

PROTECTING NATURE THROUGH LANGUAGES

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Abstract. *At the crossroads of biology, language sciences and anthropology, scientists have wondered whether, speaking of nature, the human species, in the diversity of languages, speaks the same thing. In Europe, we almost all use a variant of the Latin "natura", which becomes "nature" in French and English, "natür" in German, or náttúran »" in Icelandic. These words for "nature" almost always come from liturgical languages (Latin, Arabic, Sanskrit, Pali.) and are therefore defined in specific religious and cultural contexts. The "wilderness" in the United States, for example, emerges in an American context of conquest of the West that shapes the vision of a wilderness, where humans have no place. In South-East Asia, "thoamachat" refers to a nature made up of great cycles, which encompass both the race of the stars as well as that of the seasons or biological cycles. In India, the "prakrti" carries rather the very dynamic idea of a perpetual creative hatching. Thus, protecting "nature," "wilderness," "thoamachat" or "praktri" does not have the same meaning. Thus, understanding the concept hidden behind these words have major implications for conservation policy. They assess that the American hegemonic vision of the wilderness, disseminated around the world and institutionalized by some NGOs, may conflict with the conservation methods of other countries shaped in different cultural contexts. Nature in France, for example, has been built up a lot with man and his pastoral or landscape activities, as demonstrated, among other things, by our conservation policies in the form of regional parks in which fields and villages can be found, which is inconceivable for the concept of "wilderness". All the actors of conservation policies (scientists, rulers, agents of international institutions, even teachers) strives not to participate in the dissemination of the dominant vision, but to propose policies and practices that take into account the natural and cultural substrate of the country in which they would be established.*

Keywords: *nature, protection, language, concepts, diversity*

INTRODUCTION

A link between nature and indigenous cultures increasingly defended at the international level: at the global level, the approaches of various bodies, in particular the United Nations, increasingly raise the question of indigenous rights, especially in the 1980s. The texts insist on access to territories deemed ancestral, to the resources of nature and on the knowledge that these peoples have of them. Autochthonies are thus defined by a territorialized culture that is based on different values attributed to nature. UNESCO declared in 1972 that it was necessary to protect the natural and cultural material heritage of humanity, "*those unique and irreplaceable goods to whatever people they belong to*" (BARNOSKY AD, ET AL. 2011). The proceedings of the conference mention the importance of "*safeguarding indigenous cultures*" [UNESCO, 1973]. The reflections carried out by a United Nations sub-commission within the OHCHR led to the creation of a working group on indigenous populations in 1982, which became a permanent forum in 2000. It is responsible for taking stock of the evolution of their rights in the world and for making proposals in this regard. Meanwhile, the report "Our common future", published in 1987 within the framework of the UNO, specifies that

indigenous people must be able to access lost territories and organize themselves locally to manage them according to their culture. The International Labour Organization (ILO), which defends decent working conditions throughout the world, also does so for indigenous peoples and insists in Convention 169 in 1989 on the need to recognize their cultural and customary specificities. Designed to combat poverty and exclusion, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) helps indigenous people on economic, environmental and cultural micro-projects. [DESCOLA P., 2013]. Vernacular knowledge and the sacred interpretation of its link to nature, the importance of language in the transmission of this knowledge are gradually recognized [GINN, 2009;]. They were also protected by UNESCO in 2003 before being subject to protection measures under the Intangible Heritage Convention in 2006 after the 1972 Convention on the Cultural and Tangible Heritage. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples extends these steps into 2007. After having invoked the discrimination and historical injustices to which they had been subjected, the resolution affirmed loud and clear the right to territory and the need for cultural reappropriation, even if it meant going as far as self-determination. 143 states are in favour of this non-decision-making declaration in 2011 and the four opponents end up endorsing it (United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand). 11 countries abstained and 34 did not take part in the vote. While the spaces and lifestyles of indigenous peoples are evolving with very variable and unequal situations, the question of their condition and who they are is increasingly globalized [GADA, 2014].

Today more than ever the climate crisis and the continuous loss of biodiversity raise questions about what our role is in nature, in the environment in which we live. The Australian "black summer", with catastrophic fires for hundreds of thousands of km² and the arrival of three coronavirus epidemics (Sars, Mers, and Covid-19) in less than twenty years, are a wake-up call that calls to reflect (and to act!) about how we relate to the environment.

While anthropology and the religions of the world address these questions, in their terms and domains of action, ecology has never really clarified, applying its methods of analysis, what our function is in the biosphere. Are we a "key species" on which the health of an ecosystem depends for the most part? Are we a species that provides habitat for other species? Surprisingly, we know more about the role of other living animal and plant beings in different ecosystems than about our own [HWANG,2005].

