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Langscape

MAGAZINE



Voices of the Earth, Part 2

Langscape Magazine is an extension of the voice of Terralingua.

It supports our mission by educating the minds and hearts
about the importance and value of biocultural diversity.

We aim to promote a paradigm shift by illustrating biocultural diversity
through scientific and traditional knowledge, within an appealing
sensory context of articles, stories, and art.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTOS

Front: Dr. Rimberia Mwangi, Sacred Site Custodian, Meru, Kenya.

Photo: Jess Phillimore/The Gaia Foundation, 2012

Back: Two fishermen on Lake George, Western Uganda.

Photo: Hal Rhoades/The Gaia Foundation, 2016

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Flourishing at TWENTY

ON CONTEXT AND FOUNDATIONS IN THE RISE OF THE CONCEPT OF BIOCULTURAL DIVERSITY

In the last issue of *Langscape*, Dave Harmon traced the emergence of the field of biocultural diversity as a call for engagement with the beautifully rich complexity of life. In this second take on “biocultural diversity at twenty,” I ponder the emergence of the concept (and field) from the perspective of the history of ideas and idea making. The concept took off when it did, quickly flowering and bridging to the mainstream after centuries of marginalization, because deep global intellectual and political changes that embraced diversity and complexity created conditions for the term to take root.

Let’s start in the 1960s. Western thought had been captivated for centuries by the Cartesian separation of “nature” and “culture” and Newtonian physics of linear causation. Although Indigenous and other more holistic ways of knowing were still entirely marginalized, it was in the 1960s that systems thinking, interdisciplinary explorations, and of course ecology emerged in the Western canon, opening the door to complexity and diversity. This was all wrapped up with how the 1960s brought about independence for most of the remaining



European colonies, civil rights in the US, feminism, and global student movements that rejected a top-down hierarchical and mechanistic world. It was a time when discussions of cultural difference began to elicit more listening by the mainstream. When intercontinental connections emerged among Indigenous movements. When a generation arose

Above: Sungai community fish trap on the Kinabatangan River in Sabah (Borneo). One of the main ways that activist scholars were awakened to the concept of biocultural diversity was in their encounter with Indigenous ecological knowledge. Not only did such communities have extraordinary knowledge of fish diversity and ecology, but also their knowledge was grounded in their own languages, cultural values, and institutions and was expressed in ways that were crafted to be beautiful. Photo: Ken Wilson, 2013

globally that embraced freedom and pluralism. We still live in the wake of the 1960s. The 1970s were mostly spent arguing about what all this meant politically and culturally. Meanwhile, and on an infinitely finer scale, some wayward intellectuals wandered into human ecology and ethnobotany and pointed out that Indigenous knowledge was very significant.

Then came the 1980s and the explosion of new thinking that had been seeded in the 1960s. Lovelock had proclaimed the contemporary concept of Gaia in 1979, and the term “biodiversity” was coined in 1980. The early 1980s saw an astonishing flowering of attention to such areas as environmental history, Indigenous knowledge, landscape ecology, holism, community-based resource management and community forestry, common property theory, conservation biology, ecosystem health, agroecology, eco-agriculture, organic food, and so forth. In fact, apart from “biocultural diversity” itself, the 1980s seem to have generated all the themes in contemporary struggles around diversity and most of the terminology.

“The concept of biocultural diversity took off when it did... because deep global intellectual and political changes that embraced diversity and complexity created conditions for the term to take root.”

I was part of that movement, and we certainly intended to be deeply subversive of the Western academic canon and neo-colonial global development practice. People like me caught up in the academy fought for these ideas because of human connections we had with grassroots struggles and Indigenous Peoples. Indeed, it was at this time that “participatory” and community-based approaches emerged as the “alternative” approach



to development and resource management. At the end of the decade, two themes then suddenly overwhelmed the public mind: globalization with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and climate change propelled to attention by the summer of 1988. For many that year it was Chico Mendes who represented the connection between the bottom-up struggles that motivated us and the increasingly visible planetary environmental crisis. It was only later that more of us heard about the founding of the International Society for Ethnobiology and the “inextricable link” between cultural and biological diversity framed by the Declaration of Belém.

From 40,000 feet, the decade of the 1990s appears as one of “win-win” and “stakeholders” rather than radical intellectual movements, dominated by the birthing of the Internet, biotechnology, and a time of massive global economic expansion and integration under neo-liberalism. But while all that was happening, the new thinking of the 1980s flowed unstoppably towards describing a different world.

