



**THE HE SAPA
DECLARATION 1**

On Sovereignty and Wilderness: Deepening the Wilderness Concept Through Indigenous Knowledge and Wisdom

PREAMBLE

The intent of this Declaration is to expand the respect, common ground, equality, and trust amongst people who help steward wild places. Accomplishing this will create a stronger, more effective cross-cultural alliance for the protection of Mother Earth in a time of great peril for our common home. We believe that all people need a word and concept for a relationship with nature that is respectful and holistic, and that is neither subjective nor exploitative. We worked as a group of many core members and reviewers spanning many cultures. We reached out globally to diverse cultures, receiving valuable feedback from many areas (though more from the North (we refer to as ‘western’) than the South, thus far...and note that this Declaration is an on-going process). We as a working group of 15 members plus many reviewers spanning many cultures, engaged in a deep examination of the word “wilderness” to understand its history and the underlying meanings for many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples in order to better understand and learn from the intense and, sometimes, negative sentiments that surface regarding this concept.

In our ongoing exploration of wilderness and Indigenous perspectives of the natural environment, we endeavored to acknowledge the complexities inherent in the relationship between Indigenous People and the Western concept of wilderness. Relationality, as a central tenet of many Indigenous worldviews, underscores the interconnectedness of all beings and the environments they inhabit. This understanding exemplifies how Indigenous communities perceive their existence as being in a continuous relationship with the land rather than viewing it as a mere resource for recreation, food, or even spiritual experiences. Some Western interpretations of wilderness that have had the largest influence on its implementation disregard these profound connections, leading to a clash that perpetuates misunderstanding and dispossession. To move forward, it is vital to engage with both worldviews critically, seeking to reconcile and bridge the gaps that exist, and expand and strengthen the wilderness concept (and its implementation) through the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples. Doing so can foster a deeper appreciation of Indigenous relationships with the earth and create pathways towards a more respectful coexistence that honors both perspectives.

This Declaration is an attempt to balance multiple perspectives and worldviews. Doing so in English has inherent challenges as oral history carries so much information and subtle meanings, and is expressed in many and diverse Indigenous, non-English languages. We are at the beginning of a journey, and we recognize that every journey requires a first step. This Declaration reflects a commitment to taking the first necessary steps, and those that will follow.

We believe in respecting and protecting the set of relations (ecological web of life) and responsibilities that sustain all Earth's sovereign life forms. These relations, of which we are a part, both bind and are bound by us: humanity. Our collective task is learning to live within ecological directives and reduce and mitigate colonial impositions on ecology. The ways and means for doing this are known by Indigenous Peoples, embodied in Indigenous knowledge and wisdom systems (IKWS), and practiced by Indigenous nations and communities that retain their traditional lifeways.

Since time immemorial, Indigenous Peoples have and continue to record knowledge and wisdom in story, directives, and laws that recognize the inherent inclusion of people in healthy and functional ecology. Indigenous Peoples excel at transforming knowledge into wise practices that establish natural law and authority over human-centered decision-making. For this reason, Indigenous societies are adept at acknowledging – in word, action, and law – that humans are beholden to the authority that decrees from our relationship with the natural world. There are many names for this authority. Wilderness is one of them; a word endorsed by the delegates who convene at the 12th World Wilderness Congress (WILD12) in He Sapa, the sacred homelands and unceded territory of the Lakota Nation.

This Declaration primarily discusses the concept of wilderness. We recognize that wilderness in all its conceptualizations has many implementation pathways, such as formally designated Wilderness areas, Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas, and others. The global outcome of this Declaration is to expand the meaning of “wilderness” in the English language for use within the Global Biodiversity Framework and other international protocols to include Indigenous knowledge and wisdom. We also recognize there are additional opportunities at this Congress for distinct declarations and resolutions to address broader issues concerning land, water, and seas, including “land back.”

This Congress convenes at a time when the precipitous destruction of wild places compels us to swift action and bold objectives for the protection of the lands, waters, and seas that are essential to all life, have inherent sovereignty, and are sacred in their own being. In many Indigenous societies, we understand that Earth was brought to life by a Creator. The Creator created all the things of the Earth, all the rocks, trees, water, plants, and animals; the ones in the air, the ones in the water, the ones who walk on land, and the ones in the soil. These things that came before humans established their relationships and acted in reciprocity. When humans emerged, they entered a set of social and ecological obligations into which they had to fit. To continue to fit in over time, they had to abide by the directives of those already here. As part of

the original system, humans were pitiful. Over time as they responded to the system, in accordance to the obligations and existence of mutual laws, humans thrived.

