

INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
ON
HARMONY WITH NATURE
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Intervention of Ms. Chandra Roy-Henriksen
Chief, Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

I am honored to address the interactive dialogue on Harmony with Nature convened by the Office of the President of the General Assembly in commemoration of International Mother Earth Day. I would like to thank the Permanent Mission of the Plurinational State of Bolivia for this initiative, as well as the distinguished panelists for very interesting presentations. While the focus is on 'Harmony with Nature', for indigenous peoples around the world, it is 'Harmony with Mother Earth' because indigenous peoples hold the view that nature is Mother Earth. In the Andean region of South America it is called *Pachamama*, the name for Mother Earth in the Quechua and Aymara languages.

There are approximately 370 million indigenous peoples occupying 20 per cent of the earth's territory. It is estimated that they represent as many as 5,000 different indigenous cultures, therefore accounting for most of the world's cultural diversity, even though they constitute a numerical minority. The areas they inhabit often coincide with areas of high biological diversity, and a strong correlation between areas of high biological diversity and areas of high cultural diversity has been established.

Indigenous peoples have always identified themselves by the importance of the bond with their lands and their distinct cultures. Indigenous peoples share a spiritual, cultural, social and economic relationship with their traditional lands, and their customary laws, customs and practices reflect both an attachment to land and a responsibility for preserving traditional lands for use by future generations. A critical issue for indigenous peoples around the world is therefore access to, as well as the protection and preservation of, their lands and territories and the natural resources pertaining to these lands.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 13 September 2007, clarifies the operational requirements of existing human rights standards that have been adopted by the United Nations over the years. Article 25 states *that 'indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard'*. This article, among others in the UN Declaration, recognizes indigenous peoples' connection to the land or Mother Earth.

The concern for many indigenous peoples of the world is to bridge the vast gap between treating the planet/Mother Earth as a commodity and taking responsibility. As has been mentioned earlier, both start with very different paradigms. The former, from the position of viewing the planet as an inert being, from which we can take without consequence; the latter, a position of understanding the planet as a living being, where we are all interconnected and interdependent. The outcomes of such divergent views are dramatic - and we can see them being played out today in all arenas that involve the environment.

Indigenous peoples have realized the rapid pace of human-induced environmental change and have called for decisive action not only at the international level but also at the national and local levels. While in recent years, there is increased recognition of their environmental rights at the international level, translating this political recognition into concrete advances at the national and local levels remains a major challenge, and indigenous peoples' voices are all too often marginalized, if heard at all.

The importance of Mother Earth to indigenous cultural identity needs to be re-emphasized. Indigenous peoples possess a deep spiritual relationship with the land; their cultures are dynamic and they have been practitioners of green economy for centuries. As mentioned by the Deputy Secretary-General Ms. Migiro and others, indigenous peoples have much to share. Their role and their wisdom can contribute to greater harmony with, and respect for, Mother Earth.

Thank you for your attention.