Above: Sacred site in a forest in Bhutan. Sacred sites in culturally managed landscapes proved to be a particularly powerful way to convey the biocultural diversity concept to new audiences, in particular because numerous field studies showed how they contained higher biodiversity. Photo: Ken Wilson, 2014



To explore this, Yang Tan, then a volunteer with The Christensen Fund, helped me search keywords in the abstracts of the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI-EXPANDED)—1900 to present; the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI)—1956 to present; and the Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI)—1975 to present. Most striking is how 1990 emerges as the pivotal year for academic articles with keywords for every kind of “diversity”—a whole decade after the coining of “biodiversity” and thirty years after “cultural diversity” entered the official discourse. Some terms are far more prominent than others: biodiversity (and its cognate biological diversity) is present one to three orders of magnitude more frequently in these journal articles than any of the terms associated with biocultural diversity. Yet, when we plot the rates of expansion in the use of these terms (see graph), we find a further astonishing result: namely, that they all show a very similar and unstoppable exponential growth after 1990.

Above Left: MaiJabu, leading member of the Muonde Trust, at a community workshop under a *muonde* (fig) tree atop a granite outcrop at the home of Trust Chairman Takura Moyo in south-central Zimbabwe. Across the planet, community institutions like Muonde have found much benefit in deploying the concept of the biocultural. Photo: Ken Wilson, 2016

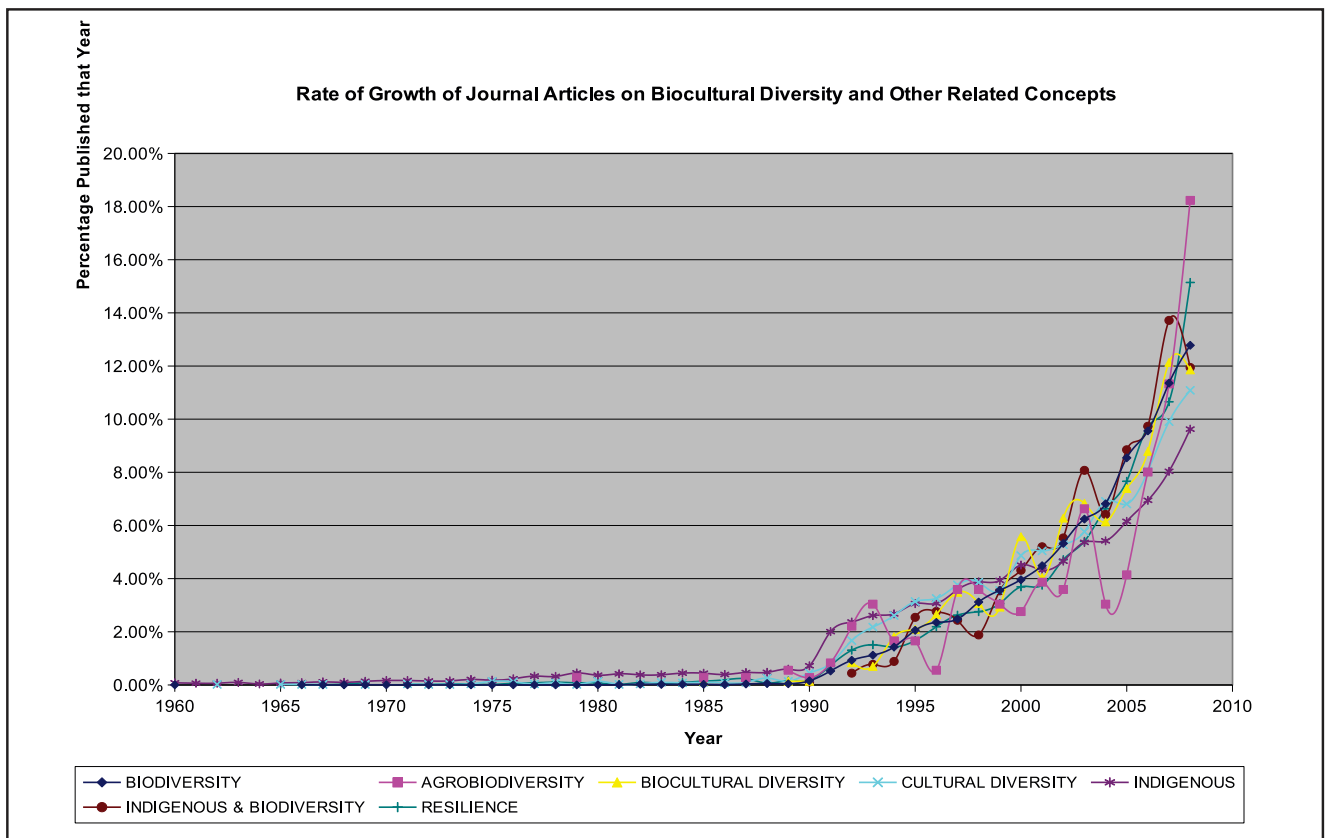
Above Right: Director of the Muonde Trust, Abraham Ndhlovu (right) provides the son of Chief Mapanzure (left) a digital copy of a video of the installation ceremony of his ancestor taken by colonial administrator J.D. White. As part of his nearly forty-year association with the communities of south-central Zimbabwe, Ken Wilson continues to bring social and ecological history back into the hands of the community. Photo: Ken Wilson, 2016

