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BLOG POST

EMPOWERING INDIGENOUS YOUTH: LEADING THE WAY IN BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

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INDIGENOUS YOUTH AS CUSTODIANS OF NATURE

Over the past 50 years, wildlife populations have declined by an average of 69%, and natural habitats such as forests, wetlands, and coral reefs are being lost at an alarming rate. This situation is critical, and to slow or even reverse this decline, we must rethink our relationship with nature. Indigenous Peoples, who have lived in harmony with these ecosystems for millennia, play a vital role in preserving biodiversity. Empowering indigenous communities is one way to ensure the continuation of traditional knowledge and practices that have protected biodiversity for generations.

Despite representing only 6% of the world's population, Indigenous Peoples manage at least a quarter of the planet's land and are responsible for protecting 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity [1]. Additionally, 21% of the planet's land is currently conserved by Indigenous Peoples, including over 1.27 million square miles of forests in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) [2]. This underscores their indispensable role not only in conservation but also in the fight against climate change, as their sustainable management practices are essential for mitigating the impacts of global warming.

Indigenous Youth, in particular, demonstrate a profound connection to the land, water, and ecosystems. This connection provides them with unique insights on how to manage and restore biodiversity in ways that are often overlooked by modern and colonial approaches. This deep connection is grounded in traditional knowledge passed down through generations, reflecting a holistic worldview. Indigenous youth leaders not only understand the interdependence between humans and nature, but also possess the ability to integrate ancestral practices with the needs of the modern world, positioning them as key actors in the preservation of ecosystems [3].

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN CONSERVATION

Community-led conservation, driven by Indigenous Youth deeply connected to their culture and heritage, is paramount in reversing the alarming decline in biodiversity. Indigenous knowledge systems, which view humans as a part of an interdependent system with nature, foster conservation practices based on mutual respect, sustainability, and reciprocity [4]. This holistic approach not only protects biodiversity but also preserves the identity and cultural values that sustain these communities.

Furthermore, by exercising their sovereignty of and self-determination, communities can implement climate solutions rooted in their ancestral knowledge, contributing to a more just and sustainable future for all [5].

To better understand the multifaceted role of Indigenous Youth in biodiversity conservation and climate justice, the following flowchart (**Figure 1**) illustrates the key elements of their leadership and actions.

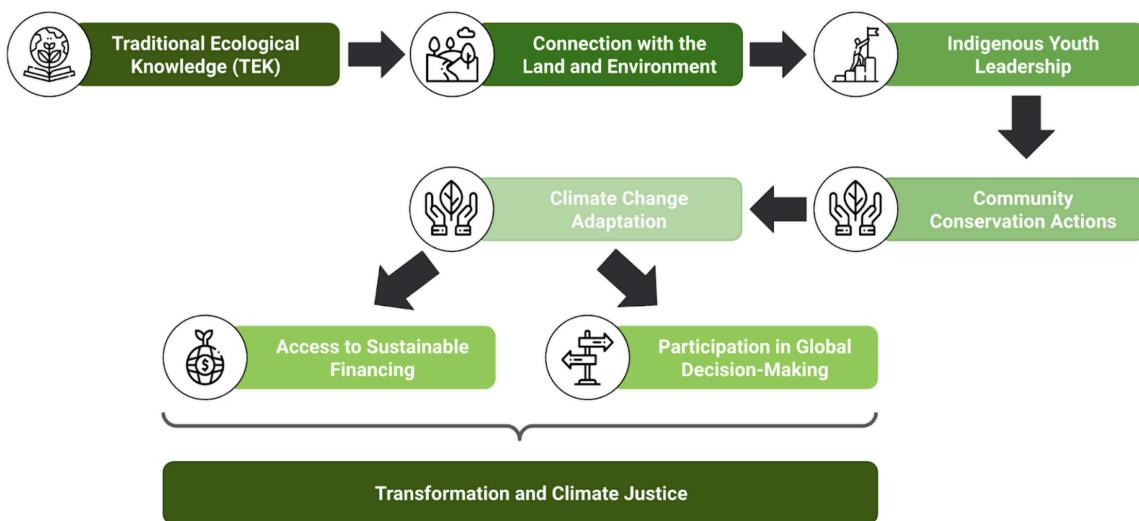


Figure 1. Pathways to Indigenous Youth Leadership in Biodiversity Conservation and Climate Justice

CHALLENGES FACED BY INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The loss of biodiversity has a direct and negative impact on indigenous communities, as they have co-evolved with ecosystems over millennia, developing a deep knowledge of species and their interactions. This loss not only affects food security but also undermines productive, medicinal, and cultural systems that are integral to their way of life [6].

