



Indigenous Peoples, Human Rights and Climate Change

***“Coal is the liver of our Mother Earth. It needs to stay in the ground so she can be healthy.”
- Dineh Elder Roberta Blackgoat, Arizona***

Indigenous Peoples’ traditional teachings have long warned that if human beings fail to protect and care for Mother Earth and the natural world, the survival of humanity would be threatened. Today, increasingly severe impacts of climate change threaten ecosystems and food production around the world. In 2009, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food confirmed that “Climate Change constitutes the single most important threat to food security in the future.”

Although island, arctic and desert ecosystems are suffering the most extreme impacts, Indigenous Peoples in all regions, including those living in North America near urban centers, are experiencing effects on their homelands, cultures and traditional livelihoods. California wildlife biologist William Carmen reported in 2013 that, “Climate change is having strong impacts on the natural systems in the Bay Area and Northern California. Decreased snow melt in the Sierras, increasing temperatures and droughts, sea level rise and fluctuating coastal ocean temperatures are impacting natural systems and food sources – salmon runs, bay wetlands, oak woodlands – that are culturally, spiritually and economically important to California Native Peoples.”



Increasingly severe droughts threaten corn crops throughout North America and Mexico.

INTERNATIONAL WORK ON CLIMATE CHANGE

The UN first took note of the dangers of the rapid rise of the Earth’s temperature and the need for the “protection of global climate for present and future generations of mankind” in 1989. Greenhouse gasses generated by burning fossil fuels (oil, gas and coal) were identified as the primary cause. Impacts included rising sea levels, glacial melting, changing weather patterns and extreme weather events (droughts, floods, storms, hurricanes), threatening global food supplies and the survival of many plant and animal species.

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was adopted after the 1992 World Conference on the Environment and Development, the Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It recognized the urgent need for global action to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions. One hundred ninety-two States and two Regional Groups have ratified the UNFCCC. Conferences of the Parties to the Convention (COPs) are held annually to reach agreements on key issues such as emissions reductions, funding, and mitigation and adaptation.

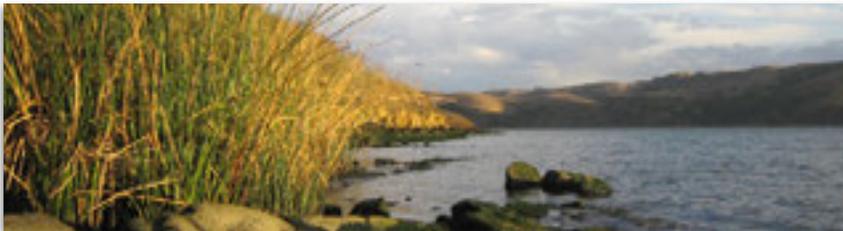
Indigenous Peoples have been actively engaged in this process since its inception and have been able to include some rights-based safeguards in the text. However, Indigenous Peoples have protested their lack of a formal decision-making role in the UNFCCC process and have also expressed concerns about market-based “solutions” such as carbon trading and forest offsets. Indigenous Peoples continue to call upon States to reject false solutions and move towards real, sustainable alternatives that significantly reduce emissions and also respect the rights, traditional knowledge and cultural practices of Indigenous Peoples.

UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, (“Declaration”) adopted by the General Assembly on September 13, 2007, is the internationally accepted minimum standard for the dignity, survival and well being of Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration contains many provisions that affirm rights related to the causes, impacts and solutions to climate change. These include Self-Determination; protection from forced assimilation and forcible removal; protection of sacred sites and cultural practices; participation in decision-making that affects them; subsistence and traditional economic activities; health, conservation of vital plants and animals; traditional lands, territories and resources; conservation of the environment and productive capacity of lands; traditional knowledge and cultural heritage including plants, animals and seeds; Treaty rights; and free, prior and informed consent regarding development. Article 42 also calls upon UN member states, agencies and bodies to promote the Declaration’s full application internationally and at the country level.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE UNITED NATIONS POST 2015 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

A key outcome of the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio +20) was the decision to develop Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which will be approved by the UN General Assembly by the end of 2015. The 1992 Earth Summit identified Indigenous Peoples as one of nine Major Groups whose contributions are vital for sustainable development. The Indigenous Peoples Major Group (IPMG) for the SDG process has called for provisions to reduce carbon-based energy production, sustainable alternatives and safeguard Indigenous Peoples’ rights, livelihoods, food systems, traditional knowledge and practices as well as diverse partnerships to address climate change on all levels. The Outcome Document adopted by the UN General Assembly at the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples on September 22nd, 2014 also affirmed “that indigenous peoples’ knowledge and strategies to sustain their environment should be respected and taken into account when we develop national and international approaches to climate change mitigation and adaptation.”



San Francisco Bay Wetlands are decreasing due to rising sea levels.

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For more information on the Indigenous Peoples
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The International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), founded in 1974, is an Indigenous organization working for the protection of human rights, cultures, treaties and traditional lands from the local to the international levels. In 1977, IITC was the first Indigenous organization to receive Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and in 2011 was the first to be upgraded to General Consultative Status.

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