

# Earth 2020

An Insider's Guide to a Rapidly  
Changing Planet



EDITED BY PHILIPPE TORTELL



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# Mother Earth

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*Deborah McGregor*

Long before the first Earth Day in 1970, Indigenous peoples around the globe developed complex knowledge systems that facilitated sustainable relationships with the natural world. These Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) have been utilized, transformed and innovated by Indigenous peoples to sustain their communities, territories and Nations since time immemorial, and passed down over countless generations. Though highly diverse in nature, IKS around the world share certain common philosophical foundations, including a responsibility to maintain and enhance relationships with ‘Mother Earth’ as a living entity, and a profound connection with Earth’s natural systems that is acknowledged every day. In the words of the Indigenous scholar and activist, Daniel Wildcat, every day is Earth Day from an Indigenous perspective.

Indigenous knowledge systems exist in various forms under different names, including ‘local knowledge’, ‘folk knowledge’, ‘people’s knowledge’, ‘traditional wisdom’, ‘ethnoscience’, ‘native science’, ‘traditional science’, ‘traditional knowledge’ (TK) and ‘traditional ecological knowledge’ (TEK). Yet, all these ways of understanding the world are united in their challenge of the dominant political and economic world order, and their calls for fundamental change to achieve sustainability for all beings on Mother Earth. Indigenous activist Winona LaDuke describes IKS as ‘the culturally and spiritually based way in which Indigenous peoples relate to their ecosystems’, through a ‘way of living or

being' in the natural world.<sup>1</sup> IKS is about how one *relates to* Mother Earth, rather than the information *gathered from* Mother Earth through other forms of knowledge.

In the face of rapid climate change and a myriad of other human pressures on Mother Earth, it is increasingly clear that western knowledge systems have thus far failed to achieve sustainability; science and technology alone cannot get us out of our current crises. Other approaches are needed, and it is logical that IKS comes to be seen as a relevant and viable system for understanding our present situation, and providing a basis from which to work toward solutions. IKS has applications in many fields, including law, governance, social work, health and medicine, philosophy, education and environment. Anyone who is truly interested in sustainable relationships with the Earth should also be interested in IKS. But this realization has come late to colonial societies.

**O**n Earth Day, fifty years ago, Indigenous voices and perspectives were conspicuously absent. Yet, Indigenous peoples have long been calling for the recognition of IKS in the decision-making processes that impact their lives, lands and waters. It is only within the past few decades that the United Nations has recognized Indigenous voices. This recognition of IKS on the global stage coincided with the increasing assertion by Indigenous people of their rights, the recognition of these rights by the international community, and the growing understanding of Indigenous rights, IKS and environmental sustainability as interwoven concepts.

International recognition of the value of IKS in addressing global environmental issues goes back to the early 1980s, when the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) established a Working Group on Traditional Ecological Knowledge, or TEK.<sup>2</sup> This early international intervention was supported by a series of workshops and symposia examining the value of TEK for natural resource management, and the unique perspectives of Indigenous knowledge systems on various environmental issues. The 1987 Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development emphasized the important role of Indigenous peoples in sustainable development, and served as a catalyst for increased recognition of IKS worldwide.<sup>3</sup> This landmark document not only introduced the concept of *sustainable development* to mainstream discourse, but

also provided international recognition of the potentially vital contribution of Indigenous peoples to global environmental stewardship. This represented a significant shift in the public dialogue on Indigenous environmental issues — from marginalized and vulnerable peoples in need of (sustainable) development, to cultures with millennia of experience living sustainably on the land.

Five years later, at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit), held in Rio de Janeiro, the legally binding Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) was signed.<sup>4</sup> The CBD and Agenda 21<sup>5</sup> emerged as two of the most significant outcomes of the Earth Summit, setting out international commitments for maintaining the planet's ecosystems. These landmark agreements, signed by a majority of the world's governments, reiterated the important role of Indigenous people and their knowledge for achieving environmentally sustainable development. Both Agenda 21 and the CBD formally acknowledged the historical relationships of Indigenous peoples to their lands, and the wealth of traditional ecological knowledge developed over many generations. At this time, Indigenous peoples generated their own agenda on the international stage at the World Conference of Indigenous Peoples on Territory, Environment and Development, which was held in conjunction with the Earth Summit. A key outcome of this meeting was the Indigenous Peoples Earth Charter (part of the Kari-Oca Declaration)<sup>6</sup> which stated that, 'Recognizing indigenous peoples' harmonious relationship with Nature, indigenous sustainable development strategies and cultural values must be respected as distinct and vital sources of knowledge'. More directly, as stated in section 98 of the Indigenous Peoples Earth Charter (Kari-Oca Declaration), 'Traditional knowledge has enabled indigenous peoples to survive'.

