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# Traditional Knowledge in the Global Climate Change Regime: Narratives for an Alternative Science Diplomacy

*An InsSciDE Case Study*

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Based on ethnographic observations during the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP 21) in Paris in 2015, this case study focuses on the narratives mobilized around the articulation between Indigenous traditional knowledge and the fight against climate change. It distinguishes the consolidation of three major narratives that frame this new participation of Indigenous peoples in this global arena: the victim-hero narrative around the theme of resilience, the narrative of integrating traditional and scientific knowledge, and the supernatural ecology narrative that refers to diplomatic-type relations with spiritual entities. Altogether, these narratives construct traditional knowledge diplomacy as an alternative to the official scientific diplomacy of climate change. They are part of an Indigenous diplomacy whose main objective remains the recognition of Indigenous rights and territories inside nation-states.



Image credit: J. Foyer & D. Dumoulin Kervran

## **Keywords:**

Indigenous peoples, traditional knowledge, climate change, narratives



# Traditional Knowledge in the Global Climate Change Regime: Narratives for an Alternative Science Diplomacy

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is one of today's best examples of a science diplomacy "institution"; nonetheless, other forms of diplomacy based on other forms of knowledge are gaining voice in the climate arena. Indeed, Indigenous peoples and their allies are advocating for alternative ways of fighting against climate change through the mobilization of traditional knowledge. At the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP) held in Glasgow in November 2021, a set of European and North American governments led the \$1.7bn funding pledge aiming to reverse global forest loss and land degradation by 2030; campaigners were cautiously hopeful that an equally significant outcome of COP26 could be the real defense of Indigenous peoples' rights. This case looks backward to COP21, whose landmark Paris Agreement recognized these rights, and examines the narratives expressed there – which, as instruments of political action and diplomacy, continue to frame these peoples' participation in global climate negotiations.

In 2015, the Paris Agreement forged at COP21 created a new frame for international diplomacy about climate change. Its preamble recognized the rights of Indigenous peoples. In section 5 of Article 7, it also established that adaptation policies should "take into account and be informed by the best available science and, as appropriate, traditional knowledge, knowledge of Indigenous peoples and local knowledge systems" (United Nations 2015).

Getting these affirmations into the Paris Agreement was the subject of diplomacy by Indigenous organizations, supported by various scientific communities, international institutions, and pro-Indigenous states, and commencing long before COP21. The construction of narratives (understood here as discourses that mix objective, emotional and argumentative dimensions) constitutes a fundamental step in this political action. Our case study examines the consolidation of narratives that articulate the theme of climate change with that of traditional knowledge and, more generally, of Indigenous peoples. Such narratives' first political effect is to give Indigenous peoples a place in the production of future scenarios for humanity; the second is to establish support for the defense of their interests via access to symbolic and material resources. As such, narratives can be considered instruments of diplomacy. The narratives we shall analyze were heard and read during our immersive observation of COP21. They treat traditional knowledge as a central element of Indigenous climate change diplomacy. Diplomacy formulated around this traditional knowledge presents an alternative to the "classical" science diplomacy of the IPCC. Indeed, it opens up in the UN arenas the possibility of other forms of diplomacy, beyond states and even "beyond humans", but also of other forms of knowledge,

beyond the canons of a globalizing western science. This diplomacy of traditional knowledge operates at various levels: first among Indigenous peoples, then with other stakeholders in international negotiations, and, at a more fundamental level, with a whole series of non-human entities.

From the state-level negotiations during COP 21 to more alternative spaces like the Climate Action Zone welcoming global civil society, we found Indigenous narratives to be carried through a wide range of channels, reaching a wide variety of actors, from heads of state to passersby in the Paris metro. While not obviously central, the Indigenous presence at COP 21 was significant and visible, with many of the participating organizations clearly identifying this COP as an important event at which to continue to push their agenda, advocate for their cause, establish contacts and capture resources and projects from international funders.



*Visit of French president François Hollande to the Indigenous Pavilion during COP21. Photo: J. Foyer*

## Protagonists:

### Who gives a voice to traditional knowledge?

*Indigenous peoples' organizations* - In the global climate arena, the voicing of traditional knowledge has depended crucially on the emergence of a strong "Indigenous peoples" actor. Despite the heterogeneity of Indigenous realities, the last 40 years have seen the emergence of representatives or organizations legitimized to take the stage and speak for all Indigenous peoples. The main thrust of Indigenous peoples' global movement has always been the claim to specific collective and territorial rights, as defined and promoted in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted in 2007.

