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and beliefs in the sacred have resulted in environmental degradation.

In Kumaun, as in other parts of India, environmental degradation due to association with religion is primarily related to the changing views of contemporary religion itself. There is an increasing emphasis in contemporary religion on the Vedic rather than the animistic traditions. Not only are local deities increasingly being associated with the Vedic deities and recognized as alternate forms of these deities, but natural elements of worship are being replaced by deities of the Vedic tradition. Thus, the traditional use of sacred stones, typically collected from river-beds and placed in temples for worship in the more animistic traditions, are today being replaced by elaborate humanized Vedic idols. There is also increasingly a separation between nature and religion, with greater importance being placed on the material aspects of religious culture in place of the natural and the supernatural. As a result, even the Vedic gods and goddesses that were traditionally associated with certain natural elements, such as rivers, are being dissociated with the natural elements and increasingly being worshipped as idols. Finally, contemporary notions of aesthetics in many of these rural areas are placing greater significance on the material rather than on natural elements. Thus, in rural Kumaun, many sacred groves are being replaced by large temples and temple complexes. Emphasis on the temples and temple structures rather than the groves is leading to intensive grazing pressures on sacred groves. In some instances, the rising popularity of specific temples, religious mass tourism, and resources used in large ritual ceremonies is leading to the depletion of the once-remote sacred groves.

Thus, given the changing conceptions of religion and religious behavior in contemporary times, merely keeping areas sacred is insufficient. By understanding local perspectives on the sacred and the changing local relations with sacred natural elements, we can see that building on local views of the sacred and reestablishing the link between nature and religion may be crucial for the protection of these natural areas.

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See also: Cathedral Forests and the Felling of Sacred Groves; Hinduism; India; Re-Earthing; Sacred Groves of Africa; Sacred Mountains; Wenger, Susan – Yoruba Art, and the Oshogbo Sacred Grove.

### Indigenous Activism and Environmentalism in Latin America

Many indigenous spiritual and philosophical traditions express ethics of respect for nonhuman life, for particular places and landscape features, and for the Earth itself. These approaches illuminate the extent to which Western modes of understanding the world authorize or excuse environmentally destructive practices. They provide insight into other ways of representing and interpreting nature and humans' relation to it and point the way to solutions to human-caused environmental crises.

As the historian Richard White notes, "[p]erhaps the most important decision Europeans made about American nature in the centuries following Columbus was that they were not part of it but Indians were" (White 1999: 132). The Spaniards brought with them a stock of ideas about "wild men" and savages, which were early although not universally applied to the inhabitants of the Americas. Foundational categories of European thinking, expressed in oppositions between savage and civilized, or nature and culture, were central to Spanish thinking, yet images of nature as Eden, the landscape of a prelapsarian state of grace, also shaped their understandings of the land they colonized.

The same categories underwrote different phases of nationalism in Latin America. Early post-Independence nationalisms were characterized by conflict between conservatives and liberals, the latter of whom favored dispossessing the Church and indigenous communities of lands. The liberal view typically saw Indians as obstacles to progress; their disappearance would be an important achievement for the consolidation of the liberal nation. In contrast, some early twentieth-century nationalists lionized their indigenous heritage in their efforts to forge a mestizo nation. The distinctiveness and superiority of Latin American culture was explained as the sum of the best parts of both the Spanish and Indian heritage

presumed in the ideology of *mestizaje*, or race-mixing. Most famously expressed in the Mexican José Vasconcelos's ideas about the Latin American "cosmic race," accounts of *mestizaje* that celebrated its indigenous component looked to a glorious indigenous past rather than contemporary Indians, who were typically poor and marginalized and regarded as hindrances to progress.

Thus, two contradictory but constantly intertwined modes of imagining indigenous peoples recur in the last five hundred years of history in the Americas. One portrays Indians as inferior people and prescribes assimilation; the other celebrates the traditions, knowledge, and history of indigenous peoples. These complex and shifting valences of respect and disregard characterize representations of Indians that convergence in regarding indigenous people as radically and fundamentally different from non-Indians. Such images shape the ways both non-Indians and Indians understand what it means to be indigenous, and influence contemporary issues involving indigenous peoples, including indigenous rights in international law, Indian land claims, and debates over bilingual education. They have also been fundamental in the relationship between indigenous peoples and environmentalists over the last thirty years.

Maya scholar and activist Victor Montejo affirms that indigenous peoples' worldviews encourage environmentally sustainable practices, pointing out that

concern for the natural world, and the mutual respect this relationship implies, is constantly reinforced by traditional Mayan ways of knowing and teaching. [A] holistic perspective of human collective destiny with other living creatures on earth has a religious expression among indigenous people (Montejo 2001: 176).