Many of these obligations are centered around reciprocity. In return for being allowed to exist as part of these relationships, humans must integrate into and connect with all their relations. This belief held by many Indigenous lifeways (but not all) underscores the role of humans as subordinate to non-human rules and laws. IKWS inform us that as people we must behave with respect, reciprocity, relationality, and responsibility. It is those sets of relationships and directives that may also shape the Indigenous approach to wilderness, because wilderness was originally a concept to recognize the inherent sovereignty of those that were here before humans. The concept of wilderness is as much about the acknowledgement of this sovereignty as it is about a specific place.

MANY NAMES FOR WHOLE & HEALTHY PLACES

In our view, Earth is a network of physical life processes and also a sacred set of relationships. Different human lifeways have different manners of appreciating and naming this universally recognized principle. Indigenous thoughts, concepts, knowledge, and perspectives are not homogeneous but share similarities, and need to be understood in order to advance a truly accurate and contemporary concept of wilderness. The perspectives of these lifeways include, but are not limited to:

Maka Sitomniya (Lakota Oyate)

The English word biodiversity refers only to physical ecology. Maka Sitomniya, on the other hand, encompasses the interconnectedness of the cosmos ecologically, physically, and spiritually. Another Lakota word closely connected to wilderness is manita, which has different meanings in different contexts and can simultaneously refer to spirit in addition to a location that has no borders, no ending, and no limits.

Indalo (Zulu/Xhosa)

In South Africa, this means Nature in its purest form, the highest expression of life and connection. It also refers to creation, where everything comes from. In a similar but more human-centric manner, *Ubuntu* encapsulates the interconnectedness of life especially among people, and the ideal state of respect and reciprocity therein, including the past, present, and future. Ubuntu is often translated to mean, “I am what I am because we are.”

Whanaungatanga (Te Taiao)

The Māori use Whanaungatanga, a word which signifies the interconnectedness of all life, a web of relationships linking us to ancestors, future generations, and the natural world.

tmix^w (Okanagan)

Is translated from Nsyilxcen into English most often as — “all of creation” and also “world, nature, Earth”. tmix^w is actually a system of relationships being reconstructed limitlessly and is the life-force of a place. It is understood that tmix^w is the cyclic spiral of regeneration

experienced as *tmx^wulax^w* or the *tmix^w-place*. *tmx^wulax^w* is usually translated into English as country, land or world. However, the important difference is that Syilx view of land is as an ecological, dynamic system rather than a mental picture of the geography with its plants and animals.

Wilderness (European/North American Settler)

Wilderness (for those born into or influenced by European-settler culture) is difficult to define because, like Indigenous concepts of the systems of relationships that make up our world, it does not merely name a physical characteristic but also expresses spiritual and relational ideals. This expansive definition, and experience of wilderness is not often endorsed in a materialistic, individualistic, dominant culture. The dominant “Western” culture has mostly limited its understanding of wilderness to a set of physical characteristics and locations. Western culture and perspectives used colonialism to forcibly displace Indigenous concepts of understanding the Earth, thereby entrenching the belief of Western superiority. These colonial directives also assisted in the institutional erasure of a more expansive understanding of wilderness.

At the root of wilderness is “wild,” a word with many possible origins. The Oxford English Dictionary refers back to the place-based, cultural roots of the word and concludes that it “is most probable that the Old Germanic *wilbijaz* represents a pre-Germanic *ghweltijos*, the root of which is found in Welsh *gwyllt*, Irish *geilt*,” Gaelic words that mean “willed and untamed.” At the level of the community or the collective expressing its will and agency, this is also synonymous with sovereign.

Indigenous scholars have recognized this concept, including Jay Hansford Vest, who engaged in a deep exploration of the roots of the word wilderness. He concludes that the root of wilderness means ‘self-willed-land’ or ‘self-willed-place’ with an emphasis upon its own intrinsic volition. Vest writes:

“In wil-der-ness there is a ‘will-of-the-land’ and in wild there is ‘will of the animal.’ A wild animal is a ‘self-willed animal’ – an undomesticated animal – similarly, wildland is ‘self-willed land’... This ‘willed’ conception is itself in opposition with the controlled and ordered environment characteristic of the notion of ‘civilization.’ While control, order, domination and management are true of ‘western’ civilization and domestication, they are not essentials of primal culture. The primal peoples of northern Europe were not bent upon dominating and controlling all environments. Thus, their ‘will-of-the-land’ conception – wilderness — demonstrates a recognition of land in and for itself.” [2]

Here we see differentiations between two worldviews, one that believed that the Earth or people could be “tamed” or “untamed” as juxtaposed to that of many Indigenous cultures that regard such a view as akin to heresy. In a generalized Indigenous view, humans are in an inextricable relationship with the Earth and are obligated to conform to Earth’s natural law.