*Anthropologists and scientists from related disciplines* - Field scientists of western tradition have also played an important role as spokespersons for traditional knowledge in the climate change arena. They are key players, acting as an "epistemic community" that defends the value and legitimacy of traditional knowledge as a tool to fight against climate change. Some of them are especially active in institutions such as the IPCC and UNESCO.

*States and international organizations* - Several northern European states, Peru, Mexico, and the Philippines have supported Indigenous peoples with financial and political resources and by relaying their demands in climate negotiations. International organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) or Development Programme (UNDP) or the European Union are also supportive.

*International NGOs* - The primary international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) supporting Indigenous voices are specialized in Indigenous rights (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs IWGIA; Survival), or land tenure for Indigenous peoples (Tenure Facility). Environmental NGOs such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Conservation International, or various rainforest foundations are also strategic allies for Indigenous peoples

## Political, diplomatic and environmental stakes: Identities, territories, and environment

Recognition of traditional knowledge is the cognitive dimension of a broader process of recognition of Indigenous peoples at national and international political levels. The most important diplomatic process on this topic led to the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The main diplomatic and political stakes of the Declaration are the recognition of multicultural identities in nations where Indigenous people are often marginalized or even denied. The recognition of Indigenous peoples supposes a high standard of protection of their basic human rights and specific freedoms, signifies the possibility of local governance based on tradition and customs and, above all, guarantees sovereignty over their land, territories, and local resources.

Such territorial authority is tightly linked with the question of environmental governance. For this reason, Indigenous people commonly take specific diplomatic action in arenas such as the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity or Framework Convention on Climate Change. Indeed, the territories in which Indigenous peoples carry out their lives (such as tropical forests, mountains, islands) are often well conserved through the active protection by these resident populations. Traditional knowledge refers to their specific experience of the places where they have held this stewardship role since time immemorial.



*Navigating the territory and learning to use Geographical Information System (GIS) during a 2022 workshop between Panamanian and Honduran Indigenous people: an example of combining traditional and scientific territorial knowledge. Photos: Yann Voisin*

## Technoscience: The dialogue of knowledge

A first scientific dimension of this case is the role of certain disciplines such as anthropology or ethnosciences (ethnobotany, ethnoecology, etc.) in studying and reporting Indigenous peoples' specific relations to and management strategies for their environment. A typical example can be found in the interest accorded by western scientists to the knowledge of Inuit People regarding ice and climate. On the basis of studies and co-construction of this Arctic knowledge, scientists built what can be called an "epistemic advocacy", i.e. a scientific knowledge-based discourse that aims at influencing politics, in this case climate change mitigation and adaptation policies.

A second scientific dimension of this case is more "epistemological" than strictly empirical. It has to do with the possibility of recognizing other ways of knowing the world. Traditional knowledge emphasizes ecologies and experiences of climate change based on sensory, spiritual or other relationships with the environment more than on scientific measures and models.

A third technoscientific dimension deals with the possibility of establishing a dialogue about knowledge, to take place between traditional knowledge and science. One example concerning the environment and promoted at the international level is community mapping. It is a way to both secure Indigenous territory and monitor the global environment (for example by comparing the "baseline" state of frequently better conserved Indigenous spaces with the state of those occupied or affected by other populations). With the rise and democratization of mapping technologies (drones, GPS, GIS, etc.) this kind of surveying activity implies a mix of hi-tech science and traditional knowledge of the territory, creating new hybrid epistemologies.

**Epistemology: the study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge.**

*-Encyclopaedia Britannica*

## Placing wordings and narratives

International texts on environmental governance are drafted in a negotiation process where each of the parties tries to insert, as often as possible and in the most appropriate places of the text, their "wordings" which condense their claim into a few words. Such wordings are forms of purification of discourse. By contrast, "narratives" can be considered to be more developed versions, claims fleshed out and conveyed in stories, an assembly of facts, imagery and anecdotes. They represent very important modalities of argumentation within a diplomatic

negotiation. Here we examine the consolidation of three such narratives that articulate the theme of climate change with that of traditional knowledge and, more generally, Indigenous peoples. These narratives portray these peoples as key players in the development of scenarios anticipating the future of humanity, at the same time justifying their interests and supporting the defense of their claims. As such, narratives are key diplomatic instruments in the climate arena.