The potential role of Indigenous knowledge in achieving global sustainability was reaffirmed a decade later at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), held in Johannesburg, South Africa. As with the 1992 Rio Summit, Indigenous peoples held their own parallel summit, which generated the Kimberley Declaration of the International Indigenous Peoples Summit on Sustainable Development.<sup>7</sup> The Kimberley Declaration states that, 'Today we reaffirm our relationship to Mother Earth and our responsibility to coming generations to uphold peace, equity and justice', and that, 'Our

lands and territories are at the core of our existence — we are the land and the land is us'. This worldview was further articulated at Rio+20 (The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development), held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, twenty years after the original Earth Summit. One result of this 2012 meeting was the Kari-Oca 2 Declaration, which included a call for the international community to 'recognize the traditional systems of resource management of the Indigenous Peoples that have existed for the millennia, sustaining us even in the face of colonialism' (Kari-Oca 2 Declaration 2012).<sup>8</sup>

The Kari-Oca 2 Declaration, and others, highlight the growing recognition of Indigenous voice and perspective on the global stage. Indeed, since the first 'Earth Summit' in 1992, the United Nations has increasingly promoted global recognition of traditional knowledge systems in achieving various environmental goals. This support has taken the form of intergovernmental guidance for the use, protection, access and sharing of traditional knowledge, its potential as a complement to science, and the need for on-the-ground support to ensure its continued innovation and vitality. In many respects, these trends over the past four decades represent opportunities for the involvement of Indigenous peoples in addressing environmental challenges locally, regionally and globally.

More recent agreements, including the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2000), have promoted a human and Indigenous rights approach to development, including the recognition of IKS. This represents an explicit acknowledgement of the unique role that Indigenous peoples can play in achieving sustainable development. Indeed, the recent 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, offers opportunities for Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems to participate directly in global environmental governance. Thus far, however, this opportunity has yet to be fully realized.

Internationally, one of the most important undertakings in recent years has been the adoption, in 2007, of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP),<sup>9</sup> following decades of advocacy by Indigenous peoples. UNDRIP explicitly recognizes the importance of Indigenous knowledge as having a key role in realizing a sustainable self-determined future. Indigenous philosophies are also becoming increasingly evident in various international Indigenous declarations pertaining to the environment,

most notably the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth developed at the World People's Conference on Climate Change in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2010.<sup>10</sup> Article 1 of the Declaration states that 'Mother Earth is a living being'. Article 3 states that 'Every human being is responsible for respecting and living in harmony with Mother Earth'. This offers a long-range perspective of how Mother Earth is understood, and the necessity of protecting her rights in order to sustain humanity. At its core, the declaration recognizes that humans are part of Mother Earth, 'an indivisible, living community of interrelated and interdependent beings with a common destiny'.

Despite growing awareness and recognition of the value of IKS in addressing local, regional and global environmental challenges, there is still much more that can and must be done. Indigenous interventions, as expressed through numerous declarations over past decades, offer a path towards an alternative future, based in part on the concept of *Buen Vivir*, Living Well, with the Earth. Indigenous peoples who gathered at the 2012 Rio+20 conference offered an alternative pathway to the unsustainable approaches proposed by international and state actors. The declaration that emerged from this meeting challenged the international community to embrace a new approach to sustainable developed, informed by a deep-rooted respect for Earth's natural systems:

Indigenous peoples call upon the world to return to dialogue and harmony with Mother Earth, and to adopt a new paradigm of civilization based on *Buen Vivir* — Living Well. In the spirit of humanity and our collective survival, dignity and well-being, we respectfully offer our cultural world views as an important foundation to collectively renew our relationships with each other and Mother Earth and to ensure that *Buen Vivir* / living well proceeds with integrity.<sup>11</sup>

*Buen Vivir* calls for an expanded view of community, where balanced relationships are sought between humans and other entities in the natural world (animals, plants, birds, forests, waters, etc.), as well as with future generations. To live well with the Earth, humanity must recognize the agency of Mother Earth.

*Buen Vivir* is more than a philosophy. It is way of life, a responsibility to live in a way that supports the well-being of Mother Earth as expressed in the 2013 Lima Declaration, which

emerged from the World Conference of Indigenous Women: Progress and Challenges Regarding the Future We Want:

Protection of Mother Earth is a historic, *sacred and continuing responsibility* of the world's Indigenous Peoples, as the ancestral guardians of the Earth's lands, waters, oceans, ice, mountains and forests. These have sustained our distinct cultures, spirituality, traditional economies, social structures, institutions, and political relations from immemorial times. Indigenous women play a primary role in safeguarding and sustaining Mother Earth and her cycles.<sup>12</sup>

Justice for the Earth, as expressed in this way by Indigenous peoples, conveys a distinct path forward and a vision that includes all life.

Whatever one's viewpoint, Indigenous peoples' continued assertions of the rights of Mother Earth can no longer be seen as simply philosophical reflections or ancient history. On the contrary, they are becoming a reality in certain state legal systems. Emerging conceptual frameworks such as Earth jurisprudence, Earth justice and wild law are gaining currency and increasingly becoming the topic of much debate. Such Earth-centred legal philosophies emphasize the interconnections and interdependence of humanity and the natural world. The conceptual frameworks that uphold the rights of Mother Earth are gaining ground, and have been enacted through constitutional and legal mechanisms in both Ecuador and Bolivia. In 2008, Ecuador adopted specific mention of the rights of Mother Earth into its Constitution. Bolivia adopted the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010), which outlines principles that seek harmony with Mother Earth, along with obligations and duties of the state and its people to protect and uphold these rights. In another recent example from New Zealand, the Whanganui River *iwi* (tribe) entered into an agreement with the Crown to recognize the Whanganui River as a living and legal entity.

These innovative pathways to environmental sustainability are based in part on ancient philosophies. They reflect the persistence of Indigenous peoples' influence, and their role in creating an expanded dialogue of sustainability informed by their understanding of Mother Earth and humanity's obligations to her. The ideas are both ancient and innovative.

If we let them guide us into the future, perhaps humanity will one day celebrate Earth Day with Mother Earth herself.

## *Endnotes*

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