
[International Year of Biodiversity: And what about peoples?](#)

The United Nations declared 2010 to be the International Year of Biodiversity. According to the official web site, “It is a celebration of life on earth and of the value of biodiversity for our lives. The world is invited to take action in 2010 to safeguard the variety of life on earth: biodiversity.” Biodiversity is portrayed as our “natural wealth”, on which we rely to provide us with “food, fuel, medicine and other essentials” we “simply cannot live without.”

We believe that although true, the above does not adequately reflect the full meaning of biodiversity. In this respect, we think it is necessary to stress that humans are part of the Earth’s biodiversity, not only as its users –and abusers- but also as a repository of a huge diversity of cultures, many of which having a profound knowledge about the sustainable use of biodiversity. Some of these cultures have already been wiped off from the face of the Earth while others –using the biodiversity language- have become “rare, threatened and endangered”. However, they are not to be found in “red lists” as in the case of animal species that face extinction.

But extinction is taking place right now. With great sadness, we received the news that on February 4th the last member of a unique tribe died on India’s Andaman Islands. Boa Sr, who died aged around 85, was the last speaker of ‘Bo’, one of the ten Great Andamanese languages. The Bo are thought to have lived in the Andaman Islands for as much as 65,000 years, making them the descendants of one of the oldest human cultures on Earth.

Had she been the last representative of a species of tiger, or monkey or gorilla, her death would have probably received worldwide coverage. But she was “only” the last member of a “tribe” in an island in the Indian Ocean.

In the forests of that same island live the Jarawa, who chose and managed to resist contact with all outsiders until 1998. According to Survival International, they are now under serious threat. Poachers are camping for days at a time in their forest, and local authorities have defied an order from India’s supreme court to close the road that cuts through the Jarawa’s reserve. In 1999 and 2006, the Jarawa suffered outbreaks of measles – a disease that has wiped out many indigenous groups worldwide following contact with outsiders.

A similar situation is being faced by a number of indigenous peoples living in the forests of South America, who are still resisting contact with the surrounding society. They live in voluntary isolation in their ancestral territories and were never asked if they would like to be citizens of Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay or Perú. Their territories were simply included inside the boundaries of the new countries created in the 19th Century by mostly Spanish and Portuguese descendants after independence from Spain and Portugal.

Their fate is closely linked to one of the best publicized biodiversity issues: tropical forest destruction. Most of the remaining isolated groups live in the Amazon forest while a few others live in the Chaco forest of Bolivia and Paraguay. Forest biodiversity provides for all their needs, but their forests are being constantly destroyed and degraded by the outside society, thus putting them on the brink of

extinction.

Many other indigenous peoples and traditional communities worldwide are struggling to protect their diverse cultures -strongly rooted in biodiversity- against the forces of so-called “development” unleashed against them by governments and international institutions. Industrial logging, oil, mining, dams, plantations, cattle-ranching, shrimp farming don’t simply “happen”: they are promoted by those same governments and institutions that are supposed to protect biodiversity.

Instead of receiving a well-deserved “environmental award” for protecting biodiversity, these peoples are being dispossessed, repressed and evicted from their territories, either to allow the occupation of their land by corporations that destroy biodiversity or to establish so-called “protected areas” that destroy their livelihoods and culture –without even achieving the stated aim of biodiversity conservation.

If by declaring 2010 as International Year of Biodiversity, the United Nations truly aims at safeguarding the “variety of life on earth”, it should start by safeguarding the rights of all those peoples, thus ensuring the conservation of biodiversity in its full extent. That would be a good start.