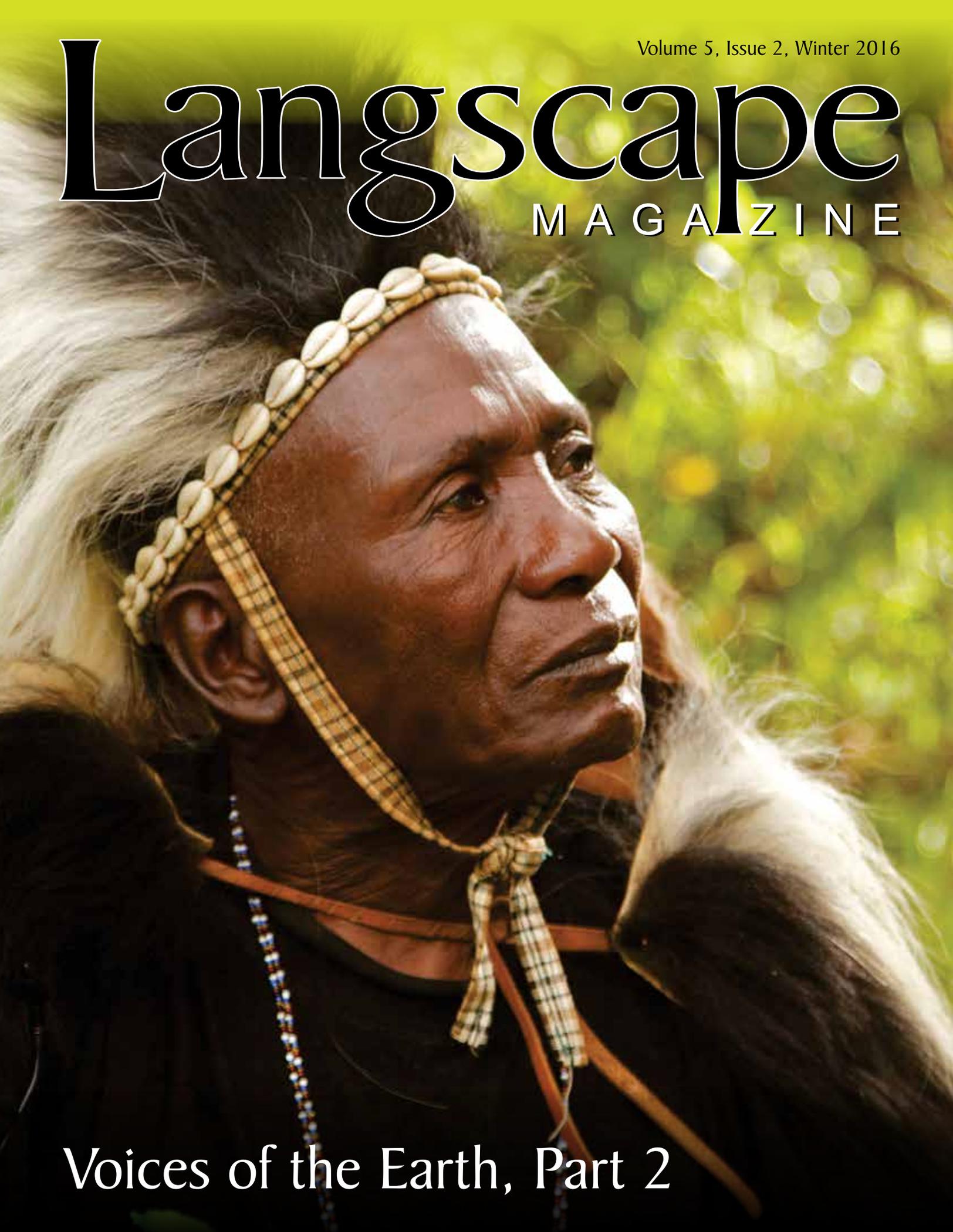


Volume 5, Issue 2, Winter 2016

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

Terralingua thanks the Logan and Kalliopeia Foundations for their generous support.

Editor: Luisa Maffi

Editorial Assistants: Christine Arpita,
Coreen Boucher

Web Developer: Phil Rees

Graphic Design: Imagine That Graphics

Learn about Terralingua www.terralingua.org

Receive Langscape Magazine by subscribing or
by purchasing single copies.

Details at: www.terralinguaubuntu.org

Learn about Langscape Magazine
www.terralinguaubuntu.org/langscape/home.htm

ISSN 2371-3291 (print)

ISSN 2371-3305 (digital)

© Terralingua 2016

**Langscape Magazine is a
Terralingua Publication**



Giving Nature a

Critical Voice

A NEW APPROACH TO NATURE CONSERVATION?