*Indigenous delegates at Indigenous Peoples' Pavilion of the COP21 Generation Climate space, 4 December 2015. Photo: J. Foyer & D. Dumoulin Kervran*

## The resilience narrative: When victims become heroes

The resilience narrative is powerful, with both symbolic and political dimensions produced not only by media, but also by Indigenous actors themselves. In this narrative, denouncing the impact of climate change and proposing a set of solutions, traditional knowledge plays a central role.

In this narrative Indigenous peoples are positioned as the most direct witnesses of climate change; the narrative explains how, due to their geographical distribution, these peoples are the first to suffer from its impact. Melting of the Arctic ice floes for the Inuit, melting of glaciers for Indigenous peoples from the Himalaya or The Andes, problems of drought, access to water and loss of agricultural land for the Maya in Guatemala, desertification for Peul pastoralists in Chad: these are but a few of the striking examples shared to demonstrate how Indigenous peoples form the front line for climate change effects, even though they scarcely contributed to the phenomenon. Therefore, they are in a privileged position to alert the rest of the world to this situation. Rooting in an intimate and concrete experience of climate change impacts, the alert raised by Indigenous knowledge is complementary to the more distanced, scientific and theory-based alert raised by the IPCC. This story, therefore, combines the figure of the victim with that of the witness and the whistleblower.

This discourse about a situation of vulnerability, considered as unjust, offers to Indigenous peoples the opportunity to play on the theme of climate justice. However, during COP21, references to climate injustice remained marginal in the general framing of the problem and in speeches. Indeed, Indigenous peoples preferred to present themselves as active providers of solutions rather than as passive subjects merely experiencing climate change. In this perspective, traditional knowledge is presented as precisely the element enabling resilience, i.e., the passage from the status of victim to that of a true hero of climate change.

Facing climate change, Indigenous peoples draw on their deep ancestral knowledge of their territories, knowledge uniquely suited to understanding and action in the delicate balance of nature. In this powerful narrative, Indigenous peoples can in this way make an important contribution to global efforts of climate change adaptation and mitigation, both directly and by teaching others.

A very good example of this narrative was expressed in the conference "Resilience in a time of uncertainty: Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change" just before the opening of COP21, co-organized by UNESCO and the National Museum of Natural History of France in partnership with Tebtebba (one of the principal Indigenous organizations in Asia) and various national and international institutions. The text that presented the event offers a perfect summary of this narrative:

"For over 350 million Indigenous peoples, climate change impacts are expected to be early and severe due to their location in high-risk environments. To face these challenges, Indigenous peoples are mobilizing their in-depth knowledge of the territories which have been the source of their livelihoods for generations. This Indigenous knowledge operates at a much finer spatial and temporal scale than that of science, and includes understandings of how to cope with and adapt to environmental variability and trends. Indigenous knowledge can thus make an important contribution towards climate change action on adaptation and mitigation (...) and in recent years this has been formally recognized by IPCC and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change."

## The integration narrative: Dialogue of knowledge and innovations

Another important narrative that was heard throughout the two weeks of COP21 aims to present traditional knowledge as not opposed but rather complementary to western scientific knowledge in the effort to adapt to climate change. This narrative blurs the distinction between traditional knowledge and

scientific knowledge in order to implement new forms of environmental co-management. Various projects based on collaboration between Indigenous peoples and scientists were presented in conformity with this narrative.

According to this perspective, Indigenous knowledge is more than simply traditional and local; it can bring new data and perspectives to modern science and contribute to innovation. This narrative of possible innovation, at the intersection of traditional and scientific knowledge, radically transforms the classical perspective on traditional knowledge as a relatively stable set of cognitive elements. It allows the actors who carry it to align themselves with the dominant narrative of science as a vector of innovation for resource management, in the more general framework of the knowledge economy.

