

IASCP 2004: *Reports from Oaxaca*

Indigenous Rights, Traditional Knowledge and Identity

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Nelson Lemus Cruz had some of us in tears as he described the “ancestral struggle and resistance” of his people, the Paez people (“nasa” meaning “living being”) in Colombia. His story of the Paez’s determination to protect their lands was similar to so many other Indigenous peoples around the globe, but it was also unique. The Paez’s desire to carry out their sacred duty as stewards of their land is fraught with danger and death. The Paez have faced state incursions onto their lands, invasion by guerillas involved in civil war and the lawlessness of drug traders. In spite of this, they continue to assert their own stewardship and customary laws. Lemus Cruz’s story wove together with so many other Indigenous peoples’ stories at the IASCP conference. His voice and others Indigenous voices at the conference fed my hunger to hear directly from Indigenous peoples, as well as to learn about their struggles through academic studies.

I was heartened by this further opening up to Indigenous voices. Although Indigenous issues have been on the agenda of past IASCP control of natural resources. Presenters gave constructive suggestions for how to address the thorny issue of rights. They advocated finding ways to reconcile rights to allow the co-existence of Indigenous rights with state and private property rights, having nation states seek the free, full and informed consent of Indigenous peoples before resource development and providing compensation where there is a loss of Indigenous land use and rights. Overall, the strongest message that emerged for me was that Indigenous peoples have always defended and will continue to defend their lands and rights.

Another message that struck me was that governance and Indigenous rights are inextricably linked. Indigenous peoples pointed to the integrity of their traditional governance systems, including customary law and common property. Given the continued existence of these governance and property rights systems, combined with the threat to their rights and land uses, I heard the plea for a political solution first, allowing self determination to form the foundation for conservation of natural resources.

But how are political solutions to be found? I heard voices suggest the creation of more “space” or that finding a “middle ground” would allow further negotiations and conflict management between states and Indigenous peoples. I heard the political/conservation connection again in relation to knowledge and land use. In addition to its contribution to biodiversity conservation, Indigenous knowledge was promoted as an essential element of self-determination. But underlying this I also heard frustration about Indigenous knowledge and management systems being still largely invisible or ignored.

My own presentation raised the issue of assessing Indigenous peoples’ economic development within too narrow a focus, such as gaining a few jobs, while avoiding measures of community

well-being and cultural survival. Given the social and economic inequity faced by most of the world's Indigenous peoples, it is no wonder that economic development is a central theme. I heard many speakers argue for equity and justice for Indigenous peoples in benefit-sharing from natural resource development. I also heard a clear message that Indigenous peoples want to make their own decisions about appropriate economic development, including poverty alleviation measures now being touted by development agencies. Such communities are not necessarily opposed to participating in wider economic systems and conferences, this is the first time that Indigenous rights have been raised to the theme level. Given the history of Mexican Indigenous peoples' struggles to maintain ownership and management of their lands, a struggle shared by other Indigenous peoples in Latin America, it is no surprise that the Oaxaca conference organizers embraced this theme. The organizers did a tremendous service in bringing together Indigenous representatives and academics who have worked with them to discuss the many unique situations faced by Indigenous peoples from around the world. Indigenous representatives came from Latin America (Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Venezuela), North America (Canada and the United States), Asia & Oceania (Australia, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Nepal), and Africa (Zambia and Zimbabwe).

It struck me that even with this great diversity, it was the common elements of Indigenous peoples' struggles world wide for their rights and the implications this had for the conservation of global natural resources that established the thread of connection and provided such a great learning experience. In Canada, we are so privileged, but even at home Indigenous peoples continue to struggle to have their rights recognized and to rise from the poverty and social alienation that besets our communities. Sometimes we in Canada think that we are leading in recognizing Indigenous peoples rights, but when I heard some of the stories at the conference, I knew that we in Canada had a long way to go and a lot to learn from our Indigenous brothers and sisters around the globe.

The arena of much of the discussion was conflict over natural resources not just over access, but also over the means to conserve from minerals and oil and gas to timber and non-timber forest products, from water to fish and wildlife, from pasture to genetic resources. And of course, there was the ever-contested resource of funding, the lack of which often arises from Indigenous peoples losing access to their natural resources and hampers Indigenous peoples' full involvement in decision-making about the use of those resources. Each of the sub-theme areas Indigenous rights, governance, knowledge and land use, and economic development brought home to me particular lessons. Indigenous rights may be the most difficult issue for researchers to understand. I think the main question is how to reconcile Indigenous rights with state and private market integration, but they want to be the ones to decide how to transform their economies and institutions. I found hope in learning about communities who were pursuing new economic initiatives related to environmental protection and services, initiatives they claim are more in keeping with their traditional views of land stewardship.

Research Challenges

I came away from the conference thinking about the strong messages to researchers exploring Indigenous peoples' participation in natural resource development and management. Researchers need to understand, respect and promote Indigenous rights and land uses. When researchers come to this understanding, it necessarily leads us to address the institutional issue of reconciling

state regulations with customary laws. I hope that IASCP will continue building on the strength that comes from sharing experiences across borders, and encourage researchers to undertake more cross continental comparative studies with Indigenous communities.

We all continue to grapple with the challenges of developing and applying appropriate research methods, including participatory research. Finally, for future IASCP conferences and studies, I hope we heed a final message from Indigenous delegates to support Indigenous Peoples to speak for themselves at future conferences and in research projects.

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