

Guest contributor

Environmental defenders as first guardians of the world's biodiversity

by **Manuela L. Picq**

A call to action

Environmental defenders are the first protectors of our planet's biosphere. It is urgent to safeguard them, their ways of life, and their territories. Here are the first steps we need to begin taking:

1. First, climate action must include human rights. In 2021, the representative of the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) asked the United Nations to fully integrate the rights of Indigenous peoples in climate action, in preparation for the COP 26. Inclusion of human rights in climate change initiatives must be a top priority in climate negotiations and climate action, including REDD and REDD+ initiatives.
2. Second, international laws must be enforced so as to require, at a minimum, the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of local communities for any land project (extraction or conservation project) on Indigenous and local population's territories, whether formal land title is held or not. Consent must be given, by Indigenous and local peoples, for mining and other mega-projects, as well as conservation projects.
3. Third, we must learn to protect local communities' ways of life and their situated relationships with the environments in which they live, learning from their example, so that they can continue to protect biodiversity through their own environmental management, knowledge transmission, and cultural values embedded in their languages and lifeways.

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Indigenous and local defenders of life itself

While Indigenous peoples represent just 5% of the world's population, they make up 40% of environmental defenders killed worldwide (Global Witness, 2020). Recent reports estimate that Indigenous peoples safeguard 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity on their territories, protecting all forms of life from industries like mining, crude oil extraction, agribusiness, and palm oil (Jerez, 2021). One could say that Indigenous and local populations are thus the best guardians of biodiversity and the most important care-takers of the future, of everyone's future. In times of an extreme, anthropogenic climate crisis and a massive loss of biodiversity – already referred to as

the “Sixth Mass Extinction” – one would expect environmental defenders to be valued and safeguarded as crucial actors in the survival of our species. But not only are they unprotected; we are failing them.

Defending nature is an extremely dangerous endeavour; every week, about four environmental defenders are killed worldwide.

Global Witness (2020) documented 212 killings of environmental defenders in 2019, an underestimate since many murders go unaccounted for. Many more defenders suffer death threats, torture, and arbitrary detentions. Women endure gendered forms of violence and are at risk of sexual violence, rape, and attacks on their families. Mining is responsible for most documented killings; half of all crimes against environmental defenders in Latin America are connected to mining. Agribusiness is the next greatest threat in Latin America, and in Asia 85% of defenders' deaths are attributed to the agribusiness sector. Over half of the killings of environmental defenders in 2019 occurred in Colombia and in the Philippines, with 64 and 43 killings in those countries respectively, although Honduras had the most killings per capita, with 14 killings there (Global Witness, 2020). As for 2020, Front Line Defenders (FLD) notes that at least 331 human rights and environmental defenders were murdered. Global Witness is set to release the latest numbers of victims of abuses, killings, and threats against environmental defenders worldwide in mid-September 2021.

Communities are putting their lives on the line because they have no choice. For them, defending nature is not just about taking an ecological stand; it is a matter of survival. If local communities lose the ecosystems upon which they depend, they not only lose their land but also their entire way of life. When nature faces extinction, so do their livelihoods. They know, all too well, that there is a continuum from ecocide to genocide, as when ecosystems disappear, the societies which inhabit them disappear along with them. Indigenous and local lives are at stake, and so are their cultures, languages, and knowledge systems.

María Paucar with other Kichwa women carry the wuipala during an indigenous march in defense of nature in Quito, Ecuador (2010).

PHOTO: MANUELA PICQ



Water is Life, water is community, water is knowledge

Mní wičbóni, the Lakota phrase that translates into English as “water is life”, became a rallying cry of resistance beyond the protests against a natural gas pipeline at Standing Rock, North Dakota in the United States. The phrase holds philosophical meaning which is shared amongst most indigenous peoples; it means that to destroy water is to destroy oneself, one’s home, one’s family, and one’s territory. Water is life. Water is community. Water is knowledge. Environmental defenders are, essentially, water protectors.

When Indigenous and local people say that water is life, they mean it. They mean: we are water, and we are all intrinsically connected. We are made of the same water that nourishes rivers and forests, the same life that breathes through nature. The Māori people of the Whanganui say, *ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au*, which translates into English as: “I am the river, and the river is me”. They consider the Whanganui River as an ancestor, and for 160 years they fought to protect it, until the river was given legal personhood in 2017. Generation after generation, they’ve taught that the Earth is taonga, a “treasure”, and that humans are one with nature. Sherri Mitchell insists on that oneness (Mitchell, 2018). The Penobscot lawyer, teacher and activist reminds us that we all come from stardust and that all matter that was once connected cannot be disconnected – something scientists call quantum entanglement.

Environmental defenders understand that humans are but a thread in nature’s fabric, and that the Cartesian binary separating people from the environment presents a fragmented, dangerous world-view. So-called ‘Western’ approaches to exploiting or conserving nature tend to uphold these dualisms, wherein human life is seen as dominant over other forms of life. Perceiving the environment as ‘separate’ allows humans to turn nature into a resource to be exploited, or ‘capital’ to be accrued. But these hierarchies of life are becoming untenable.