Nevertheless, common ground exists in the belief that the Earth and its many places have inherent sovereignty.

COLONIZATION AND WILDERNESS

As Indigenous cultures and nations were decimated by colonialism, so too was the wild. Colonial culture carried out a protracted project of domination that continues to this day in many places and asserts human (Western-development) authority over the many nations of the Earth – human, animal, plant, and those more subtle energies that manifest through the mind and spirit.

The imperialistic agenda of Western colonization served economic aspirations, and often inappropriately used wilderness to advance Western well-being through exploitative, capitalistic activities and wealth accumulation that was promoted as critical for human (individual or collective) well-being. In the face of a contemporary ecological catastrophe, the accumulation of wilderness wealth (i.e. through protected area designation) is viewed as important for civilization. Care and watchfulness is required because economic purposes and mechanisms may also drive these assumptions that could create a kind-of ecological capitalism that produces many of the uneven outcomes of economic capitalism. This occurs now because wilderness as a concept was co-opted by colonial perspectives to exploit people and resources. This is in contrast to the Indigenous Peoples' perspective that wilderness is the realization of the collective well-being of all things. There cannot be well-being without being "in relationship" and we are aware of no Indigenous concepts that endorse nature in unilateral service to human-derived objectives.

Indigenous Peoples inherently work in concert with the will of the land, recognizing the autonomy, free will, and self-governance of all beings. This relationship is foundational for understanding Natural Law. As Athabascan Elder Wilson Justin articulates, the principles of permission and consent from nature are essential to this bond, underscoring the necessity of engaging with the environment in a respectful and reciprocal manner.

However, there are many Indigenous Peoples and beliefs that prescribe reciprocity of service to the rest of life as a necessary step for the achievement of collective well-being. Indigenous knowledge and wisdom systems describe mutualistic actions that benefit the web of life. We call upon conservation to anchor these principles into their worldview and place them at the center of the wilderness concept. The advent of the US Wilderness Act (1964) partially reinforced this process by recognizing special places where significant human impacts were not allowed so that the free-willed processes of nature could prevail and evolve. This is surely commendable, yet it should be noted (as was consistent with that era of policy and legislation) that the formulation of this pioneering Act had no consultation from Indigenous Peoples.

Wilderness may be the only word/concept within European languages that comes close to approximating the more encompassing terminologies originating from Indigenous worldviews. As such, many people are reluctant to abolish the term entirely as, without it, European and

North American settler culture is bereft of any English language concept that acknowledges the natural world as sovereign and therefore worthy of respect. Without the wilderness concept, what remains in English are sterile, inanimate terms – environment, ecosystem, biodiversity – or worse, a vocabulary based purely on the assumptions of exploitation (e.g. natural resources, commons).

The dearth of European words for the sophisticated concepts found in the languages of Indigenous Peoples is all the more reason that the understanding and practice of wilderness needs to evolve. As a starting place for this evolution, we must recognize that it is difficult, if not impossible, to untangle various aspects of a colonial culture that is overshadowed by land theft, racism, and genocide. That is not to say that wilderness and conservation cannot produce much needed and valuable outcomes. However, it is important to recognize that many protected areas (and in the case of North and South America, all protected areas) are situated on lands and territories originally occupied and stewarded by Indigenous Peoples. While there are increasing examples of successful and respectful conservation initiatives in many countries, far more are needed. Some of these initiatives are led or co-led by Indigenous Peoples and are oftentimes interim measures towards more fulsome sovereignty for Indigenous Nations and communities.

Most protected areas, including national parks and game reserves, are not wilderness, even if they are frequently and casually referred to as such. The casual/generic use of the term wilderness has often led to confusion, especially when we are considering formally designated Wilderness areas. Thus, those areas in which “recreation” takes precedence over the traditional practices of Indigenous Peoples as well as the needs of other lifeforms, is a form of discrimination. While most of these areas are not actually wilderness, the casual use of the word contributes to its poor reputation in some quarters. In wilderness, much as in the worldview of Indigenous Peoples, the will of ecology is given primacy. The difference is that wilderness, in practice, remains a place apart from people, whereas in contrast Indigenous lifeways synthesize respectful human activity and the needs of the community with a harmonious and integrated co-existence with nature. Such synthesis, however, does not happen in absence of the sovereign constraints adopted by Indigenous Nations. One example of such constraints comes to us from the Toda People.

