



Yachay Wasi

(Quechua: House of Learning)

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THEME

“Sacred Sites and the Environment from an Indigenous Perspective”

A side event of the fifth session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (15 – 26 May 2006)

Sponsored and organized by Yachay Wasi – Hosted by UNEP

Friday 19 May 2006 – 1:15 pm thru 2:45 pm – UNEP Conference Room DC2 8th Floor

This event will link the protection of Indigenous sacred sites, a symbol of spirituality, to the Millennium Development Goal # 7: Ensure environmental stability.

From the United Nations Millennium Declaration, September 2000:

“We must spare no effort to free all humanity, and above all our children and grandchildren, from the threat of living on a planet irredeemably spoilt by human activities.... We resolve therefore to adopt in all our environmental actions a new ethic of conservation and stewardship...”

This ethic of conservation and stewardship was integrated in the psychic of the first nations of this world who lived in balance with nature. Respect for their environment and the welfare of the seventh generations to follow were important parts of their spirituality.

Excerpts from a statement delivered by Secretary-General Kofi Annan in Machu Picchu, Peru, 12 November 2003:
“Here, amidst the peaks of the Andes in Peru, the enormous contributions of indigenous peoples to human civilization are everywhere on display — from the sacred ruins of the Inca empire to the crops that grow on the mountainsides. In the jungles of the Amazon too, indigenous communities have lived for millennia in harmony with the rainforest, and they continue to do so today.

And, throughout Latin America, one sees the extraordinary diversity of indigenous cultures and the potential contribution their knowledge and values can make to poverty eradication, sustainable agriculture, and indeed to our concept of life. From here in Peru to the Philippines, and from the deserts of Australia to the ice-covered lands of the Arctic circle, indigenous peoples have much to teach our world.”

Indeed, the world must listen to the voices of the first Nations who were able to live through centuries in harmony with the earth. Modern society, in one hundred years, has brought this earth to an environmental state of crisis.

TIME magazine, April 3, 2006, had a cover special report entitled: *“Global Warming, Be worried, be very worried. Climate change isn’t some vague future problem...”*

The Millennium Development Goals 7: *Ensure environmental sustainability* calls the attention of the international community to the problem the planet is facing.

Modern society must regain the awe and respect with which Indigenous peoples in past centuries regarded nature while they tried to understand it and protect it. This was guided by an inner spiritual quality, which seems to be lacking in modern times as “anything goes” and awe and respect of the Creator and its creation have been lost.

This inner spiritual quality was expressed symbolically in spaces which Indigenous peoples consider having special power: Sacred sites.

On 15 May 2002, Yachay Wasi coordinated, on behalf of the NGO Committee on the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, a Panel Discussion entitled “**Cultural Heritage and Sacred Sites: World Heritage from an Indigenous perspective**” which took place at New York University during the historic First session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. This event featured speakers from Indigenous Nations, UNESCO NY Office and UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights and the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Sacred sites case studies from 33 world Indigenous nations were given at the seminar and included in a report.

<http://www.yachaywasi-ngo.org/sacredcall.htm>

As in 2002, a Call was sent to world's Indigenous nations for Cases submissions on their Sacred Sites. 27 papers were received from countries including Guatemala, Nepal, Argentina, USA, Canada, China, Russia, Cameroon, Mexico, India, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Kenya, Saint-Lucia, Peru...

From presentation by Luis Delgado Hurtado, Quechua, President of Yachay Wasi, Cuzco, Peru, 15 May 2002: *En el mundo andino en general el aspecto sagrado resulta sorprendente, tiene relación con el medio ambiente y la naturaleza que es considerada un ser afectivo y practico, la tierra, las montañas, los ríos, los árboles, las rocas, el sol, el viento son sagrados.* (In the Andean world in general, the sacred is part of the environment and nature is considered a being effectual and practical, the earth, the mountains, the rivers, the trees, the rocks, the sun, the wind are sacred.)

From UNEP Press Release, Curitiba/Nairobi, 18 March 2006 :

An international initiative to conserve ancient sacred sites is being launched in the belief that these culturally important locations may be a key to saving the world's declining biodiversity.

The project, backed by organizations including the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and indigenous peoples groups, has secured preliminary funding from a multi billion dollar development fund, the Global Environment Facility.

<http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=471&ArticleID=5230&l=en>

From CBD (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity) Akwe: Kon Guidelines Foreword, 2004:

“...their (Indigenous communities’) cultures and knowledge are deeply rooted in the environment on which they depend.”

Akwe: Kon is a Mohawk term meaning “everything in creation”. These are voluntary Guidelines for the conduct and social impact assessments, regarding developments proposed to take place on...sacred sites and on lands and waters traditionally occupied or used by Indigenous and local communities.

From 30 May thru 2 June 2005 in Tokyo, Japan, a Workshop on the Akwe: Kon Voluntary Guidelines was held. It was organized by CBD in partnership with UNESCO, UNPFII, UNU and FAO.

Ms. Erjen Khamaganova, Buryat, Russian Federation, presented a case study on the protection of sacred sites. She examined the meaning of the sacred and the role of traditional knowledge, in traditional Buryat life in which “sacred” refers to the holistic unity of all living species, spirits and the physical (material) world and is a significant factor in the formation of indigenous ways of thinking. *(excerpt from CBD report - 7 June 2005)*

From the Declaration on the Role of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Landscapes in the Conservation of Biological and Cultural Diversity which was adopted there:

“...Recommend the integration of actions to promote the protection of sacred sites and cultural landscapes of Indigenous peoples in the Programme of Action for the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People”.

From UN Environment Programme (UNEP)'s Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity, Pub.1999:

“Another important aspect of the invisible spiritual world is that it is the arbiter of legitimacy relating Indigenous peoples to their environments.”