

Restoring and Protecting our Native Languages and Landscapes

Conference Report
Cultural Survival

October 5-7, 2021



Introduction

At least 40 percent of the world's 7,000 languages are at risk of some level of endangerment. Indigenous languages are the most vulnerable because they are not taught in schools or used in the public sphere. Building upon the International Year of Indigenous Languages (2019) findings, UNESCO organized Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages in February 2020 in Mexico City. During this conference, participants adopted the **Los Pinos Declaration**, which calls for implementing Indigenous Peoples' rights to freedom of expression by promoting bilingual intercultural education and using Indigenous languages in public spheres. They also designed the strategic framework for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032).

Cultural Survival's work to promote cultures and languages has been a priority from the beginning. It is directly connected to our work on community media, radio, our Cultural Survival Quarterly magazine, our Bazaars, and communications. Supporting cultural and language diversity and revitalization also directly supports biological diversity and conservation. We believe that Indigenous Traditional Knowledge is the key to protecting the land we have inhabited for millennia, and Indigenous languages are essential to maintain and transmit our Traditional Knowledge to future generations. We believe in the sacred and interdependent relationship between the land, its Peoples, and their cultures, and as such, the erosion of culture leads to the erosion of biodiversity, land, and soil.

On October 5-7, 2021, Cultural Survival hosted the three-day virtual conference, **Restoring and Protecting our Native Languages and Landscapes**. The objective of the conference was to facilitate knowledge sharing among participants for best practices regarding the revitalization of Indigenous languages, with a special focus on using Indigenous languages in stewarding Traditional Ecological Knowledge and biodiversity protection. Cultural Survival engaged 32 activists, practitioners, educators, and Indigenous linguists working in the field from the United States, Canada, Central and South America, Russia, Australia, and Africa.

Agenda

October 5 - Indigenous Languages as Contributors to the Preservation of Biodiversity

10:00 AM EST Opening ceremony and welcome

- Kaimana Barcarse (Kanaka Hawaii")
- Galina Angarova (Buryat)
- Adriana Hernández (Maya K'iche')
- Richard Grounds (Yuchi, Seminole)

10:30 AM EST Keynote presentation: domestic and international legal framework and the UN Decade on Indigenous Languages by Dr. Wilton Littlechild

11:00 AM EST Panel 1: State of Indigenous Languages as Measure of Indigenous Rights

- Galina Angarova (Buryat), moderator
- Carla Fredericks (Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara)
- Kate Finn (Osage)
- Tarcila Rivera Zea (Quechua)
- Francisco Calí (Maya Kaqchikel)

1:30 PM EST Panel 2: Indigenous languages and Traditional Knowledge at the center of biodiversity conservation

- Bia'ni Madsa' Juárez Lopez (Mixe/Ayuuk ja'ay and Zapotec/Binnizá), moderator
- Jeanette Armstrong (Okanagan)
- Marcus Briggs-Cloud (Maskoke)
- Miguel Jacanamejoy (Inga)
- Antonio Q'Apaj Conde (Aymara)

October 6 - Reclaiming and Strengthening our Indigenous Languages Beyond Our Homes: Methodologies and Practical Approaches

10:00 AM EST Keynote presentation: Real barriers, real solutions by Michele K. Johnson

10:30 AM EST Panel 3: Reclaiming and Strengthening our Indigenous Languages beyond our homes: methodologies and practical approaches

- Daisee Francour (Oneida), moderator
- Jennifer Weston (Hunkpapa Lakota, Standing Rock)
- Tatiana Degai (Itelmen)
- Juan Solano (Kañari)
- Richard Grounds (Yuchi, Seminole)

1:00 PM EST Interactive Session: Our Languages live: Stories of success and inspiration from Native Peoples

- Kaimana Barcarse (Kanaka Hawai'i) - host
- Vyacheslav Shadrin (Yukagir)
- Angela Butler (Eyak)
- Vanessa Farrelly (Pertame South Arrernte)

October 7- Indigenous Women and the Power of Community Storytelling

10:00 AM EST Keynote presentation: Indigenous women and the power of community storytelling

- Tarcila Rivera Zea (Quechua)

10:30 AM EST Panel 4: Indigenous Women in Language Retention and Revitalization

- Avexnim Cojti (Maya K'iche'), moderator
- Lucy Mullenkei (Maasai)
- Halay Turning Heart (Yuchi, Seminole)
- Rosa Palomino (Aymara)
- Vanessa Farrelly (Pertame Southern Arrernte)
- Valentina Sovkina (Saami)

1:00 PM EST Panel 5: Media and storytelling promoting and revitalizing Indigenous languages

- Shaldon Ferris (KhoiSan), moderator
- Socorro Cauch (Maya)
- Dulma Batorova (Buryat)
- Toroga Denver Breda (Khoikhoi)
- Vianna González (Maya K'iche')

