

Linkages Between Biodiversity and Cultural Diversity

UNESCO

The side event was preceded by the launch of the book “Fishers' Knowledge in Fisheries Science and Management”, recently published by UNESCO in collaboration with its Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) programme. Hosted by UNESCO and the Permanent Delegation of Canada, the launch opened with words of welcome from Prof. Walter Erdelen (Assistant Director-General for Natural Sciences, UNESCO) and Ms. Natasha Cayer, Charges d'affaires from the Permanent Delegation of Canada to UNESCO. Two of the volume's co-editors, Dr Barbara Neiss of Memorial University (Canada) and Mr Nigel Haggan of the University of British Columbia (Canada), were also present to say some words about how this volume, dedicated to the memory of Bob Johannes, a trail blazer in the traditional knowledge field, explores the application of fishers' ecological knowledge in fisheries management world-wide, in both indigenous and commercial contexts.

In his opening remarks, Prof. Walter Erdelen (Assistant Director-General for Natural Sciences, UNESCO) noted that cultural diversity and biological diversity are increasingly viewed as key elements in achieving sustainable development and the MDGs, including poverty eradication. He also recalled that the recent coming into force of two UNESCO Conventions that explicitly address the issue of cultural diversity - from the perspectives of intangible cultural heritage and the diversity of cultural expressions - necessarily poses the question of the ties that need to be established with the Convention on Biological Diversity. He also stated that if linkages between biological and cultural diversity are to become meaningful tools for policy and action in real-world contexts, a great deal remain to be done to rigorously identify and define avenues for research and action. Therefore, he invited the participants of the side event to address these challenges and contribute to this process.

Dr Peter Bridgewater (Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention) gave a presentation on the biological and cultural diversity in the Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) and future research directions. He highlighted that both diversities are meeting each other in many ways, not least through MEAs. He presented the example of the Ramsar convention on wetlands, pointing out that the relationship between people and wetland is so close that many wetlands would not exist without human intervention. Many of the Ramsar sites have archaeological, historical, cultural, religious, mythical or artistic/creative significance, thus the influence of cultural practices on biodiversity is particularly important. As for the future research, Dr Bridgewater mentioned the need to: examine the definition of cultural landscapes, link these definition to an analysis of the multi-functional nature of landscapes; examine the role of languages and the multidimensional nature of cultural practices affecting biodiversity; verify the hypothesis that current economic systems act as tools for social desegregation and do not adapt rapidly to new ecological and sociological knowledge, but rather mainly to new market knowledge.

After these general considerations, different case studies on linkages between biological and cultural were presented. Dr Barbara Neiss (Co-Director, SafetyNet and Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Memorial University, Canada) presented a case study focusing on fish stock collapse, restoration efforts, and the role of commercial fishers' knowledge. She highlighted that the fisheries restoration challenge is huge, that problems are complex and interwoven, and that conventional natural or social science is not enough to offer a solution. Consequently, as a complement to scientific knowledge, she highlighted commercial fishers' knowledge that includes fine-grained knowledge of fish ecology and behaviour, fishing, and fisheries policy and interactivity. This knowledge may be multi-generational, aggregated spatially and temporally, area specific, highly detailed, diverse and dynamic. It can serve to map seascapes & identify essential habitat. A recent experience from Canada was presented to illustrate how fishers fill data gaps, as well as design, implement and interpret research. It demonstrated that both fishers' and scientists' knowledge are diverse and dynamic, and influenced by multiple interests, the biography of the knower, and their points and means of contact with nature.

Case studies from UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves were presented by Dr Ana Persic (Assistant Programme Specialist, Man and the Biosphere Programme, UNESCO). In particular, they illustrated on-ground interlinkages between biodiversity and cultural diversity through: the use of Aboriginal traditional burning practices in the Uluru-Kata Tjuta Biosphere Reserve (Australia); promotion of the Mayangna language and associated knowledge for biodiversity management in Bosawas Biosphere Reserve (Nicaragua); contribution to ecosystem conservation through conservation of holly hills and sacred forests in Xishuangbanna Biosphere Reserve (China), enhancement of traditional rural material culture through sustainable use of biodiversity in Al-Shouf Biosphere Reserve (Lebanon), and development of a socio-cultural institution that serves as promoter of a flexible community-based natural resource management in the Kristianstads Vattenrike Biosphere Reserve (Sweden). Ms Persic also highlighted that biosphere reserves should be used as sites of excellence to further study biodiversity-cultural diversity interactions in the site-specific context, while the challenge for the future will be to integrate lessons learned from BR experience on biodiversity cultural diversity linkages in management and policy decisions dealing with sustainable development.

Mr. Riex Smeets (Chief, Section of Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO) presented on biological and cultural diversity in the Conventions for Intangible Heritage and for the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. He highlighted 'knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe' as one of the domains in which the intangible cultural heritage is manifested and recognized by UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage that entered into force in 2006. He noted that the role of UNESCO is to assist Member States in developing activities and programmes designed to safeguard (a) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe and (b) languages, and in particular endangered languages, as vehicles of intangible cultural heritage in general and traditional knowledge in particular. He also stressed, that the Convention makes explicit reference to communities, in particular

indigenous communities as bearers of traditional knowledge, which opens opportunities for the participation of communities that create, maintain and transmit such knowledge.

In the discussion that followed the participants noted that there is urgent need to better explore the links between biological and cultural diversity in both developing and developed countries and to better connect the findings with policies dealing not only with conservation of biodiversity and cultural diversity but also with sustainable development. The need for better connections between different conventions that deal with biodiversity and cultural diversity separately was also pointed out.

Finally, Dr Ahmed Djoghla (Executive Secretary of the CBD) confirmed that cultural diversity plays an important role in conservation of biological diversity and that a more systematic approach to study the links between biodiversity and cultural diversity is needed. He referred to some of the main themes at the interface between biological and cultural diversity, such as traditional and local knowledge and practices, language diversity, and belief and religious systems that need to be further addressed to promote the conservation of both diversities and their contribution to sustainable development.

Both Mr Djoghla and Mr Erdelen supported the idea of strengthening the collaboration between CBD and UNESCO in exploring the links between cultural and biological diversities for the benefit of both environment and human populations.