Ecological degradation, caused by the destruction of forests, rivers, and other natural landscapes, further exacerbates the challenges faced by Indigenous communities. They are already suffering from the impacts of climate change, such as extreme weather events, coastal erosion, the loss of sea ice, and declining biodiversity and water quality. Meanwhile, the global demand for resources, driven by carbon-intensive economies, often exploits the ancestral indigenous lands, exacerbating these problems [7].

In addition, climate change is causing the forced displacement of indigenous communities, as exemplified by the Guna people of Cartí, who have been displaced from their island in Guna Yala, Panama, due to rising sea levels and constant flooding [8]. The relocation of nearly 1,200 people to the Nuevo Cartí neighborhood by the Panamanian government highlights the broader trend of displacement affecting indigenous populations worldwide, especially in island communities. This relocation is particularly significant, as the Guna people of Cartí became the first indigenous community in Latin America displaced by climate change. The loss of ancestral territories due to climate change further erodes their cultural identity and traditional knowledge.

Indigenous communities also face significant barriers to engaging in climate action and biodiversity conservation. Limited access to funding, digital technology, and formal education are major obstacles, particularly in rural or remote areas [9]. This exclusion prevents Indigenous Peoples from accessing critical funding mechanisms and the tools necessary for environmental management and conservation projects. Moreover, the digital gap limits their ability to use online tools that could foster learning and intergenerational collaboration [10].

SUSTAINABLE FINANCING AS AN OPPORTUNITY: EMPOWERING INDIGENOUS-LED SOLUTIONS

Indigenous wisdom, expressed through traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), offers key solutions for addressing climate change, such as sustainable agriculture and responsible resource management. Indigenous youth have valuable perspectives that must be heard and integrated into global climate action. Their participation is essential in inspiring policy changes and fostering transformative climate action [11].

Sustainable financing presents a key opportunity to support and amplify these indigenous-led solutions. By creating job opportunities within Indigenous communities, sustainable finance instruments can empower Indigenous Youth to lead conservation and climate adaptation projects. This not only contributes to a more inclusive and environmentally sustainable future but also helps strengthen the economic resilience of Indigenous communities.

Investing in education, digital training, and access to financing can create a virtuous cycle that fosters both economic and social development while ensuring the preservation of biodiversity. These initiatives can provide Indigenous Youth with the tools and resources needed to contribute to local and global climate action.

CLIMATE JUSTICE AND MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

Achieving true sustainability requires more than just financial resources. Climate justice is a central issue in this context. Indigenous Peoples are not only the most affected by the consequences of climate change and pollution, but they also face significant inequality in accessing justice. Discrimination and the lack of effective legal protections prevent these communities from participating in decisions that affect their territories and rights. One example of this is the environmental violence experienced by Indigenous communities due to exposure to toxic substances from extractive industries. Approximately 80% of the world's mineral resources are extracted from Indigenous lands, resulting in severe consequences for these communities, who are often denied justice in seeking solutions for the environmental harm they face [12].

Indigenous youth leaders are increasingly advocating for their communities to be recognized as key stakeholders in global climate discussions. They emphasize the importance of meaningful engagement, where indigenous knowledge is not treated as secondary but as a fundamental part of biodiversity conservation efforts. These communities must be given leadership roles in decision-making processes that impact their lands and resources. Effective, collaborative relationships between Indigenous communities, governments, NGOs, and researchers are essential to ensure mutual respect and shared responsibility.

The Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform ([LCIPP](#)), established under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, exemplifies this approach. It provides opportunities for Indigenous youth to engage, such as through the annual youth roundtable at COP conferences. Additionally, initiatives like UNESCO's Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems ([LINKS](#)) programme and capacity-building efforts are crucial for equipping Indigenous youth with the tools to contribute to climate policy development and resource management in their communities, ensuring their voices are integral to environmental sustainability and climate action.

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