Montejo draws on the teachings of the pre-Columbian Mayan text *Popol Vuh*, as well as his lessons he learned as a child, to show how Mayan beliefs foster humans' respect for the rest of creation. An origin myth in which an earlier race of humans were destroyed for the disregard they showed animals and inanimate objects cautions people to respect the natural world, while humans' relationship of dependence on a Creator who is embodied in the unity of sky and Earth reinforces the sacredness of the world.

Montejo's work points to one of the central aspects of contemporary indigenous identity: the identification of Indian religions and worldviews as emphasizing respect for nonhuman life and providing a holistic approach to understanding humans and nature. This is often expressed in the figure of Mother Earth. Mother Earth spirituality (whose historical roots among indigenous Americans is disputed) poses environmental protection as an issue of central concern to indigenous peoples for religious reasons. This lends legitimacy to activists' claims about

the ecological superiority of indigenous worldviews; it also provides weight for some territorial claims. But Mother Earth spirituality has also become a central concept for the pan-indigenous identity asserted by political and social activists, expressing a certain sensibility and helping to foster solidarity among diverse indigenous traditions. Prayers to Mother Earth commonly lead off indigenous organization meetings and public events; references to Mother Earth were prominent among indigenous-oriented events at the 1992 Rio Earth Conference.

For the Maya and other Mesoamerican peoples, spiritual links to nature are clearly expressed in beliefs and traditions relating to maize. The first humans were made of corn, according to the *Popol Vuh*, and corn cultivation remains central to the lives of rural people throughout Mexico and Central America. In western El Salvador, peasant farmers choose to sow corn on at least some of their land even when it will be less profitable than other crops and even if they have insufficient land and will have to buy most of the years' corn in any case. Javier Galicia Silva notes the same preference for corn in Mexico, reporting that for contemporary Nahua small-scale farmers there are still "mythic criteria that motivate agricultural practices" (Galicia Silva 2001: 321).

Culturally specific appraisals of the importance of particular crops and forms of agricultural production clearly inform indigenous peoples' understandings of and interactions with the natural world. In Mesoamerica, indigenous farmers developed myriad varieties of corn, while Andean farmers have produced an astonishing number of potato varieties. Andean farmers' preference for a high diversity of crops is expressed in an ethic of cultivation that outlines what constitutes a satisfactory livelihood. This preference for diversity has been particular to peasant or non-elite farmers since before the arrival of the Spaniards: Inca state-run agriculture, like the *hacienda* production of Spanish colonial rule, was dedicated to the cultivation of large quantities of relatively few species and varieties. Commoner or peasant farmers, in contrast, identify a wide diversity of both species and varieties as fundamental to a satisfactory life, and their work has produced and preserved an astonishing array of potato and corn types.

Notable in these examples is the importance of culturally specific, often religious, guidelines that address both connections to "nature" as a general realm of nonhuman being and to agriculture. Although many indigenous traditions distinguish between cultivated spaces and a more distant place of spirits and beasts, both terrains are addressed by belief systems that provide guidelines for human interactions with the nonhuman. While it is by no means uncontested, there is evidence for the claim that many American indigenous traditions do not make the fundamental distinction between "wild" and

“civilized” or “humanized” landscapes that predominate in Western approaches to nature.

Indeed, much of what has been regarded by Westerners as “wild” landscapes in the Americas has indeed been produced by human activity, in some cases over thousands of years. This is true not only for regions like those in the Andes or the Mesoamerican highlands, but also for the lowland forests like the Amazon, many of whose inhabitants – long regarded as “hunters and gatherers” – have long traditions of gardening and cultivating medicinal plants. Selective slash-and burn (swidden) cultivation in lowland forests appears to have increased biodiversity in many areas; ancient Maya and Aztec societies maintained gardens and protected areas.

In Latin America (as in the U.S.) dominant elites have often labeled land inhabited and tended by indigenous peoples as not only “wild” but also “empty,” particularly in cases of land not occupied by peasant farmers. In many countries (including Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Brazil) governments have encouraged highland Indians to colonize “empty” or “unused” lowland forests to relieve pressures on highland land concentrated in large estates and expand the agricultural frontier, and in some cases to strengthen national claims to disputed border areas. Highland peasants moving into lowland areas can cause tremendous ecological damage, often burning large tracts of land for cultivation and ranching or opening mining claims, and are a major threat to lowland groups in several countries.