To give an example of this integration narrative, an oft-discussed issue has been "Indigenous REDD+" (see endnotes), and more specifically one of its pillars, "Indigenous MRV" which entails Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification. This reappropriation by Indigenous peoples of the official UN-REDD MRV mechanism leverages local and real-time monitoring of climate change by Indigenous peoples themselves. It combines one of the most traditional activities of forest Indigenous peoples — control over their territory — with high-tech tools such as cellular phones, GPS, satellite images, and drones. As Henderson Rengifo, president of the Peruvian Amazonian Indigenous organization AIDESEP noted,

"With time, the climate jargon is always stronger. Nevertheless, the so-called Indigenous Monitoring, Reporting, and Verifying for us is nothing but a form of governance and vigilance of our territory, that is to say what we have always been doing all along our history, but this time with technological tools that enable us to do it better".



*Training in drone management by Panamanian organization Geoidigena in Honduras, 2022. Photo: Yann Voisin*

## The supernatural ecology narrative

A third narrative we could identify includes a relationship to spirits and the supernatural. In this narrative, traditional knowledge must no longer be considered only in its practical and cognitive dimensions, but also in its ontological dimensions in the sense that it implies other ways of living and composing the world. In other words, traditional knowledge embraces other worldviews or another cosmovision. The claim to other ecologies becomes in this narrative a powerful tool for contesting hegemony. Compared to the narrative of integration, then, the narrative of supernatural ecology tends to re-establish differences and ruptures with western ways of knowing and seeing the world.

The demand for a different way of composing the world and conceiving nature was an important component of the discourse of some Indigenous organizations and their allies during COP21. This was all the more evident when it came to evoking shamanism and an ecology that goes beyond the material and natural worlds to incorporate other entities, particularly of a spiritual nature. It is precisely the consideration of the spiritual dimension and the ability to make westerners accept this dimension that constitutes the basis of supernatural ecology.

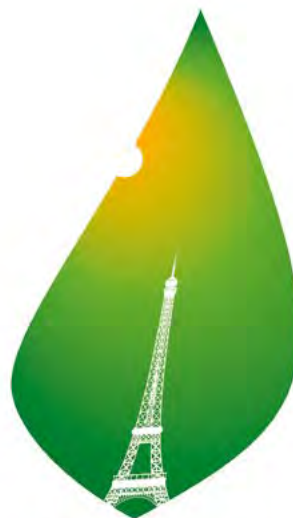
Invited by the Ile de France host region for various events during COP21, representatives of the Quichua People from Sarayacu (Ecuadorian Amazonia) were very active in disseminating a supernatural ecology narrative with their Living Rainforest ("Selva Viviente") initiative. Felix Santi, President of the community of Sarayacu, stated firmly:

"We came from the remote land of Ecuador, upset by the situation of Indigenous people, connected with the guardians of the forest, with a connection to the cosmic world. Climate change affects all the living beings that live on this little planet, the Earth. Sarayaku elaborated its living plan and its proposal: Living Rainforest (Selva Viviente), Kawsak Sacha. Sarayacu's proposal is a space where we apply ancestral knowledge. Our Yachak, our wise men, interact with the beings who protect the water, the mountains, and the forest (...). The main objective is to reach a clear recognition by the Ecuadorian state of this space as a sacred biocultural heritage, free from oil exploitation. Our call to the international community is to become aware of the necessity to maintain the Kawsak Sacha, the living rainforest" (*Felix Santi*, 1/12/2015, translation by the authors).

Ontology, or metaphysics:  
the philosophical study of 'being' in general.  
-*Encyclopaedia Britannica*



Presentation of the "Selva Viviente" (Living Rainforest) initiative by Sarayaku People Delegates in the COP21 Climate Generation space, 1 December 2015. Photo: J. Foyer



PARIS2015

LA RECHERCHE  
SE MOBILISE  
POUR LE CLIMAT

Image credit: COP21

## Conclusions: Alternative diplomacy, other knowledge

We can consider diplomacy engaging traditional knowledge as an alternative diplomacy in its form, enlarging the sets of institutions and representatives among whom interactions take place. Moreover, traditional knowledge diplomacy points to an alternative science diplomacy of the climate in its legitimation of other forms of knowledge.

