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Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta: Understanding the Basis for Natural Resource Management

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Few have understood the value of the philosophical store of knowledge that indigenous people hold for humanity through their understanding of nature. This discussion will look at efforts invested in understanding the basis for indigenous natural resource management, which indicate that attitudes commonly held about indigenous knowledge are beginning to change.

Nature and culture: the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta case

Colombia presents perhaps the best opportunity and the greatest challenge for the conservation of biological and cultural diversity in our hemisphere. This South American country is recognized as the nation with the greatest biological wealth per square mile and the largest number of languages. Amidst this wealth lies a national treasure: Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.

Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, a UNESCO biosphere reserve, is an isolated mountain set apart from the Andes mountain chain that runs through Colombia. Reaching an altitude of 18,942 feet above sea level, and lying just 26 miles from the Caribbean coast, Sierra Nevada is the world's highest coastal peak. Sierra Nevada encompasses about 4.2 million acres and serves as the source of 36 main rivers. The Sierra comprises two natural national parks (Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and Tairona) and three large indigenous reservations and five small ones. Due to its altitudinal variation as well as its location at 11 degrees latitude north, the Sierra Nevada contains samples of all of the climatic zones that can be found in the tropical Americas.

Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is one of the most distinctive, diverse, and threatened areas in South America. Tapirs, red brocket deer, and howler monkeys are among the 120 species of mammals roaming the Sierra Nevada, along with elusive cats such as the jaguar, puma, and little spotted cat. The park also harbors 46 species of amphibians and reptiles; those that live above 9,900 feet are found nowhere else on the planet, having evolved in complete isolation. An amazing 628 bird species have been recorded only in the area of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta National Park.

During the last fifty years, the Sierra Nevada has suffered from degradation and deforestation. This poses a threat to the approximately 1.5 million people who rely on its watersheds for survival, the species of this ecosystem, and the future of its traditional indigenous cultures. At present, only 18% of the ecoregional forest remains and two of the 35 rivers have completely run out of water.

As a result of its geographic and historical characteristics, the Sierra Nevada is shared today by a diverse set of ethnic and cultural groups, each with its own interests and values. The Sierra's population includes 32,000 members of the indigenous cultures of the Kogi,

Ijka, Wiwa, and Kankuamo groups, descendants of the Tayronas that still keep their ancient traditions. There are also approximately 150,000 peasants, and 1.5 million city dwellers in the lowlands. Of these, the only stable populations are the indigenous groups, and although each group has its own language they share a similar system of beliefs. Since pre-Hispanic times, the indigenous peoples of the Sierra Nevada have possessed a worldview, social organizations, and living patterns revolving around the management and conservation of this unique environment. The Sierra Nevada is a sacred mountain—"the heart of the world" (Figure 1). For the tribal communities living here, the forests are vital, providing wildlife habitat and serving as sanctuaries for worship and religious ceremonies. The resources in the forests also provide shelter, fuel, and clothing, household utensils, medicines, food and materials for their artistic expression.

As of their first moment of contact with the Western world, the indigenous communities have witnessed the incessant pillage and destruction of their territories, their sacred sites, burial grounds, and customs of their ancestors. The four tribes that managed to survive are undergoing various degrees of acculturation due to outside actors. Today few have understood the value of the philosophical store of knowledge that the indigenous people hold for humanity through their understanding of nature. The fact that some effort is now being invested in understanding the basis for indigenous natural resource management indicates that the negative attitudes commonly held about indigenous knowledge during the colonial era have begun to change.

The Law of the Mother

At present, the native peoples are practitioners of the "Law of the Mother." This is a complex code of rules that regulates human behavior in harmony with the plant and animal cycles, astral movements, climatic phenomena, and transhumance in the sacred geography of the massif. The indigenous peoples are the best guardians of the knowledge of their ancestors. The strict observance of this complex code of knowledge by indigenous society has enabled the native population to survive and remain self-sufficient over the course of several centuries.

However, this unique example of harmony between humans and



Figure 1. A hand-drawn interpretation of the cosmology (worldview) of the indigenous people of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.

their environment is beginning to fade due to outside intervention and the loss of fertile lands now in hands of drug-traffickers, rich banana and oil palm growers organized for international trade, and the guerrillas and paramilitary.

The indigenous groups live in a complex ranked society in which lineage plays a major role. The true power of decision in personal and community affairs is concentrated in the hands of the native priesthood (*Mama*). They possess a profound knowledge of their environment, such as astronomy, meteorology, and ecology, and use this knowledge to plan their agronomic calendar and distribution of lands and crops. They believe that between humans and nature there is an equilibrium, one which might easily be disturbed by irresponsible human actions. This equilibrium not only refers to the subsistence-related activities such as water management, forest conservation, and tending crops, but also to the spiritual and moral balance of the individual and to agricultural rituals. These ritual dances and ceremonies play a prominent role in the indigenous peoples' religion and agricultural practices, which are submitted to many ritual rules timed according to astronomically determined seasons. In other words, the ritual calendar corresponds to the agricultural cycle.

It is believed that all native food plants have their “fathers” and “mothers” and crop fertility has to be ensured by offerings to these spiritual beings. Soil types, such as clays, humus, etc., are ritually named, as are such categories as rains, winds, and lagoons, along with the cardinal points with which they are associated. These offerings are real evidence of indigenous knowledge, as is the ritual payment for the use of a particular species of tree to build a bridge. This payment consists of feeding sacred food to saplings of the same species dispersed in the forest, thereby favoring their survival.

The only link between productive sectors is through the native peoples' use of the water, which makes forest conservation imperative and which, in turn, requires a social accord that includes the validation of indigenous knowledge by our society, as they are controlling the conservation of basic resources that ensure the region's well-being. As such, the water, a product whose value extends beyond the forests, is a basis for dialogue between the various groups in conflict. Without social agreement between indigenous people and inhabitants of the urban and farming areas on the surrounding lowlands, conservation of the forests and sources of water for the future development of the region will not be possible.

Conclusion

Intrinsic to the definition of culture— and, in many places, cherished as gods or demigods— mountainous cultural landscapes have evolved in ways that produce a symbiotic relation between nature and culture. This region provides an example of how local and indigenous Colombian communities can be engaged in sustainable development and protection of mountain landscapes, while at the same time revealing the complexity of interactions between culture and nature in this region, and the importance of traditional indigenous practices in landscape management.