This apparent paradox is an expression of our presence in most of the great variety of terrestrial and marine ecosystems of the planet, and in the variety of actions and relationships between us and nature in different cultural and individual contexts. Man cultivates the land in a variety of forms, from the most traditional to the strongly mechanized; man transforms nature, paints nature, writes about nature, documents nature, venerates and imagines nature and everyone does it in his own way. What our role is in the ecosystem therefore becomes an extremely complex question to be faced in its multiple dimensions, a question that perhaps had a simpler answer at the beginning of our evolutionary history. [RICHARDS J.F., 2005],

However, there is a register of our relations with nature that allows us to differentiate how different cultures have understood and understand today our role in the environment: language. Language is in fact our means to describe and tell the world around us, and therefore reflects our perspective on nature and what our role is in it.

In other words, language plays an essential role in the transmission of culture and in the understanding of the environment. Through language we express what has value or what arouses our attention in the natural world. Through language we express the sensations of our experience of nature, and the type of knowledge necessary to transform it. In addition, the language as the environment changes and adapts over time, recording how our perception of

the world changes. From the Canticle of the Creatures of St. Francis, to the tales of rich and uninhabited lands (or inhabited by „savages“) that have legitimized colonization and imperialism, the language used to describe the world reflects how our relations with the environment change [BRUNET R., 2003]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research method used is an analytical one with descriptive elements.

Materials and extracts from official reports have been processed and analysed, from different periods of time, pointing out the major importance of protecting nature and the role so important in doing it through languages, although, at the first sight, one may find it difficult to connect nature and languages. They are more connected than ever and the impact of nature and climatic changes on languages is a very strong one and may have important consequences for certain societies, cultures and civilisations, consequently if we look the other way round, also languages' impact on nature and its protection has the same important values.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

On this basis, a recent study (here available in an open access version: <https://bit.ly/2vK86Xp>) by a group of researchers from over thirty different countries of the world, coordinated by the writer, has revealed three main conjugations of the concept of "nature", analyzing how the word "nature" is used and translated into over sixty different languages, including some indigenous languages. In particular, the word nature assumes, or excludes, man as part of it, or takes on a spiritual dimension when it is understood as a gift, or the personification of a god or goddess or as the result of "Creation"[KARP ET AL. 2015].

Today, in Western cultures, we tend to refer to nature as a virgin element, to which human activities constitute a disorder, the violation of a certain order or the alteration of a certain „natural functioning“. In this context, the only possible form of development is to alter and control nature. As a result, environmental conservation policies tend to promote the isolation of nature from man and his activities, and the establishment, for example, of demarcated protected areas in which nature is inside and we stay outside and can (almost) only observe. Or, when it is the economic argument that wins, "unproductive" ecosystems can be sacrificed to our needs.

More inclusive meanings of the term "nature" exist in other cultures and languages. For example the word 里山(Sato-yama), in Japanese, refers to nature as the place where there are mutually beneficial relationships between man and the environment. Other cultures maintain spiritual elements in the idea of nature such as the Pachamama, or Mother Earth, of the Quechua and Aymara peoples in Latin America. This spiritual relationship is at the origin of the vast majority of initiatives that guarantee legal rights to the environment as an expression of collective interest including, for example, the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth.



Figure 1. Approaches and multilinguism

In general, the study highlights how different relationships between man and nature in different cultures, represented in language, give rise to different approaches to the management of the environment and human activities. Often these relationships or forms of knowledge are ignored, considered not compatible with the scientific method or with a set of relationships defined as normal or appropriate by some dominant, widely accepted culture or worldview [CALLICOTT JB. 2001].

In terms of conservation and sustainability, however, it should make us reflect on how some cultures and forms of living far from "Western" development standards manage to combine the needs of man and those of nature. For example, when respected, the territories of indigenous peoples in America as in Australia, host and maintain a richer biodiversity than in many protected areas precluded from human activities. [FRASER,2001]. Will it not be that we can learn something from them, or from other cultures or forms of living forgotten in our own country, about the management of the environment? Our research highlights the importance of respecting, understanding, and giving voice to the multiple perspectives to define effective conservation policies. Climate change as well as the loss of biodiversity are global phenomena. The solutions to these problems will emerge from our collective knowledge of the world and the natural environment.

CONCLUSIONS

The participation of local and indigenous peoples appears to be a paradigm in nature protection at least at the international level. The situation in several part of the world is in contradiction with this trend, because ethnocide through a series of governances on populations who lived in close relationship with the natural environment has accelerated over the last thirty years. Built on misappropriation, the current policy of protecting nature and its biodiversity, or within the framework of a protected area, is based on the opportunities for profit that it can generate. They are put in competition on the same space, with the desire to promote a mecca of nature tourism for a wealthy foreign clientele on a global scale while sparing the opportunities for exploitation of various mineral resources, such as for example, diamonds of which Botswana is the leading producer in the world. At that price, a territorialized Aboriginal culture does not seem to be of much interest. But if this valorization of natural capital depends on economic parameters and the international situation, political choices and regional and local socio-historical realities are also important issues.

Protecting local languages, we do protect nature itself.

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