Indeed, unlike the classical model of diplomacy, traditional knowledge diplomacy is primarily the prerogative not of sovereign states but of Indigenous peoples. While these peoples defend their cultural and territorial sovereignty based on the principles of self-determination, treaty, or prior and informed consent, they do not claim the political form of classically organized diplomacy. Like the diplomacy practiced by environmental NGOs or transnational firms, the practice by Indigenous peoples as observed at COP21 opens up the notion of diplomacy taking place beyond nation-states or rather, in their interstices. While the practice of traditional knowledge diplomacy in the climate change regime may be largely subject to the codes of classical western diplomacy, it also diverts these codes by introducing other ways of speaking, of presenting oneself, other less technocratic and more embodied formats of discussions, as well as other forms of sanctity and rituality.

Traditional knowledge diplomacy is an alternative to scientific diplomacy also because it contrasts with the diplomacy of "Big Science", which dominates the IPCC in particular. The work of this enormous scientific-diplomatic machine is indeed dominated by the prevalence of global models, whether they be climatic or economic. This reign of abstraction and globalism, where "global average temperature" and "ton of carbon" are unsurpassable metrics, has been criticized for its tendency to flatten the world and erase differences in experience, knowledge, value, or even meaning of climate change. The decoupling of climate science from the

direct experience of climate change tends also to render invisible the temporality and territoriality of the problem, making its translation into public policy more difficult. Finally, the hegemony of a globalizing and abstract knowledge is linked to a political order that produces inequality. In this context, traditional knowledge holds up an inverted mirror to global and top-down Big Science, and to the governance that typically accompanies it. While perhaps not perfectly symmetric, traditional knowledge as it is presented and narrated in the climate arena opposes localism to globalism, particularism to universalism, a situated and embodied presence to the "view from nowhere" (Shapin 1998), tangible and affective experience to cold abstraction, marginality to hegemony, tradition to modernity, and even spirituality to materiality.

The diplomacy of traditional knowledge thus seems to lay the foundations of an alternative to the science diplomacy of climate change. It exercises a kind of influence or form of soft power where the challenge is not so much to impose decisions and norms as it is to change representations, roles in the climate arena, and alliances. This influence must be understood cumulatively and over the long term. The exercise of traditional knowledge diplomacy does not drastically change the living conditions of local communities, and it may even in some cases create or reinforce a conceptual gap between global humanity and local autochthony. However, its contribution over the last 50 years to a growing institutional and political consideration of Indigenous peoples and their rights must be acknowledged.



*Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples' Caucus at COP 21 in Paris. Image credit: Foro Indígena de Abya Yala © FIAY 2015.*



## Study Questions

- What exactly can be considered as traditional knowledge of climate change? Where is it encountered? Is it familiar or strange to readers of this case?
- In what ways is this knowledge different from modern or western scientific knowledge?
- On what grounds would you consider traditional knowledge diplomacy to be a vital element of the climate change regime today? On what grounds would you argue to exclude it?
- Can we consider Indigenous peoples to be stewards of the environment? Could that give them a particular status in climate policy negotiations?
- Based on examples from this case, how does the Indigenous exercise of knowledge diplomacy work concretely? Can other forms of its influence be found or suggested?

## Endnotes

- A fuller version of this InsSciDE work has been published as a peer-reviewed journal article. See Foyer J, Dumoulin Kervran D (2020) Mettre en récit les savoirs traditionnels : Une diplomatie scientifique alternative à la COP21. *Homo diplomaticus* 73. [journals.openedition.org/terrain/20607](https://journals.openedition.org/terrain/20607). Accessed 5 May 2022
- As discussed in the "integration narrative", REDD stands for "reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation"; this United Nations approach is complemented by REDD+ adding "the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries".
- Cover image: A representative of the Embera people Indigenous to Panama converses in the COP21 Green Zone with members of civil society, Paris 2015. Photo: J. Foyer & D. Dumoulin Kervran

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### Selected Publication

Foyer J, Dumoulin Kervran D (2017) Objectifying traditional knowledge, re-enchanting the struggle against climate change. In Aykut SC, Foyer J, Morena E (eds) *Globalising the climate. COP21 and the climatisation of global debates*. Routledge, Abingdon, pp 153-172