

TUNZA ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS

indigenous wisdom

Do you have questions on environment and development issues that you would like the experts at UNEP to answer? Please send them to cpinfo@unep.org, and we will try to answer them in future issues.

For this issue, Tunza asked five indigenous people to answer questions from readers. **Upaluk Poppel** (Inuit, Greenland), **Jennifer Koinante Kihoro** (Laikipiak Masai, Kenya), **Niyara Gafarova** (Crimean Tatar, Ukraine), **Francis Alfred** (Tolo, Solomon Islands) and **Ngwe Soe** (Karenni, Myanmar) prepared the answers.

Q: It is often said that indigenous peoples are much better at using the world's resources in moderation. How has this come about, seeing that they have a much narrower knowledge of the world?
Caroline Ang, United States

A: This question reflects a common stereotype about indigenous peoples. They have struggled peacefully for their rights – and to preserve their traditional knowledge – for centuries. As they lost access to their own resources, they had to learn to survive in very hostile environments by using what remained creatively. This has nothing to do with

narrowness of knowledge but with the difficulty we have, as indigenous peoples, in getting access to education, information technology and so on, because of discriminatory policies excluding us from schools and universities. Indigenous peoples do not usually waste resources, as they have strong spiritual and cultural relationships with their environment.

Q: Are there things we can learn from indigenous peoples?
Cristi Gerlach, Venezuela

A: Yes, many. Indigenous peoples have very rich and interesting cultures, and most communities still speak their native languages and engage in traditional storytelling, music and dance. They hold traditional knowledge on how to co-exist with nature,

land and resources, with skills in hunting wildlife and gathering herbal medicines to treat infections and other illnesses. Additionally, they know peaceful ways of resolving conflicts and are usually good negotiators.

Q: What can we learn from the alternative medicine practised by indigenous peoples? Could it help us cure many of our modern diseases?
João F. Scarpelini, Brazil

A: Yes, but it is even more important to respect indigenous peoples' rights to their lands, from which they harvest medicinal plants, and their rights to use such plants. We face the intrusion of researchers who take away our genetic and natural resources without asking our permission. They believe that they can find cures by copying indigenous medicines, yet they rarely

consult us or share the ensuing commercial benefits with us. We hope that many modern diseases can be cured using indigenous knowledge, but if this is to happen there must be better cooperation and communication with indigenous peoples, and our knowledge and resources must be respected and protected.

Q: Is it possible to preserve an 'original' culture in the face of increasing influence from more dominant cultural models such as the American/Western one? Has any indigenous culture managed to remain intact?
Maria Sterniczuk, Canada

A: It will be pretty difficult to maintain our original indigenous identities. But some of us still own traditional territories, or are in the process of regaining them. Moreover, we know that we belong to indigenous groups, giving us an incentive to

preserve and practise our original cultures and traditions. Indigenous cultures, like any others, are constantly developing and changing, but we believe that it should be up to us to decide when and how.

Q: How has environmental degradation – deforestation, desertification, the loss of biodiversity – affected the ability of indigenous peoples to live off the land?
Irina Gavriloea, Romania

A: Environmental degradation reflects a lack of understanding of indigenous peoples' livelihoods and modes of production. Land and natural resources are vital sources of knowledge that represent our spiritual life, and provide space for our rituals. We see the forest as part of our mother, Nature – not as a commodity that can be sold and overexploited in the name of so-called

'development' for economic benefits. Ecosystems are being rapidly depleted, yet our physical and cultural survival depends on them. The right to life is intrinsically linked to gaining access to and control over our resources. Development projects must be based on the principles of self-determination and self-governance of indigenous peoples.

environmental *heroes*

The Goldman Environmental Prize is the world's foremost award for grassroots environmental heroes, recognizing those who fight for the environment – often at great personal cost. The prize is given by the Goldman Environmental Foundation to six recipients every year. Those whose stories are told on this page are all Goldman prizewinners.

Yosepha Alomang, an elderly leader of the Amungme people of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, was tortured for six weeks, and held for a week without food and drink in a cell knee-deep in water and human excrement, after questioning local mining practices. Mines in her area – one of the

most biologically diverse places on earth – have destroyed the rainforest, polluted rivers and displaced entire communities. Despite her mistreatment, she continued to speak out and succeeded in getting a governmental investigation into the practices.



Harrison Ngau Laing, a Dayak tribesman from Sarawak in Malaysia, led his people in a blockade of logging camps to try to stop the felling of their forests, which were being cut down more rapidly in Sarawak than anywhere else on earth. For his efforts, he was jailed and put under house arrest for almost two years. Awarded a Goldman Environmental Prize in 1990, he used the prize money to stand for a seat in the Malaysian Parliament. He won a seat that same year, ousting the Deputy Minister for Public Works. Today, as the programme coordinator for a legal resource centre, he continues to fight against deforestation and for the rights of his people.

Benito Kuwaru'wa is one of the highly traditional U'wa people who live high in the cloud forests of Colombia. The U'wa have had very little contact with the outside world. They believe that oil is the blood of the earth, and that pumping it out is like killing one's own mother. In 1992, a major petroleum company tried to explore for oil on their territory. Kuwaru'wa campaigned against these operations and – with 5,000 of his people – threatened to commit mass suicide if oil was ever extracted. In July 1997, he was beaten by armed and hooded men and thrown into a river to drown. He survived the attack and gained a limited victory over the oil company.



JoAnn Tall, a Native American belonging to the Oglala Lakota tribe, lives on a reservation in the poorest county in the entire United States. Guided by prophetic dreams and spiritual experiences, she became an environmental activist – despite being crippled with rheumatoid arthritis and the mother of eight. She defeated plans to build both a nuclear weapons testing site and a waste dump and incinerator on Native American lands.

Luis Macas, a Quechua Indian from the Andean highlands in Ecuador, led a general strike of more than a million indigenous people in his country in a campaign for recognition of their rights. As a result, the Government granted 148 indigenous communities legal title to almost 1.25 million hectares of Amazonia, the largest single return of land in the Amazon. In 1996 he became the first indigenous person ever to be elected to the Ecuadorian National Congress.

Eileen Kampakuta Brown and **Eileen Wani Wingfield**, both Australian Aboriginal elders in their 70s, led their communities in a campaign to fight the proposed construction of a national nuclear waste dump on their lands in the South Australian desert. Despite their failing health, the two women fought tirelessly until the Australian Government abandoned the plans in 1994.