In 2014, Nature found her voice. Struggling against deforestation, gasping for air, and fed up with the carelessness of her tenants, Nature spoke up. No more passive-aggressive notes on the fridge; no more pleas imploring care and consideration. Nature put her foot down and reminded humans that she doesn't need us, but we need her. We need nature—not just as a metaphorical, benevolent protector, but in order to sustain us, to provide oxygen, clean water, shelter, and more. In a motherly tone, she scolds and gently chides us for our own good: we (humans) are acting like petulant little children who need to stop making excuses and behaving in detrimental ways to our surroundings.

Nature acquired this newly found expression through Conservation International's (CI) campaign "Nature Is Speaking," which takes a unique and bold approach to addressing environmental destruction

in hopes of transforming complacent perspectives of nature and getting humans to recognize a new "voice" in conservation decisions. In my view, however, the campaign misses its target, and instead further perpetuates the lack of communication between nature and humanity. Rather than fostering a symbiotic relationship, this campaign functions to mollify human observers about pressing environmental issues. The new "voice" of nature is just human appropriation.

Through visually appealing imagery along with recognizable celebrity voice-overs, the "Nature Is Speaking" campaign goads humans to recognize the need to listen to nature, even if we do not like what she is saying. Currently consisting of twelve videos, each featuring a different celebrity voice and element of nature, the videos deliver a harsh criticism of humanity. Ostensibly, these videos present a compelling case through beautiful landscape images, witty word play (speaking as "Mountain," Lee Pace declares: "*There is one thing I see clearly: the cliff you're on and the rocks below*"), and celebrity-

Below: Rocky Mountain Flatirons, Colorado.
Photo: Katherine D. Lind, 2016



quiz-style allusions (for example, *Sweet Home Alabama* star Reese Witherspoon voices the video “Home”). Yet, the soothing, bucolic imagery is juxtaposed to the harsh tones and expressions in the voice-over, creating a dissonance with the supposedly harmonic imagery. Perhaps the contrast between imagery and voice-over is designed to represent the discord generated by our own conflicting words and actions. While humans claim to be environmentally conscious, they simultaneously engage in behaviors that are detrimental to surrounding ecosystems.

“We need nature—not just as a metaphorical, benevolent protector, but in order to sustain us, to provide oxygen, clean water, shelter, and more.”

As CI is a well-established conservation organization, its campaign needs to be critically evaluated for its ability to generate awareness for other non-human “voices” in the natural world and to develop an interrelationship between humans and nature. Exploring three main components of the campaign—the celebrity voice-overs, the visuals, and the tagline—leads me to conclude that “Nature Is Speaking” fails in its effort to re-orient human perspectives toward a non-anthropocentric worldview.

The Voices

Humans are called upon to pay attention and listen when Nature speaks—embodied by a human voice. Mother Nature’s voice is startling for its terse derision, adopting a tone that is counter to general portrayals of

Top: View from Hickory Ridge Fire Tower
in Hoosier National Forest, Indiana.
Photo: Katherine D. Lind, 2013

Center & Bottom: Griffy Lake, Indiana.
Photo: Katherine D. Lind, 2014

Gaia as a benevolent, if naïve, provider. In the video “Mother Nature,” Julia Roberts’s voice-over makes no qualms about it: “*I have fed species greater than you and I have starved species greater than you.*” While she threatens, Kevin Spacey as “The Rainforest” sarcastically quips: “*Humans, making air. That’ll be fun to watch.*” Nature would have us remember that she is a force to be reckoned with, rather than trampled and taken for granted. Meanwhile, some voices adopt a different approach. Edward Norton, voicing “The Soil,” laments: “*You treat me like dirt... I am broken, aching, overused, sick. Because of you.*”

It is all too easy to get caught up in the voices we recognize, asking questions inconsequential to the campaign. For instance: Can we separate Kevin Spacey’s voice as “The Rainforest” from his role as Frank Underwood in *House of Cards*? Why did they pick Penelope Cruz for “Water” and not the spokesperson for Water.org, Matt Damon? Plus, when you think of iconic celebrity voices, you realize that *March of the Penguins* narrator Morgan Freeman is missing. These questions illustrate the distraction of celebrity voice-overs, especially considering that CI’s goal in this campaign was to give nature a voice that recognizes nonhuman–human interactions.