There is evidence that anthropogenic environmental change in pre-Columbian Latin America contributed to degradation in some areas, and may have caused significant damage. The most widely cited case is of damage wrought by widespread deforestation and agricultural intensification, which is thought to have contributed significantly to the collapse of Classic Maya civilization.

For the most part, anthropology, ecology, and other disciplines remain ambivalent about the links between spirituality or religion and ecological sustainability in indigenous communities. While many indigenous traditions express respect for nonhuman life or “the environment,” the extent to which these expressions predict ecologically wise and sustainable practices is uncertain. Understanding the natural world as sacred does not necessarily call for an ethic of environmental protection or stewardship. Indeed, a powerfully sacred landscape may well be outside the boundaries of human influence by definition. Specifically religious responses may not address ecological problems in some cases, and the “ecological balance” that many see expressed in indigenous religious traditions may be the result rather than the cause of particular practices that are ecologically sustainable and sensible.

Skeptics assert that the sustainability of many indigenous societies can more plausibly be explained as an out-

come of particular technologies, ecological conditions, or levels of population density than as the result of religious attitudes about nature. Some assert that Indians with access to environmentally damaging technologies are no less likely than non-Indians to destroy their environments. In a less extreme but still cautious appraisal of the relations between indigenous religious traditions and ecological sustainability, other observers note that spirituality as well as everyday practices are created in particular historical and ecological conditions. They contend that attributing primary causal weight to religious beliefs oversimplifies complicated historical, cultural, and environmental factors, and that stark contrasts between Indian and Western worldviews neglect the impacts of five hundred years of Western presence in the Americas.

One recent study based on ten years of field research among indigenous and non-indigenous farmers in the lowland Petén forest of Guatemala provides suggestive evidence in favor of cultural explanations of environmental practices while also addressing the contingent quality of culturally specific variables. The Itza’ Maya, who have lived in the Petén for centuries, plant more crops and tree species than do neighboring Q’eqchi’ Maya (who moved to the forest from the highlands) or non-indigenous Ladinos. Itza’ also farm in ways that are less harmful to the soil and more productive, and show a more sophisticated understanding of forest ecology than do the other groups. One factor in Itza’ agricultural and forestry practices is a belief that spirits act as intermediaries for particular forest species, and these must be cared for and respected, while the intimate local knowledge of the Itza’ – inextricably linked to their worldview and spiritual traditions – guides sustainable management and farming practices.

Notably, nearby Ladinos engage in less damaging practices than do immigrant Q’eqchi’ Maya. Ladinos’ social organization favors learning from Itza’ practices, while Q’eqchi’ social organization does not. In addition, cognitive models of ecological relationships brought by Q’eqchi’ Maya from their highland places of origin seem not to favor the environmentally sustainable (or less-damaging) practices engaged in by Ladino and Itza’ farmers.

These findings point both to the importance of culturally specific and religious understandings of nature and to the transferability of those understandings. Yet they also show that culturally specific values of an indigenous people may predict environmental degradation and hinder learning ecologically sustainable techniques.

While social scientists may be unable to agree on the relative ecological wisdom of indigenous peoples, many environmentalists and indigenous activists assert with conviction that indigenous peoples are better able to live harmoniously with their environments than non-Indians, a belief that is fundamental both to political platforms and

to social identities. Romantic images of ecologically superior Indians are employed to combat virulent racist representations. Such images are essential to the relatively recent importance of environmental issues to the political platforms of indigenous peoples as well as the alliance between international environmental organizations and indigenous groups. Some observers see the link between indigenous and environmental activists as a decisive shift in the practices of both groups, noting that earlier encounters were marked by tension and competition. Key features of this shift include the increasingly transnational sphere of indigenous activism as well as the new prominence of discourses and symbols associated with Indians' spiritual and traditional ties to nature.

The roots of indigenous rights activism in Latin America go back to debates over the treatment of Indians in the early Colonial period, as well as a long history of Indian revolts. Contemporary indigenous mobilization draws on this heritage, yet is more directly linked to doctrines of universal human rights and national sovereignty developed in the wake of World War II.

Abuses associated with colonization of lowland forests by miners and rubber tappers prompted the creation of some of the first international indigenous rights instruments, including the International Labor Organization Convention on the Protection of Indigenous Populations (ILO no. 107). Issued in 1957, ILO 107 was assimilationist in its basic logic, yet it marked the emergence of indigenous rights in the realm of international law and provided a baseline against which subsequent advances would be defined.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the establishment of seminal indigenous rights organizations including the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs, Survival International, and Cultural Survival. The 1971 Declaration of Barbados (issued at an international meeting of mostly Latin American anthropologists) called for the recognition that indigenous peoples have rights that precede those of other national groups, including collective and territorial rights, thus articulating the fundamental distinctiveness of indigenous rights in universal human rights doctrine.