Proceedings of the conference

During the first day, we celebrated the conference's inauguration with an opening ceremony hosted by Kaimana Barcarse (Kanaka Hawai'i), Chair of Cultural Survival's board of directors, and Galina Angarova (Buryat), Cultural Survival's Executive Director. The first keynote presentation was given by Dr. Wilton Littlechild (Cree), and focused on domestic and international legal frameworks for the right to language, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, and the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

During the first panel (The State of Indigenous Languages as a Measure of Indigenous Rights), we discussed a holistic approach that considers all aspects of the well being of Indigenous Peoples connected to languages. We concluded that we, as Indigenous Peoples, have the responsibility to speak our languages at home. To continue the sacred work of revitalizing our languages and protecting our lands, we need to work together with allies, governments, policymakers, and philanthropic institutions. We ended the panel with a call to action for governments to redesign school curricula and include Indigenous languages at the center of education systems.

In the second panel (Indigenous Languages and Traditional Knowledge at the Center of Biodiversity Conservation), we learned how Indigenous communities transmit good practices for the care and conservation of our territories. In the case of the Inga community in Colombia, for example, every word is a story from their ancestors. With the loss of Indigenous languages, we will lose knowledge and good practices for our territories. The appropriate setting to develop revitalization strategies for the severely endangered Inga language is within the community, where the language can be lived through the relationship with Mother Earth. Another example of the close relationship between language and Mother Earth comes from the Maskoke Peoples in the United States, where maintaining the language is vital because the responsibilities of Indigenous peoples are embedded in the language. Today, many young people do not understand their responsibilities to the natural world because they do not understand the language.

The first intervention on Day 2 was given by Michele Johnson from the Syilx Language house in Canada. She expanded our knowledge on methodologies focused on adult learning processes. The Syilx language is critically endangered, so the community has implemented a radical revitalization method of a comprehensive immersion curriculum¹. It is crucial that the language revitalization approach includes a methodology focused on growing new adult speakers. In the Syilx community, the adult students spend 1,600 hours as part of a sequenced curriculum and choose a

¹ An immersion curriculum is an intense response to the high level of endangerment of a language at home and within a community. The immersion response employs full immersion in the native language and the use of the mainstream language as a foreign language.



Sylx Language House. Photo credit: Michelle Johnson

full immersion methodology. The Sylx Elders record their voices, and adults get paid to learn their language full time. Additionally, lateral training sessions that incorporate kindness as a central value to address intergenerational trauma, along with non-violent communication methods such as stand-up comedy.

The third panel (Reclaiming and Strengthening our Indigenous Languages Beyond our Homes: Methodologies and Practical Approaches), focused on the Itelmen community from Russia, who understand that in order to revitalize a language, the learning process must go beyond the classroom. They have implemented such unconventional methodologies as using Google Maps to map culturally significant places around the Itelmen community and record meaningful stories, along with the use of puppet and shadow theater to tell Itelmen stories. The Kovran Community House of Culture has created an [Itelmen Karaoke channel](#) that promotes traditional dances and songs.

For the Yuchi community in the United States, full immersion programs have been effective. For them, it is important to invest in people who are doing the work, dedicating the time to learn the languages face-to-face, breath-to-breath. Some of the actions that have been helpful for the Yuchi include working with committed people who are willing to carry their language, culture, and medicinal knowledge forward. The Yuchi recognize that the most critical voice in their community belongs to the Elders, so the community has progressively expanded its target group to teach the language through different immersion programs. They started by working with adults and young adults in a Master-Apprentice model, and have expanded to teaching babies via a language nest program.

Another success story of a Master-Apprentice program involves the Pertame language of the Southern Arrernte Peoples. Due to Central Australia's colonial history, Pertame is no longer the language spoken in the homes of most Pertame families. The Pertame

started a Master-Apprentice language revitalization program led by Pertame Matriarch Christobel Swan. Swan is the backbone of the program, which is run entirely by Pertame women. The goal is to support the intergenerational transmission of the Pertame language.



Pertame Language Program in Australia. Photo credit: Vanessa Farrelly

During our interactive session (Stories of Success by Native Peoples), we learned from the Eyak Peoples. Their language is the most endangered in Alaska, as the last native speaker passed away in 2008. For the Eyak Peoples, documenting their language and using dictionaries has contributed to learning the basics of the language. They also run language camps where classes include Eyak history, field trips and talking circles, traditional crafts, singing traditional songs, eating traditional foods, and learning and speaking words in Eyak. Still, they struggle, since there are no fluent speakers remaining.