Describing the campaign in 2015, CI’s Kristen Walker Painemilla explains: “*The Indigenous and local communities around the world are among the best stewards of the environment precisely because they know their well-being and their culture depend on healthy ecosystems. We need to rekindle this wisdom worldwide. So we at Conservation International decided now was time to give nature a voice.*” Yet, if “giving nature a voice” and recognizing the stewardship of “Indigenous and local communities around the world” were indeed the goals of this campaign, it is questionable why mostly white, Western culture celebrities were selected to embody the multiple voices of nature—ocean, forests, farmland, and so on.

The incorporation of celebrities like Harrison Ford, Liam Neeson, and Robert Redford suggests that this campaign is directed to an audience that is mostly steeped in Western culture. The inclusion of Penelope

Cruz, Joan Chen, and Lupita Nyong’o brings in more diversity, but they all speak English—which may suggest that the target audience for this campaign is an English-speaking population familiar with these stars. This may be an audience already capable of recognizing the necessity of modifying behaviors that are detrimental to the environment. Therefore, these videos may serve more to generate publicity for celebrities than to develop a legitimate plan of action to address the depletion of nature.

“While humans claim to be environmentally conscious, they simultaneously engage in behaviors that are detrimental to surrounding ecosystems.”

The Visuals

In an attempt to prioritize Nature, these videos convey sweeping, cinematic landscapes that elicit aesthetic appreciation but fail to demonstrate signs of suffering and of environmental crisis. For the most part, the videos render humans invisible, thereby visually distancing their damage to the environment. Instead, each video features Nature’s perspective, illustrating what “Home” looks like or what “Sky” or “Soil” encompass. Although each video enumerates problems caused by humans, there is very little visual evidence of human destruction. In “Rainforest,” there is the sound effect of a chainsaw accompanying an image of a tree falling in the forest. “The Sky” offers a few different images of smog-congested city skylines as well as a scene of a house submerged by flooding. Yet, among all of these references to human activities, there is not a single image of a human in any of these videos.

This absence detracts from the conservation message by failing to adequately convey humans as the cause of environmental crisis. Instead, the breathtaking imagery depicted in these videos seems more akin to an episode of *Planet Earth*, functioning to produce a calming effect that counters



the derisive tone in the voice-overs. Perhaps, if the visuals depicted Indigenous tribes interacting with their environment or images of sustainable ways of harvesting natural resources, this campaign might productively capture our imaginations regarding humans' interrelationship with nature. Images of ecological destruction may not elicit the same push for conservation as they did in the 1970s, but by leaving such imagery out, the campaign harkens back to a more pastoral aesthetic rather than presenting a radical change of focus. Nature may be speaking, but her concerns are going unnoticed because of the captivating beauty depicted instead.

Above: Boulder Creek, Colorado.
Photo: Katherine D. Lind, 2016

The Tagline

Although it is meant to be provocative, the tagline is misleading and ultimately counterproductive. Instead of viewing nature as impotent and unassuming, the “Nature Is Speaking” campaign adopts the uncompromising stance that “Nature doesn’t need humans. Humans need nature.” This disaffected tagline is meant to function to shake up humans’ perceptions of nature. CI probably figures that a no-nonsense approach will reach more people, or at least get those who are immune to cute or melodramatic conservation messages to share these videos with their friends. Yet, the claim that “Nature doesn’t need humans. Humans need nature” is both provocative because it is an unconventional claim for conservation groups, and detrimental because it is factually wrong.

It is not true that nature does not need humans. Nature does need humans to care. As Ian Somerhalder speaking for the “Coral Reef” implores, nature needs humans to stop poisoning her, or otherwise she will die. But rather than repeat the exhausted plea from environmental campaigns about saving the earth, CI proffers a misconstrued claim that after a long time, nature will recover from human interference. Joan Chen, “The Sky,” explains: *“But in the end I’ll be fine. Give me a few thousand years. I have weathered trauma before.”* Several videos claim that after a great deal of time, nature will recover from human interference. Due to the large amount of time needed for regeneration, it is hard to tell whether these statements convey a genuine belief that humans are irrelevant or are meant to be ironic statements that acknowledge mutual fate.

Again, while it may be compelling for “Nature” to claim such independence, the stark truth about ecological collapse is what propels most conservation advocacy. If humans continue to pollute, deforest, and over-tax natural resources, there will be drastic consequences—among them the extinction of plants and animals and an inability for the natural world to sustain humanity.