Also viewing indigenous rights as properly the domain of international law, the United Nations has been an essential ally in the development of indigenous rights doctrine. The U.N. sponsored NGO conferences in 1977 and 1981, and in 1982 established its Working Group on Indigenous Populations, which issued the Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DDRIP) in 1989. In 1989, the ILO issued Convention 169, an updated version of the earlier 107 that calls for constitutional recognition of cultural difference within nations as well as support for indigenous territorial claims. It has been ratified by ten Latin American nations.

The human rights focus of the movement expanded to include environmental concerns in the 1980s when

environmentalists and indigenous rights organizations found common cause in the Amazon. Environmental activism underwent a period of rapid growth and internationalization in roughly the same period as did indigenous movements, and by the 1980s environmentalists were looking beyond national borders and taking an active interest in international issues such as tropical deforestation.

Opposition to World Bank-funded development projects in the Amazon galvanized the alliance. Beginning in 1982, the Brazilian government paved a road through the Amazon, using Bank funds. Millions of colonists followed the road, damaging the forest and threatening indigenous communities. Northern environmental groups pressured U.S. politicians and the Bank, which suspended funding for the project in 1985 and subsequently modified the terms of the loan to include mitigation of environmental damages, protection of indigenous lands, and local participation in decision making. (The World Bank and other international lenders continue to fund road building in the Amazon and other lowland forests, where the presence of a road is the single most significant variable predicting deforestation. The Bank itself is a complex institution, and the impact of reforms like OD 4.20, described below, are uncertain.)

In another campaign, environmentalists joined the Brazilian Kayapó to fight a Bank-supported hydro-electric power project that would flood indigenous territory, including inhabited villages. A meeting convened at one of the proposed dam sites in 1989 included a performance by the rock star Sting. The publicity drew international attention and linked forest conservation with cultural survival. Once again the Bank suspended its loan pending revision of the project.

Responding to the protests, the Bank issued Operational Directive 4.20 (OD 4.20) in 1991. OD 4.20 calls for the mitigation of negative impacts on indigenous peoples caused by Bank projects (although it does not prevent projects anticipated to have such impacts). OD 4.20 formalizes the close association of indigenous rights and environmental concerns. Evaluation of threats to indigenous peoples is subsumed in the environmental impact assessment previously required of Bank projects.

The successful protests against the projects in Brazil helped to consolidate indigenous/environmentalist alliances in the Amazon. They also helped publicize indigenous issues as preparations were underway for two pivotal events of 1992: the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio and the continent-wide protests of the planned celebration of Columbus' arrival in the Americas five hundred years earlier.

Latin American and Spanish officials planned to celebrate the five-hundred-year anniversary in 1992 of what they called the "encounter of two worlds." Indigenous activists did not consider the event anything to

celebrate. Under the banner of “500 years of resistance,” indigenous groups throughout the Americas organized protests. In Ecuador, thousands of Indians marched from the Amazon to Quito (with support from NGOs including the Rainforest Action Network) to demand territory and indigenous management of a national park – demands that were soon met. The anti-quincentenary campaign galvanized indigenous groups throughout the Americas, and international networks grew substantially. Largely responding to the protests and pressures from indigenous activists, the UN declared 1993 the International Year of Indigenous People and later extended the year to a decade, 1995–2005.

Brazilian indigenous groups, working with environmentalists, had received significant publicity in the five years before the UNCED. Indigenous leaders had toured the U.S. and Europe to mobilize international support and had generated a great deal of media attention. The Kayapó had successfully challenged the World Bank dam project and gained territorial rights, while the Yanomani were fighting for territory in the form of a national park that would protect their traditional lands. Environmentalists, human rights and indigenous rights organizations, and the UN Secretary-General pressured the Brazilian government to grant the Yanomani demands, using the upcoming UNCED as a point of leverage. The Yanomani were granted territory in November of 1992.

These successes, combined with years of diligent organizing, placed indigenous activists in a good position to take advantage of the political space opened by the Rio Conference. They attended a parallel NGO meeting and organized an “Intertribal Village,” a gathering of Indians that generated publicity and helped them achieve a meeting with the head of the UNCED. Their influence, along with the legacy of their alliance with environmentalist groups, is evident in the various provisions addressing indigenous peoples in the policies and recommendations made at the UNCED.

