

Talking diversity

The diversity of life is biological, cultural and linguistic, says Luisa Maffi.



When they hear the expression 'diversity of life', most people think of biodiversity: diversity in nature, at the genetic, species and ecosystem levels. Since the concept of biodiversity was coined two decades ago, biodiversity and the threats it is facing have become an object of concern not only among conservationists and academics, but also in the wider world of policy, philanthropy, the media and the general public. But in recent years, a newer, more complex and integrated understanding of the notion of diversity of life has been gaining ground—"biocultural" diversity: diversity in culture as well as nature. From this perspective, the diversity of societies, cultures and languages that have developed throughout human history is another expression of life's evolutionary potential.

Biodiversity and cultural diversity are intimately—some would say inextricably—related to each other. Humans have adapted to life in particular environments, while drawing resources from those environments to sustain themselves. In so doing, they have needed to acquire in-depth knowledge of species, their relationships, and ecosystem functions and to learn how to tailor their practices to suit their ecological niches. To a large extent, this has meant learning about stewardship and responsibility: how to use natural resources without depleting them, and often by enhancing them, to preserve options for the future—in a nutshell, the very principle of sustainable development.

This knowledge, commonly described as 'traditional environmental knowledge' has been passed on through centuries of inter-generational transmission, via language and practical teachings. It has shaped ways of life and world views, and served material as well as psychological and spiritual needs. It has led to the development of a strong 'sense of place'. Through constant innovation, this knowledge has remained alive and vibrant in those societies that have maintained a close link with

and direct dependence on the local environment, such as the indigenous and other traditional rural communities that represent the largest share of cultural diversity.

Environmental degradation poses an especially severe threat for these people. It deprives them of their subsistence base and the basis for their individual and social identity. It undermines their societal structure, organization and resilience. At the same time, the social, economic and political pressures that indigenous and local communities experience worldwide contribute to hastening environmental degradation. Such pressures often result in the displacement of these communities from their traditional territories, the introduction of alien value systems and ways of life, and the loss of traditional knowledge and local languages. Radical changes of this nature can lead to increasingly unsustainable relationships with the environment.

Supporting the resilience of indigenous and local communities is therefore both a human rights imperative and an environmental one. It presents special challenges as well as opportunities for all those involved in environmental protection and social justice. The indigenous movement has been leading the effort to link these two realms in the quest for ensuring their own rights.

Biocultural diversity research, originally spearheaded by a handful of organizations including Terralingua, and now actively pursued in academic and other fora, has contributed to our understanding of the links between biological and cultural diversity. Global and regional mapping of the overlaps between these diversities provide analyses of the factors accounting for these patterns and for the persistence or loss of biocultural diversity. Indicators of the state and trends of traditional environmental knowledge and of linguistic diversity can be integrated with biodiversity indicators to give us a picture of what is happening with

the world's biocultural diversity. Hundreds of studies and applied projects are refining our knowledge of the connections between language, culture and the environment at the local level.

At the same time, indigenous and local groups on all continents have been involved in remarkable efforts to restore the ecocultural health of their landscapes and communities. Their activities include, among many others, revegetation, protection or reintroduction of culturally-important species, and conservation and promotion of local landraces (domesticated species adapted to the local natural and cultural environment). These efforts are *de facto* biocultural in nature, as they often combine environmental action with cultural affirmation, knowledge transmission and language revitalization.

Research, advocacy and on-the-ground projects have had a key role in promoting a biocultural perspective at international as well as national levels. The Barcelona Congress, with its theme 'a diverse and sustainable world', offers an ideal context for helping to ensure that this perspective is included in conservation policy and implementation. A pre-Congress symposium to be held in April 2008, 'Sustaining Cultural and Biological Diversity in a Rapidly Changing World: Lessons for Global Policy', organized by the American Museum of Natural History, IUCN and Terralingua, will provide a valuable opportunity for exploring how state-of-the-art knowledge can be translated into guidelines for supporting biocultural diversity and its stewards worldwide. ■

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