“Our landscape looks like a modern-day wilderness – it is, in fact, the core area of The Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve proclaimed in 1986, the first such in India – with occasional small groups of huts that signify habitation of Toda families and their temples. Although we are free to roam across this wilderness within our homeland and its immediate vicinity, our movements are restricted by constraints imposed by our Sacred Geography. Therefore, we know which hilltops are the abodes of deities and thus should not be defiled but used to purify us and all constituents; indeed, traditionally, even pointing out their direction was taboo. Similarly, as we traverse this harmonious wilderness we are aware which rocks are sacred, with prayer names, and thus not to be trod upon; which waterbodies are only to be used for the dairy-temples, and thus never to be touched by laypeople. We know the sanctified plant species that may only be used for priestly ordination and other aspects of

sacred life, and not be handled for mundane purposes. Yes, there are specific Sacred Areas, and they exist within a Sacred Geography” (Chhabra 2015).

Many Indigenous Peoples, including the Toda People, interact with the lands, waters, and seas in different and familiar ways that are often unfamiliar to Western society and are actually indistinguishable from wilderness. This is due entirely to the symbiotic relationship Indigenous Peoples who practice traditional lifeways have with their environment. People in colonial European culture were unable to comprehend that such relationships were possible, a failure of imagination that contributes to the term wilderness referring to lands bereft (or seemingly so) of humans.

Human-centered models of decision-making over the land, water, and seas present specific challenges. However, in recent years, wilderness discourse has increasingly included Indigenous Peoples working in collaboration with conservation to protect their homelands and the biosphere. These collaborations result in growing recognition of the holistic models present in Indigenous knowledge and wisdom systems. From these discussions a new category of wilderness emerged which recognizes that sometimes Wilderness will be occupied by Indigenous Peoples practicing traditional lifeways. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) refers to this as a “Category 1B; Wilderness Protected Area.”

The IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), Wilderness Specialist Group (WSG), continues to shepherd this work and recognizes that the protection of Wilderness includes the presence and contribution of the nations, cultures, and communities who inhabit and care for these places. Rather than the mere presence of humans, the WSG emphasizes the degree and type of impact caused by human presence, and the application of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom within the networks of wildlife and natural processes.

We commend this effort conducted by the WSG within the IUCN WCPA and recognize it as an important step in a long process of building trust between the knowledge and wisdom. They gain a more concrete understanding of the consequences that result from not adopting it more closely. IKWS apply within places, spaces and time, and to all who reside and pass through these areas. Indigenous science is inextricable from Indigenous law and therefore has much more authority to influence the way the societal participants behave than does Western science, a fundamental and important difference (and even point of conflict) that is essential to understand in any work of cultural reconciliation. In general, the colonial mindset does not easily and often grasp the ecological and social consequences of its strictly anthropocentric policies. Collectively (on the Western side), this is still not well-understood. Not understanding this illustrates one’s bias and indicates we are not yet in an equitable dialogue.

Indigenous Nations call “protected areas” by their various languages and through the lens of the relationships that characterize these places. Rob Edward, Smelqmix elder, has described a process of traversing and awareness of the land by “marking your place on the journey by describing the relationships you have in that place”. Indigenous Peoples mark where they are through understanding the relationships of the place. Teaching this to “little brother,” “settlers,”

“colonialists,” etc. is the responsibility of the local nations who know the relationships of the place. Local nations may call areas designed to preserve these relationships Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas, Sacred Places, Food Sovereignty Areas, and other terms relevant within their Traditional Territories. Drawing in and deepening non-Indigenous understanding of these concepts through the concept of wilderness creates a space of dialogue and understanding. Reg Crowshoe and Willy Ermine call this space an ‘Ethical Space,’ where two cultures are poised to engage with each other and deepen the collective understanding of the other, so we can create something new. We hope to create a new understanding of the word and concept of wilderness through this dialogue.

As we transition from a singular cultural reference point for wilderness we deepen our capacity to work together, restore sovereignty to Indigenous Nations, and protect Earth’s many lifeforms. Let us prioritize the development of “two-eyed seeing” (understanding through both traditional and contemporary lenses) to integrate Indigenous knowledge and wisdom at the center of wilderness so that we may better respect and defend the sovereign Nations who practice and apply this knowledge and live on a healthier planet upon which life thrives.

