

- Indigenous Spirituality at the Core of Andean Conference -
INDIGENOUS SACRED SITES: BIODIVERSITY AND SPIRITUALITY
A Conference organized by Yachay Wasi
Acopia, Province of Acomayo, Dept of Cuzco, Peru, 5 thru 11 April 2009

THEME

The future of human beings on *Pachamama*, Mother Earth, relies on the ability of this modern society to change what has been accepted as normal human behavior during these past centuries of conflicts and environmental degradation and to reevaluate the purpose of life.

In this regard, Indigenous peoples have a lot to contribute with their example of pursuing a steady and constant way of living, which has survived centuries.

In Machu Picchu, on November 12, 2003, former Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated:

“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.” (UN Press Release SG/SM/9005-13 Nov. 2003)
<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2003/sgsm9005.doc.htm>

Mr. Annan refers to “Our concept of life”. It seems that this concept of life today is that human beings can do just whatever they want without regard to consequences, that nature must be dominated and that the Creator, God or whatever name given, is dependent on human beliefs, not a reality that should be taken into account in every moment of our lives.

Indigenous peoples’ “concept of life” was, and still is, directly opposite: they act with the welfare of the forthcoming seventh generation in mind, they consider themselves caretakers of the earth and they respect and integrate the reality of a Creator in their daily lives.

Indigenous spirituality or religion has been put down over the centuries. Considered pagans by various conquerors, Indigenous Peoples’ wisdom has been ignored until recent years.

The United Nations has taken the lead in acknowledging and assisting Indigenous peoples during the past thirty-five years.

On December 10, 1992, during the launch of the 1993 International Year of the World’s Indigenous People, leaders from twenty Indigenous communities around the world addressed the General Assembly.

One of them was the late Thomas Banyacya, the last interpreter of the Hopi nation, who fulfilled his mandate by telling their prophecy, sending a message of peace and warning “to the leaders of the world meeting in the Great House of Mica (glass) in the East”.
(*Newsletter of Yachay Wasi: Yachay Wasip ‘Simin’ - Summer 1994 - Page 4*)

Symbols of Indigenous spirituality are sacred sites such as the mountain Mauna Kea in Hawaii, World Heritage sites Machu Picchu in Peru and Uluru-Kata Tjuta in Australia but also lesser known places in various Indigenous communities around the world.

For years, Indigenous peoples have demanded recognition and protection of their Sacred Sites.

These demands were acknowledged in some way over the past 10 years:

In the United States of America, on May 24, 1996, the White House issued President Clinton's Executive Order on Indian Sacred Sites, which asks Federal Agencies to "(1) accommodate access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites by Indian religious practitioners; (2) avoid adversely affecting the physical integrity of such sacred sites."

<http://www.ncai.org/ncai/resource/documents/governance/clintonsacredsites.htm>

Then, there was the attempt by Indigenous representatives to establish a consultative body for UNESCO World Heritage Centre:

In 2000, as the 24th session of UNESCO World Heritage Committee was meeting in Cairns, Australia, a parallel Forum of Indigenous Peoples requested that the World Heritage Committee facilitate the establishment of a World Heritage Indigenous Peoples Council of Experts (WHIPCOE). This Council would have worked with UNESCO World Heritage Centre in order to assure the respect, protection and good management of World Heritage Sites sacred to indigenous Peoples.

During 2001, an Indigenous Working Group from Australia, Canada and New Zealand worked with UNESCO to achieve this goal.

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/496/>

The NGO Yachay Wasi was invited by UNESCO to participate in the UNESCO WHIPCOE Workshop in Winnipeg, Canada (5-8 November 2001).

This was in response to a letter signed by Andean Indigenous participants in Yachay Wasi First Encounter of Indigenous Communities in the High Andes (17-21 June 2001). Letter was faxed to UNESCO World Heritage Centre protesting the September 2000 chipping of the *Intiwatana* (sundial) by a falling crane during the filming of a beer commercial in Machu Picchu.

The workshop progress summary and report were presented during the 25th session of the World Heritage Committee in Helsinki, Finland in December 2001.

<http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/activities/documents/activity-496-3.pdf>

<http://whc.unesco.org/archive/whc-01-205-web3e.pdf>

Unfortunately, UNESCO World Heritage Committee "*did not approve the establishment of WHIPCOE as a consultative body of the Committee ... but it encouraged professional research and exchange of views on the subject.*"

<http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2001/whc-01-conf208-24e.pdf> (see pg 57)

Following this decision, in May 2002, Yachay Wasi organized a Panel Discussion entitled "Cultural Heritage and Sacred Sites: World Heritage from an Indigenous perspective".

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

This event, sponsored by the NGO Committee on the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples, took place at New York University School of Law during the historic first session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and featured as speakers the Director of UNESCO NY Office and an Officer from UNESCO World Heritage Centre in Paris. Various Indigenous leaders spoke of the experiences of their own communities.

One of them was Luis Delgado Hurtado, co-founder and president of Yachay Wasi:

"Excerpt of his presentation (Translated from Spanish): *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. They are part of the past and the present. And because we are born from the earth, she takes care of us*

lovingly as a mother does. If man or woman live in harmony with Mother Earth, they acquire a sacred power. Man is part of the vital forces, like all beings of the earth: the plants, the animals and when he dies, he returns to her. Man is not the owner of the earth but is part of all. He is son of the Pachamama.

