

RE-STORY-ATION OF THE ECOSYSTEMS

Why is conservation of indigenous wisdom and language diversity also the conservation and restoration of ecosystems?

By WANGARI WAMBUI

It is hard to separate rich knowledge of nature from language diversity. Languages are the conveyors of culture, and culture is the foundation of human interactions with nature (Maffi, 1998; Kimmerer, 2016). Languages act as the sentinel for nature's knowledge through generations, and as an enabler for humans to live in harmony with it. The diversity of life on Earth is an interconnected manifestation of biodiversity, linguistic and cultural diversity. Unfortunately, anthropocentric activities and exploitative thinking that see biological or cultural diversity not as an asset, but as a barrier to exponential extraction and consumption of natural resources are putting this diversity in great danger. Forgetting that a good economy depends upon a healthy environment.

A world map consisting of 866 regions (hotspots of plant and animal species) and 6,800 languages (32% spoken in the Asian region, 30% in African nations, 25% in the American countries, 19% in the Pacific region and 3% in the European nations) shows that 50% of the languages are spoken by communities with less than 10,000 speakers (WWF, 2000). The map also shows that regions rich in animal and plant biodiversity are those with the greatest linguistic and cultural diversity. The World Wildlife Fund compared this map with a

map showing the regions where biodiversity is threatened and languages are in danger of extinction, revealing a positive correlation (WWF, 2000). This demonstrates that the disappearance of biodiversity can generally go hand in hand with the disappearance of language diversity and indigenous wisdom linked with ecosystems.

For one to understand this interconnectedness of biological, linguistic and cultural diversity, immersion in the cosmology of indigenous knowledge is one way. Notwithstanding all the opposing forces, the majority of the indigenous communities all over the world have maintained an intriguing intimate and interdependent relationship with their natural environment. They consider themselves to be part of the ecosystem just as one of the many life forms in nature. The main trait of life is diversity, composed of multiple ecological niches to which the species adapt over time, interacting with other species to coexist. This means that species have to know nature's characteristics and functions, so that they can use its resources with gratitude without depleting them (Kimmerer, 2016). In this wise, the life of future generations is guaranteed. The wisdom, which is referred to as "traditional ecological knowledge" by anthropologists, is transmitted through language and makes part of the indigenous societies' culture through generations (Maffi, 1998). Language is the core of traditions, holding people's thoughts of how they perceive the world. The indigenous way of living is embedded in the belief that nature is their guardian, and the ecosystem services are gifts given to them. Thus, every action taken

is with consideration for the future generations and care is given to nature because life depends on it (Kimmerer, 2016).

The current pandemic is a perfect illustration that investing in a healthy environment is good for the long-term interests of the economy. One of the ways humanity will manage to overcome the challenges it is facing, is by drawing inspiration from indigenous knowledge. Human position or place on the planet, must be questioned to protect the whole ecosystem, and put an end to the thought/idea that humans are one superior species and separate from other species. The majority of indigenous people understand this concept very well, but unfortunately, they are also threatened with extinction (Kimmerer, 2016), and this does not tie well with the survival of humanity. The indigenous people respect nature and this aids them to maintain an intimate relationship with the environment. This may be the reason why places that are home to the most important biodiversity hotspots in the world (Earth's heart) are those that are inhabited by the indigenous communities. To them, the Earth is a living organism (Mother Earth) that gives birth to all the kingdoms in the life domain including plants, animals and human species; all interconnected and with equal importance. Unlike most of our modern societies that are governed by ideas of economic growth and international competition, the indigenous communities are governed by the principles of reciprocity and respect for the ecosystems that allow them to thrive. They believe that any violation of these principles will cause imbalances in the ecosystem later resulting

in the ill health of the environment and its dwellers. That is why nature is considered not as an inert object but as a territorial body with its organs functioning in much the same way a human body does. This way, the environment (territorial body) contains the equivalent of the acupuncture points that inform the indigenous custodians of nature of the possible imbalances and eventually their treatment. The mode by which they acquire this knowledge, the ability to observe nature and feel places where the Earth is alive and dead, is essential for sharing with all the ecologists and in the current education system.

References

- Kimmerer, R. W. (2016). Braiding sweetgrass: *indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*.
- Maffi, L. (1998). Language: *a resource for nature*. *Nature and Resources*, 34(4), 12-21.
- WWF, T. L. (2000). Indigenous and Traditional Peoples of the World and Ecoregion Conservation. In *Director*