Today’s environmental emergency is embedded in a crisis of our civilisation that has been in the making for five centuries. Its roots can be traced to the 16th century, in Potosí, Bolivia, when Spanish colonisers extracted silver through slave labour, exporting it back to Europe. European development in this period was potentiated by the extraction of silver in Potosí, though it came at the cost of entire local ecosystems and an estimated of eight million human lives. Potosi made the world go round, just like the Atlantic slave trade. Gradually, these economies of dispossession brought a certain world into being, from the gold mines of Johannesburg and California in the 18th century, to agribusiness in Amazonia and the Philippines today.

Environmental defenders are at risk because they challenge powerful structures, a combination of state and corporate interests that treat their territories (and their bodies) as a resource, ‘cheap’ nature up for grabs. They stand against extractive states, who self-arrogate the right to appropriate land, as in colonial times, as well as global elites who live from exporting nature on global markets. That which nature defenders contest is not

simply a lucrative political economy of extraction; they challenge the authority of states to treat nature, and therefore life itself, as property, unmasking an illegitimate world system. That is why both state and capital target them with such brutal violence.

Conservation for whom, and at what scale?

At the same time, nature defenders are also confronted with large environmental organisations who force communities out of their ancestral territories in the name of conservation. Against all evidence, Indigenous lands are being stolen in the name of conservation (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones, 2012). Since its early colonial origins, what we call ‘fortress conservation’ has relied on the enclosure of nature through the forced displacement of local communities (Brockington, 2002). Conservation programmes

seeking to protect untouched ‘wilderness’ by separating nature from humans are often complicit in regimes of dispossession and the brutal silencing of environmental defenders. This conservation conflict has been ongoing for more than one hundred years, to the point of creating a worldwide phenomenon of ‘conservation refugees’ (Dowie, 2009). India



Environmental
protester in India.

PHOTO: XXX

is perhaps the most extreme case of conservation-based displacement and dispossession, with millions of forest-dwellers, the Adivasi, and other tribal peoples facing eviction under a law called the Forest Rights Act (FRA). Among the Van Gujjar pastoralists of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, for example, direct threats, economic pressures, violence, and legal maneuvers are all part of a larger process of dispossession stemming from the FRA in India, leading to what Paquet (2018) has called “jungle government”.

In nature reserves across Asia and Africa, park rangers funded by international conservation NGOs, including the WWF, use intimidation tactics and violence against local and Indigenous peoples defending their territories (Zembla, 2019). Cases of rape, torture and even murder linked to the implementation of conservation have been reported across the globe. Indigenous peoples have resisted dispossession by empires claiming civilisation; by modern nation-states promising development; and by western NGOs seeking to protect biodiversity (Spence, 1999; Jacoby, 2014; Grove, 2010). We urgently need to decolonise conservation and move away from colonial methods of protecting nature, which are too often based on racism, violence, and intimidation, and instead support community-based conservation that includes, as a baseline, local consent and ownership.

Challenges ahead for the conservation world

Two problems lie at the heart of the conservation world's lack of an adequate response to the violence against defenders.

The first stems from so-called 'Western' notions of pristine wilderness that treat zones under Indigenous management as 'wild' areas to be protected from anthropogenic threats. For example, the '30x30' and 'Half-Earth' proposals emerging at the 2014 IUCN World Parks Congress (WPC) and expanding since then, seeking to mitigate biodiversity loss by protecting, for example, 30% of the world's lands and waters by 2030, or half of the world's ecosystems by 2050, uphold the idea that 'Nature Needs Half' and can be split into natural and social zones – forgetting that such areas are fundamentally blurred in most parts of the world, and that areas of high cultural and ecological diversity tend to overlap. These proposals, led by leading scientists, conservation practitioners, and global leaders, fail to recognise that over a third of these biodiverse lands are also Indigenous territories (Survival International, 2021; Lurie, 2021). Unless safeguards exist to protect Indigenous territories, many of which are not under formal tenure, these conservation schemes could dispossess up to 1.8 billion people, becoming the biggest land grab in history (see Brockington, 2021).

The second problem, which is interrelated, is that Indigenous peoples are often not valued as equal, autonomous, political actors within the conservation world at the level of policy making, think tanks, research, conservation practice, project implementation, and decision-making. This heavily influences how conservation decision-making at the state and international levels plays out, notably in international arenas, such as at the COP climate accords, for example. This has measurable consequences for the protection of both biodiversity and local and Indigenous people. Conservation will not protect the planet if we further dispossess and criminalise Indigenous and non-Indigenous nature defenders.

The call to decolonise conservation is not a metaphor; it is the only way forward. Let us remember that all humans are not equally responsible for the anthropocene; structural inequalities have transformed nature into cheap natural resources for the over-consumption of a few to the detriment of many. Any climate action must be careful not to perpetuate racist and colonial value systems that denigrate, minimise and give lip service to local and Indigenous peoples, their relationships to land, and their claims for self-determination.

Humanity is on the edge; our collective future depends on restoring nature in all its diverse, yet indivisible, forms. All the broken relations between humans and nature must be restored if we are to stop depleting our homes and ourselves: our bodies, our spirits, and our energies. Efforts to stop the Sixth Mass Extinction must be guided by our collective ability to mobilise against racial injustice, ongoing forms of dispossession, and various forms of domination, including gender inequalities. If we continue to fail environmental defenders, we fail ourselves.

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