OUR CALL

For these reasons, we agree to undertake the following actions to help, expand, and indigenize the wilderness concept, so that all nations may benefit from a way to speak, in their own words, of a healthy relationship with the Earth. Most importantly, this Declaration recognizes both traditional Indigenous and Western sciences as critical informants of a more holistic philosophy and practice of wilderness conservation.

1. Acknowledge that the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (especially Article 8(j)) is a necessary baseline and starting point for cross-cultural dialogue and for any actions that impact the sovereign territories of Indigenous Peoples. We commit to becoming consistent with existing international instruments recognizing the rights of Indigenous Peoples.
2. Include language and protocols for the implementation of responsibilities of and to all life, before establishing any development/protection plan or initiative, and throughout the process of developing a concept and/or designation for Wilderness or other formally protected area on land, water and sea,

3. Practice Ethical Space/Two Eyed Seeing to create an expanded concept of wilderness, openly acknowledging that early applications of the wilderness concept reflected a worldview that is inconsistent with Indigenous Peoples.
4. Prioritize assistance in advocacy, financial, and technical support to Indigenous Nations and communities who are struggling to defend their territories, food security, and/or biodiversity because of threats to their sovereignty.
5. Actively promote a wilderness policy that acknowledges the multi-dimensional nature of the concept that transcends the material and physical realms. This action will both restore/strengthen the broader meaning of 'wilderness', and improve the likelihood that Indigenous Peoples can more effectively speak to and influence institutional land management strategies.
6. Adopt language throughout Wilderness law and policy that honors the rights and roles of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in perpetuity.
7. Hold accountable all international bodies, including the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Wilderness Specialist Group (WCPA/IUCN), to accelerate efforts to expand and strengthen wilderness by acknowledging the necessity and value of applying Indigenous knowledge and wisdom.
8. Elevate awareness of Wilderness Category 1B within institutions, organizations, governments, nations, and the public at all levels as an opportunity for protected area designation and management in the future and urge more comprehensive and far-reaching actions to initiate, integrate and support Indigenous management or co-management of designated Wilderness areas.
9. Freely and openly acknowledge wilderness' problematic history and frequent mal-appropriation, including genocide and land theft, and the opportunity and the need for it to evolve through the implementation of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom.
10. Actively and publicly support and collaborate with Indigenous Peoples so that they can stay on their lands if they so wish, and empower them to defend their sovereignty, traditional lifeways, and the land, waters, and seas upon which they depend.

11. Actively and publicly recognize that the science-based, international call for protecting 30% of land by 2030 (and 50×50) is necessary for the protection of biodiversity and can only be achieved by strengthening the sovereignty of and collaboration with Indigenous Peoples practicing wise stewardship of nature.
12. Implement the best protocol for integrating Indigenous knowledge and wisdom as an equal partner with contemporary science (this would mean legal pluralism) to determine the best possible conservation management, goals, and methods; noting that Indigenous knowledge and wisdom always contains specific, place-based information, management wisdom, policy, and guidance.
13. Ensure that networks of sacred natural sites and territories which have been sustained by Indigenous Peoples and others for ceremonial and pilgrimage purposes, and for the intrinsic value of the area(s), are recognized as an essential part of wilderness and/or as another relevant, distinct category of protected area. Ensure that the customary governance systems of the custodial communities are recognized and protected within these designations.
14. Actively support, whenever possible, Indigenous knowledge-based definitions, policies, practices, and solutions that prioritize the importance of “relationship,” interdependence, and harmony between humankind and nature.
15. Elevate awareness of Wilderness Category 1B within institutions (national governments, international governmental organizations, and NGOs) and within the public as a baseline for formal Wilderness definitions and management, while urging more comprehensive and far-reaching actions to facilitate stewardship of the land by Indigenous Peoples.

OUR ACCORD

We believe it is important that the concept of wilderness persists, and to do so, it needs to be expanded, deepened, and strengthened by Indigenous perspectives. Accomplishing this endeavor will take an active effort on the part of the conservation community because it bears the responsibility for promulgating an enhanced and improved understanding of what the wilderness concept can and should be.

We believe that wilderness is a place where all nations – people, animal, plant, and spirit – have the ability to experience freedom and exercise their agency and obligations within their relationships to all other life. We believe that wilderness is a place where all nations are interwoven into the ancient and sacred processes of life. We believe that wilderness is our true home, the place from whence we come and from which we draw sustenance. It is also the place to which we return so that we may live with, feel, and better understand our relationship with the world.

We believe, in the words of the Athabaskan-speaking Gwich'in People in the territories commonly known as Canada and Alaska, that wilderness is “the way the Creator intended it to be.”

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