besides the supreme authority of the Kuna General Congress, there are other groups in the *comarca* engaged in the administration of fisheries, at the local level, especially for the sale of spiny lobster or crawfish. These are the *langostero* (spiny lobster) groups, usually made up of five or more persons who manage the group and sell their catch.

The Kuna people have spent fewer than 100 years on the coast. However, they have applied the knowledge acquired on dry land to the coastal and marine areas. This can be seen in their resource management practices, and in the institutions that comprise the *comarca*. They have also gained new knowledge from their daily man-sea relations, which have enabled them to make a much more profound analysis of the sea and its systems.

Most of the existing traditional fisheries practices in the Kuna Yala *comarca* are based on the Kuna dryland cosmos vision or world-view; their fishing practices are derived from those undertaken in the rivers. Before they migrated to the coast, the Kunas lived along the large rivers of Panama and Colombia (like the Atrato, Cuenca and Tuira, among many others). From the 17th century, they began to be gradually displaced from these rivers and their tributaries to the coast and from there to the islands where they currently live. This migratory process was gradual, and it was not until the mid-19th century that they had migrated completely to the islands. Thus the Kunas' settlement on the Caribbean islands is relatively recent. It is thus not strange to hear the great wise Kunas in the Onmaked Nega (the Kuna General Congress) affirm that the ultimate destination of the Kunas is on the mighty rivers, which is where the Kuna soul is driven for its final rest.

It was in these rivers that the Kuna developed their fishing gear and techniques. They fished with lances (*sur emaked*), tipped with poison whose effects were localized and did not contaminate the rest of the river system, and small traps (*nasa*). Though their fishing activities were once



Traditional Kuna fishing uses nature's means, and sustains family consumption. Canoes are small in size and made from the wood of selected trees

community-based, subsequent contact with the Caribbean coasts from the 19th century caused them to diversify their fishing activities, which became much less organized and community-oriented. Today commercial fishing for cash has replaced community-based fishing among the Kunas.

The Kuna people's traditional fishing techniques have a low environmental impact and involve the use of small wooden canoes that operate in coastal areas at distances of no more than 12 to 15 miles from the coast, within what is known as the territorial sea. Their catch—moderate

### The Kuna people's traditional fishing techniques have a low environmental impact...

quantities of fish, shellfish, molluscs and crustaceans—is delivered to local markets. The Kunas depend on the coastal ecosystems for most of their animal protein needs.

#### Resource management

The Kunas' resource management measures are generally spiritual in nature and depend on taboos, stories, tales and songs, most of which have

not been much studied or well documented. The Kunas believe that all marine species were once human beings, with names like Olobiskaliler and Olonaidiginya, until the appearance of Ibeler, who established the *inna nega* (a tavern). He got everyone drunk and converted them into animals, so that Olobiskaliler became Dulup (spiny lobster) and Olonaidiginya became Nali (shark). It may be for this reason that many of the traditional management practices forbid the consumption of some of these animals.

Rules once existed among the Kunas for the sustainable management of marine Hawksbill turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*)—only half the number of eggs laid could be harvested, and turtles could not be hunted or consumed, since their spirit could cause serious illness. Today, however, turtle meat is traded and consumed in the *comarca*, turtle eggs are harvested to the maximum, and turtle shells are traded. These commercial activities have caused a decline in the population of turtles in the *comarca*, despite the existence of a closed season, mandated by a General Kuna Congress resolution of 8 November 2006.

Currently, in many areas of Kuna Yala cash-based trade has displaced the traditional values of hospitality and exchange; fishing and hunting, once strictly subsistence activities, are increasingly practised for the money that can be made. The teachings of Pab Igala (Gods' laws), and the historical traditions of the Kuna General Congress, which have a great ecological component, are nowadays ignored by the younger generation of Kunas.

Taboos and attitudes towards management and use of natural resources are being rapidly replaced by the logic of the market, which converts everything into saleable products. Though the incentives for this new orientation come from outside the indigenous Kuna realm, the Kuna have only themselves to blame for the current pillaging of their resources for commercial ends. Nonetheless, some attempts have been made to defend their natural resources, language and

culture through institutional initiatives and self-government.

It is vitally urgent for the *comarca* to find new ways to strengthen its model of conservation and sustainable resource management by drawing on elements from the modern world of science and technology. The following basic courses of action can be proposed:

- strengthen, protect, rejuvenate and disseminate traditional indigenous Kuna knowledge on coastal/marine environmental use and resource management and their model of participative, adaptive community-based management;
- manage, protect and revive coastal and marine fishery ecosystems;
- utilize, and effectively apply, national and international laws that support management of the marine environment and artisanal fisheries;
- undertake studies and research on fisheries issues;
- improve community-based communication, awareness raising and participation;
- promote the right to self-development; and
- strengthen environmental education on the sustainable use of coastal marine resources and artisanal fishing.

#### For more



[www.iwgia.org/sw32477.asp](http://www.iwgia.org/sw32477.asp)

#### **Indigenous Peoples in Panama**

[www.lighthouse-foundation.org/index.php?id=215&L=1](http://www.lighthouse-foundation.org/index.php?id=215&L=1)

#### **Sustainable Use of Marine Resources in Kuna Yala, Panama**

[www.ilo.org/indigenous/Activitiesbyregion/LatinAmerica/Panama/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/indigenous/Activitiesbyregion/LatinAmerica/Panama/lang--en/index.htm)

#### **Indigenous and Tribal Peoples - Panama**

# 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

#### For more



[www.itmems.org/itmems3/NEW%2004%20FISHERIES/03%20T4%20CASE%20STUDIES/T4%20Promoting.pdf](http://www.itmems.org/itmems3/NEW%2004%20FISHERIES/03%20T4%20CASE%20STUDIES/T4%20Promoting.pdf)

#### **Promoting The Sustainable Use of Marine Resources in Kuna Yala, Panama**

[www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/Wkg\\_grp/TILCEPA/TILCEPA.htm](http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/Wkg_grp/TILCEPA/TILCEPA.htm) [www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/Wkg\\_grp/TILCEPA/TILCEPA.htm](http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/Wkg_grp/TILCEPA/TILCEPA.htm)

#### **IUCN-CEESP-TILCEPA**

[www.Immanetwork.org/](http://www.Immanetwork.org/) [www.Immanetwork.org](http://www.Immanetwork.org)

#### **Locally-managed marine areas**