Furthermore, when looking from underneath, it turns out that it was in the 1990s that most of the institutional structure that now underlies our field emerged, symbolized perhaps by the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development and the achievement of Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, with its reference to the importance of traditional knowledge. The work done in the 1990s becomes especially clear when we look at the emergence of institutions working at the interface of Indigenous, environmental, and human rights. Examining a sample of such institutions worldwide from the Wiser Earth database, I found that a full quarter had their roots in the years 1990–94, and nearly as many forming in the next five years, although this obviously varies by region of the world. The decade of the 1990s was when “fortress conservation” took a wobble; when the Indigenous movement went global; and when sacred places were first discussed in official venues as places of significant biodiversity and cultural importance. All this reflected the growing capacity of social movements to organize and take on the establishment, and how the cacophony of ideas generated in the 1980s was honed and deployed to create a discourse the mainstream could understand. Integral to this was how Indigenous intellectuals increased in number and started to be heard. Across the world, Indigenous Peoples won landmark land rights struggles in the 1990s, from Mabo in Australia to the San people in South Africa.

From my perch at the Ford Foundation, I witnessed closely how it was in the 1990s that all of these struggles and the potential to succeed began to find traction with foundation, private, and even bilateral government funding. Most important of all, individuals, mostly North Americans of wealth (for better or worse), increasingly chose to back these communities and their advocates. Most of these radical donors had come of age in the 1960s and embraced the new and different. They were not afraid of complexity and were ready to back the feminine. Josh Mailman—one of them—once referred to this as the “the rise of the female donor”: the era when women (typically widows and daughters) got their hands on significant philanthropic moneys for the first time. Alongside these donors, I also saw in the 1990s the impact made by the intellectuals who had come of age in the 1980s, and who by the 1990s had begun to have the capacity to influence how things worked.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the different threads we needed to name “biocultural diversity” came together in the 1990s (and not earlier or later), albeit with the alignment of the right mavericks and with the dogged creative energy of Luisa Maffi. I see these threads as being the maturing of multiple parallel academic fields that valued diversity; the recognition of trans-disciplinary connections and holism; an ever-stronger voice for Indigenous ways of knowing; and a constituency ready and able to ground a multiple-syllable concept in the deliciously complex daily reality of peoples and their struggles. I believe counter-cyclical thinking is often most potent when the mainstream is most confident. But was there really the possibility that the deliciousness of biocultural diversity and related thinking could take on the global cultural and financial juggernaut?

Along came the 2000s. These biocultural ideas from the margins, now with some institutional grounding, pressed forward surprisingly relentlessly.



Above: The rate of growth of journal articles citing biocultural diversity and other related concepts since 1960, as charted by Yang Tan for The Christensen Fund (TCF). Source: TCF, 2009



In my experience, the pioneers and advocates for the biocultural paradigm, and the leaders of the struggles with which it is associated, overwhelmingly elected to fight for their causes irrespective of whether they were likely to succeed and independent of whether they had funding or other support. Coming from the margins and often suspicious and contemptuous of the mainstream in equal measure, they were an unlikely group to make the strategic shift from protest, creative disruption, and quiet labors of love toward strategies that could also facilitate “storming of the citadel” as opportunities for recognition and mainstreaming arose. Part of the way that evolution of strategy happened