The fourth panel (Indigenous Women in Language Retention and Revitalization), focused on the Aymara language, which today is mainly spoken by adults in the Bolivian Andes; fewer children are growing up speaking the ancestral language. Rosa Palomino (Aymara) from the Union of Aymara Women explained that women are developing reading-writing classes in the Aymara language in her community. Through language competitions and games, women pass on their stories, poems, and songs to Pachamama. Despite the disproportionate violence and discrimination women face in their community, women are the backbones of their communities and families, and therefore they must continue with the sacred work of passing the language to youth and children.



Rosa Palomino from the Union of Aymara Women producing media content. Photo credit: Rosa Palomino

Indigenous women are key actors in the language retention process for children. Yuchi women in the United States resist colonization on a daily basis when they talk to their children in their Indigenous language. Halay Turning-Heart (Yuchi) highlighted the importance of reconnecting to our traditional lifestyle and storytelling practices where we speak face to face to one another. Equally important is wellness and self-care when learning and teaching a language. Our communities face alcoholism, drugs, violence, and other issues, all of which can interfere and make it harder to dedicate the time and energy necessary to learn the language. We need to nourish our bodies by taking care of our diet and health. It is harder to teach and learn language when our habits have shifted to non-traditional diets. And finally, we need to create a language habitat. We must intentionally create a safe space for learning and establish boundaries for colonial languages.

The fifth and final panel (The Role of Media and Storytelling in Promoting Indigenous Languages), offered an inspirational example of how multilingual media is a powerful tool to strengthen Indigenous languages, in this case among the Maya People of Mexico. Yuuyum is a Maya initiative that aims to exercise their right to communication in their language, Maya Yucateco. For them, the internet has become a resource to give voice to the Indigenous communities globally who have access to the internet. At least 80 percent of their programming is in Maya, with the remaining 20 percent in Spanish. They intend to contribute to strengthening the Maya identity through broadcasting in the Maya language. Indigenous media, and especially radio that works through the internet, are so powerful in reaching migrant communities living outside their communities.



Key Findings

- ▶ Indigenous languages are an essential part of Indigenous well being and their identities, culture, spirituality, and relationship with the land. There is a deep connection between language and ceremonies and how Indigenous Peoples speak and relate to the land, primarily through ceremonies. To work towards the overall well being of Indigenous Peoples, we need to maintain a connection with the land and the environment, which is held through the medium of Indigenous languages.
- ▶ Illustrations from different communities brought attention to the need for increased funding to grassroots initiatives doing the language revitalization work, rather than economic support to academia. To overcome the barriers affecting communities, we need new and stronger partnerships and alliances.
- ▶ Practitioners stressed the role of Indigenous Peoples in designing and implementing self-determined solutions to keep their languages alive. Solutions to revitalize and strengthen Indigenous languages will be more effective when they are culturally relevant and go hand in hand with Indigenous Peoples' cosmovisions and ways of life.
- ▶ Exchanging ideas and success stories is a key aspect of language revitalization's collective work. From other communities' struggles, we learned that we are not alone in this reclamation language journey. The methodology sharing demonstrates why reciprocity among Indigenous Peoples across continents will help build stronger communities preserving our languages.
- ▶ Based on the examples and stories from different geographic areas around the world, Indigenous women carry out invaluable work as language transmitters and as culture bearers. Indigenous women resist colonization daily by speaking their languages to their children. Despite the challenges women face to share the language with future generations, they deserve more recognition and the right to advise in the policymaking processes.

Final recommendations and next steps

January 2022 marks the start of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. During this decade, we have clearly understood our desired future directions in support of Indigenous languages and have strengthened global partnerships to carry out this work through this conference. Pending future funding, we hope to expand our work to support Indigenous languages in line with Cultural Survival's newly established programmatic priorities and [2022-2026 Strategic Plan](#) using grantmaking strategies, communications, advocacy, and capacity building. Possible activities include:

- *Grantmaking to community-based language revitalization initiatives through our Keepers of the Earth Fund*
- *Hosting in-person, community-to-community exchanges focusing on cultural and language revitalization*
- *Establishing youth fellowships for Indigenous language learners*
- *Hosting a series of larger in-person gatherings and cultural exchanges every other year throughout the International Decade of Indigenous Languages to monitor progress and continue the momentum*
- *Advocating for government funding of Indigenous language learning programs and access to education in mother languages through international spaces*
- *Producing content in Indigenous languages, including our Indigenous Rights Radio educational radio platform, for distribution to Indigenous audiences of community radio stations worldwide*
- *Continuing to uplift stories of Indigenous language leaders to further advocate for cultural and language revitalization*

Special Acknowledgment

This meeting was hosted by Cultural Survival with support from the Lannan Foundation, Vadon Foundation, Swift Foundation, and Trust for Mutual Understanding. We are grateful to the language warriors working in the field towards finding solutions to keep their languages alive. We could not have done this work without all of you. Our deepest gratitude to our community partners.