The main UNCED program (Agenda 21), the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD), and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) make special note of indigenous peoples’ relations with their environments. These policy statements recognize that many indigenous peoples have sophisticated understandings of local environments and natural resources – commonly called indigenous knowledge (IK) – that contribute to the sustainability of indigenous peoples’ economies, ecologies, and communities.

Indigenous knowledge has contributed to Western scientific knowledge, and many industries see a potential for IK to point to new products and technologies. Industry calls the search for new resources “bioprospecting” while many indigenous activists regard the process as “biopiracy.” They protest the patenting of traditional technologies and resources by Western scientists and firms.

They note that patenting rewards Western corporations and scientists for exploiting indigenous knowledge without recognizing the creation of that knowledge by indigenous peoples or the centrality of that knowledge – its production and its use – to indigenous belief systems.

(A related issue of growing concern to indigenous as well as peasant activists is the spread of genetically modified crops and seeds. The use of GMO seeds dramatically increases local farmers’ dependence on agroindustry. Another potential negative impact of GMOs is the reduction of the extraordinary diversity of corn, potato, and other cultigens developed by indigenous Americans. Many indigenous activists argue that GMO and seed patenting threaten their ways of life and their very identities by controlling crops and dramatically impacting agricultural practices central to indigenous spiritual traditions.)

Agenda 21, the CBD, and the CCD all encourage the dissemination of IK. Yet critics argue that indigenous knowledge is meaningful and workable in specific social contexts. The approaches to nature that are understood as IK may, for the people who developed them, be tied to complicated cosmologies and spiritual understandings of the natural world, as in the case of the Itza’ Maya. For indigenous peoples, stripping indigenous knowledge of the worldview and religious traditions within which that knowledge operates is yet another example of outsiders’ failure to respect their beliefs and values. Furthermore, the environmental sustainability of indigenous societies is not reducible to a single factor like IK. Access to Western technologies and market economies, population density, and settlement patterns, all affect sustainability. This complexity suggests that institutionalizing and disseminating IK within a Western development framework may be disappointing.

The interest in IK (and, more generally, the association of indigenous peoples with environmental protection) has contributed to increased support for programs that encourage community management of natural resources. In several cases, notably in the Amazon, Panama, and Costa Rica, participatory management and conservation plans have dovetailed with indigenous peoples’ territorial claims. Agenda 21 includes provisions for territorial rights, as do ILO 169 and the DDRIP. At smaller scales, community forestry and agroecology initiatives that draw on IK have given indigenous peoples greater control over natural resources and local autonomy, including religious freedom. In highland Guatemala for example, including sacred sites identified by local religious leaders in forest management plans, these initiatives have contributed to more successful conservation.

In some cases, indigenous peoples have sought to exploit non-traditional resources within their territories in ways that are unsustainable and environmentally destructive. The Amazonian Kayapó have sold logging rights to tracts of forest under their control, and Amazonian

Guajajara Indians took hostages in 1989 in order to force the government Indian affairs agency to let them sell timber. The image of Indians clear-cutting their forest is jarring for some observers, including some environmentalists and indigenous activists. Yet as indigenous communities seek to achieve higher levels of economic development and social well-being, they may often be faced with the same kinds of decisions regarding environmental quality that non-Indians must confront.

The tremendous diversity of Latin American indigenous peoples is reflected in the heterogeneity of their religious beliefs and relations to nature. Yet Indians throughout the Americas share a basic experience of colonization and social, political, and economic marginalization in which assimilationist efforts to eradicate indigenous belief systems have persisted from missionary colonists through post-Independence education policies, as have the dispossession and destruction of Indian lands by outsiders. For many indigenous peoples religion as an expression of a unique identity and a philosophy of connections to particular territories and places is central to their struggles to secure and protect their rights as distinct peoples.

*Brandt Gustav Peterson*

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- See also: Aboriginal Environmental Groups in Canada; American Indians as "First Ecologists"; Indigenous Environmental Network; Maya Religion (Central America); Maya Spirituality (Guatemala Highlands); Mother Earth; Native American Languages; Noble Savage; Religious Environmentalist Paradigm; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; United Nations' "Earth Summits"; World Conference of Indigenous Peoples (Kari Oca, Brazil).

#### **P** Indigenous Environmental Network

This relationship to the sacredness of our Mother Earth and all her children, defines our spiritual, cultural, social, economic, and even, political relationship we have with each other and with all life (Tom "Mato Awanyankapi" Goldtooth, Indigenous Environmental Network 2002).

The Indigenous Environmental Network was born in 1990 from a national gathering of tribal grassroots leadership and youth to discuss common experiences regarding environmental assaults on our lands, waters, and communities and villages. At that time, a significant number of our tribal communities were targeted for municipal