Ironically, it was perhaps in part because we were in the era when economics was supposed to solve everything. What had been in the 1980s mere workshops, direct actions, and wish lists became in the 2000s mainstream conferences, international treaties, academic recognition, and university programs. The United Nations (UN) Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples Issues was launched and in 2007 achieved the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples after decades of grueling struggle. Lin Ostrom won a Nobel Prize for attention to the commons. Biocultural diversity and its associated values appeared regularly in the declarations of UN agencies and at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), especially in the second half of the decade. Soon we ran out of places to get it declared and had to turn to the harder task of getting things implemented.

was the engagement of social justice funders who knew something about building institutions and movements and who could resource strategic change. Again this is a story I know because I lived it. Indeed, it was while I was still at the Ford Foundation in 2001 that I learned about Terralingua from linguist Michael Krauss, for I was planning a program around Indigenous language revitalization. That was actually the first time I heard the term “biocultural diversity,” despite it having stalked me all my life, and a rather surprised Luisa Maffi received a fateful phone call. Then in 2002, as I was now involved with The Christensen Fund, the foundation’s Board agreed to make the concept fundamental to its new mission and so unleash new levels of support to the nascent field.

In the 2000s, a growing number of funders allied with the passionate struggles of place-based peoples taking on the Homogocene and Anthropocene. The rise in funding for biocultural work is thus connected to the increasing

Above: Women’s group in the Rasht Valley of Tajikistan cooking a traditional noodle dish. The connections between foodways, agro-biodiversity, and traditional agricultural landscapes not only powerfully illuminated the concept of biocultural diversity, but also linked the concept with the mushrooming food movements across the planet. Photo: Ken Wilson, 2015

recognition of Indigenous Peoples and the need to support them on their terms and through their own institutions and partnerships. It was in 1999 that International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) was founded in a gathering of just a dozen people; by 2009, IFIP had 51 members, and hundreds would attend its conferences. Although reliable statistics are hard to calculate, it is clear that foundation giving to Indigenous causes domestically and internationally probably increased 10-fold over that decade, especially around the intersection of environmental and Indigenous work. As funders, we did not cause this global shift, rooted as it was in the unfolding of the 1960s, but it would be hard to argue that we did not accelerate and deepen change. It is also clear that we helped close gaps and build relationships between the intellectuals and policy makers and the grassroots activists and community stewards. Bioculturalism was a powerful connecting concept.

Biocultural Diversity is, of course, not “at twenty.” It is as old as biological and cultural diversity, and is a concept fundamental to most if not all pre- (or non-) Cartesian cultures. But, at the same time, viewed as a formal idea, a mantra, or a rallying cry, it is clear that it is now very much “at twenty.” It is this age because, in order to launch, biocultural diversity needed the three decades from the explosive freedom of the 1960s

to build the foundations that could carry it—intellectual, cultural, political, and institutional. It is also clearly “at twenty” because of how it flourishes so beautiful, lithe, and invincible. Too insignificant as yet to have been fully tested by the powers that be, but old enough to be the determined and beguiling idea for the future. And the only optimistic way to prepare for the reorganization, restoration, and revitalization that will follow the collapse and crises that are bound to dominate the twenty-first century. As one of the many individuals apparently fated to throw my life into loving this golden child, and in the spirit of my retirement, I commend him and her to you with all my love. Take the dance.

Further Reading

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Left: “Preserving biodiversity and our cultural heritage”: the WAD Conservation Area in Papua New Guinea. While the Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas movement had diverse roots in the Indigenous, environmental justice, and community-based natural resource management areas, the concept of biocultural diversity added potency to that enormously important development over the last ten to fifteen years. Photo: Ken Wilson, 2015

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Terralingua
UNITY IN BIOCULTURAL DIVERSITY

Terralingua n 1: the languages of the Earth, the many voices of the world's diverse peoples. **2:** the language of the Earth, the voice of Mother Nature. **3:** an international non-governmental organization (NGO) that works to sustain the **biocultural diversity of life** – a precious heritage to be cherished, protected, and nurtured for generations to come. ¶ From Italian *terra* 'earth' and *lingua* 'language'

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"Stories are like ecosystems, with a community of meanings, interpretations, and systems interacting with their physical, cultural, and spiritual environments. As Indigenous Peoples have realized, all parts of the story matter."

– Hēmi Whaanga and Priscilla Wehi