Sacred sanctuaries that were left to us by our grandparents the Inkas were very much related to the Andean cosmivision. More than three thousand years ago was the beginning of the Inka culture which considered the world as part of the universe and something sacred. It is for that reason that they built manifestations of the sacred in their culture, among them temples and ritual spaces for the spirits of the universe, which are part of the environment. This relationship between man and the universe was translated in a philosophy which influenced powerfully the progress of development of the Andean civilization. This gave birth to the Inka society.

The same is interpreted in the principle of a balance named Pachacuti or the return of the world. Principle applied obligatorily every 500 years to stay in harmony with the world.

Today, in our country Peru, our cultural heritage and the wealth of the Inkas are disappearing, destroyed like the Intiwatana of Machu Picchu. The constant robbing of the Moche, Nazca cultures on the Peruvian coast and the Inka culture in the Andes along with the robbing and, in a most cruel manner, the desecration of Inka and pre-Inka tombs which for us are sacred and part of our cultural history and roots. We ask that everything which has been stolen be returned..."

<http://www.dialoguebetweennations.com/N2N/PFI/English/heritage.htm>

Another speaker that day was a representative of the Secretariat on the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

CBD Conference of Parties for years has included Indigenous representatives in its discussions, recognizing the importance of traditional knowledge toward the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

In February 2004, the 7th Conference of Parties adopted the Akwe: Kon Voluntary guidelines for developments taking place on sacred sites and on lands and waters traditionally occupied by indigenous and local communities. Akwe: Kon means "Everything in Creation" in the Mohawk language.

<http://www.biodiv.org/doc/publications/akwe-brochure-en.pdf>

In June 2005, CBD collaborated with UNESCO in organizing an international symposium in Tokyo, Japan entitled: "Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Landscapes".

One speaker at this symposium was Parshuram Tamang from Nepal, then member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. In his welcome, he stated:

"I feel proud to say that Indigenous peoples are making concrete contributions to global, cultural and biological diversity, to our planet - Mother Earth - and to the future of humanity. We are Indigenous because we are conscious of the great responsibility and mission we have to Mother Earth. We are bestowed the responsibility to maintain balance within the natural world. When any part is destroyed, all balance is thrown into chaos. When the last tree and icecap are gone, and the last river has dried up, only then will people realize that we cannot eat gold and silver. To nurture the land is an obligation to our ancestors who have passed this to us, and for future generations."

(UNESCO publications 2006: International Symposium, Tokyo, 30 May-2June 2005 Conserving Culture and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Sites and Cultural Landscapes - Pg 24)

Mr. Tamang also spoke at a panel discussion organized by Yachay Wasi in May 2006 during the Fifth session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The event was entitled "Sacred Sites and the Environment from an Indigenous perspective" and was hosted by the United Nations Environment Programme.

<http://www.yachaywasi-ngo.org/SC06report.htm>

One important aspect of the 2002 and 2006 Panels was the contribution of sacred sites studies by Indigenous communities around the world. From the Sacred Mountain of Mauna Kea in Hawaii to Lake Homicho in Nepal, a total of 64 cases were presented.

<http://www.dialoguebetweennations.com/N2N/PFII/English/CaseStudies.htm>

<http://www.yachaywasi-ngo.org/SC06report.htm>

Indigenous burial sites should also be respected. In 1996, Yachay Wasi started its Inka Challenge Campaign against the desecration of Indigenous remains with a petition and media outreach against the exhibit of a 500 years old Inka young girl's remains at Washington DC headquarters of National Geographic Society. The campaign continued during other USA exhibits featuring pre-Columbian human remains such as the 1998 Florida Museum exhibit.

Indigenous representatives are now actively participating in various international meetings from the UN Commission on Sustainable Development to the World Intellectual Property Organization Intergovernmental meetings.

UN agencies have put Indigenous issues as a priority on their agendas. This was in response to the establishment of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, a subsidiary body of the UN Economic and Social Council, which held its first session in May 2002 at UN Hqrs in NYC.

Most recently, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 13 September 2007, lost some of its impact on protection of Sacred sites after a paragraph, which had remained untouched for more than 20 years, was deleted in February 2006 during the second part of the last session of the Working Group on the Draft Declaration of Indigenous Peoples (Geneva, 5-16 Dec. 2005 and 30 Jan. - 3 Feb. 2006). The deleted part of Article 13 read: *"States shall take effective measures, in conjunction with the Indigenous peoples concerned, to ensure that indigenous sacred places, including burial sites, be preserved, respected ad protected."*

[http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/\(Symbol\)/E.CN.4.SUB.2.RES.1994.45.En](http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/(Symbol)/E.CN.4.SUB.2.RES.1994.45.En)

In closing, these are the words of an additional speaker at Yachay Wasi 2006 event, Ms. Ina Mc Neil, a Lakota artist, great great granddaughter of Chief Sitting Bull:

"We, as indigenous people, still maintain (these) connections with our sacred sites; with our ancestors, and the Creator.

But even more important than our ancestral connection to sacred sites is indigenous people's belief that everything in the environment has a spirit, and a divine purpose.

It is this one belief that keeps us as Indigenous people from exploiting anything to the point of extinction or permanent damage.

Not only would we be causing irreparable damage to the environment that surrounds us, upon which we are dependent, but to do so would be to disrespect the Creator.

In my language, we refer to the Creator as "Wakan Tanka". The Greatest Spiritual Being.

The word "Tanka" meaning "large" or "great".

The word "Wakan" meaning "Spiritual" or "Holy".

Therefore, we believe that sacred sites and the environment are "Wakan".

- *They are sacred*
- *They are holy*
- *They are of timeless purity*
- *"They are Wakan".*

<http://www.yachaywasi-ngo.org/InaSpeech.pdf>

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