Reclaiming Voice

Like it or not, humans and nature are woven in a web of interconnections that sustain each other and make us codependent. This codependence can be difficult to convey when one side is not recognized by the other to have the capability to speak out. If considered “voiceless” (in the sense of both “lacking a voice” and “lacking the ability to advocate for herself”), nature not only goes unrecognized by humans but also is seen as inferior because of her inability to express herself in human terms.

One interpretation of the “Nature Is Speaking” videos is that Nature is attempting to find her voice and take a stand, to advocate for herself. According to communication scholar Eric King Watts, in recent years, “Voice has come to mean the sound of the dispossessed.” That is, the oppressed are finding ways to speak out. Lacking the defiant rejection of

humans explored by other videos, the “Coral Reef” and “Soil” videos find a voice by coming from a position of dispossession. The protagonists express concern for their survival while still fighting back and verbally rebuking humans for being neglectful and destructive, thereby advocating for self-preservation. Aspects of nature that are acutely feeling the effects of global warming and other human interference—the coasts, the oceans, and the coral reef, for example—may be the first to experience dispossession. Thus the “Coral Reef” and “Soil” videos highlight the fact that Nature *does* depend upon humans.

“The ‘Nature Is Speaking’ campaign misses its target, and instead further perpetuates the lack of communication between nature and humanity. Rather than fostering a symbiotic relationship, this campaign functions to mollify human observers about pressing environmental issues.”

Another important consideration for this campaign is the willingness of humans to truly listen to the voices of nature. According to bioacoustics researcher, Chris Clark, “The whole world is singing. Clicking, grinding, whistling, and thumping.” Yet, Clark laments, humans have “stopped listening” to this singing world, indicating an unwillingness to interpret the sounds of nature and perhaps an ignorance about nature. Having largely lost the ability to listen to nature, Western culture has grown unaware of the natural world and the ways humans and nature intertwine. “Nature Is Speaking” loses sight of its original goal to rekindle the worldwide wisdom of Indigenous cultures and to give voice to the voiceless nature, as Painemilla suggested.

Instead of fostering a more sustaining interconnectivity between nature and humans, this campaign showcases predominantly unblemished landscape imagery, a problematic incorporation of celebrity voices, and a faulty tagline, all of which



obfuscate the urgent situation. Not only is this an unfortunate, if likely unintended, consequence for this campaign, but it is also detrimental to conservation advocacy seeking to attract new voices and to renew attention to environmental issues. Viewers of “Nature Is Speaking” will perhaps watch and move on, or maybe they will be entertained but may not critically engage the counterproductive claim that “Nature doesn’t need people.” In this time of peril, Nature doesn’t need this ill-conceived idea.

CI’s “Nature Is Speaking” videos can be found at <http://www.conservation.org/nature-is-speaking/Pages/default.aspx>

Above: Frozen river in Golden, Colorado.
Photo: Katherine D. Lind, 2013

Further Reading

Painemilla, K. W. (n.d.). Nature is speaking: Conservation International’s campaign to spread nature’s message. *Origin Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.originmagazine.com/2015/04/23/nature-is-speaking-conservation-internationals-campaign-to-spread-natures-message/>

Peeples, J., & Depoe, S. (2014). *Voice and environmental communication*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Racing Extinction. (2015, November 27). In *Facebook*. Retrieved March 14, 2016, from <https://www.facebook.com/racingextinction/videos/1040394716054641/>

Watts, E. K. (May 2001). ‘Voice’ and ‘voicelessness’ in rhetorical studies. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 87(2), 179–196.

· nature · language · culture ·

Langscape

MAGAZINE

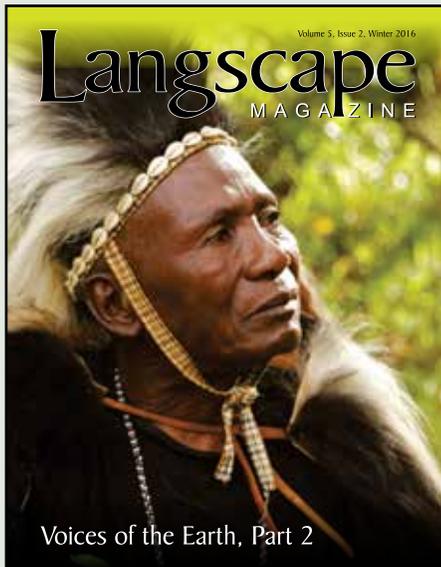
LANGSCAPE MAGAZINE VOLUME 6, ISSUE 1, SUMMER 2017

CALL FOR ABSTRACT SUBMISSIONS COMING SOON

Sign up for Terralingua's enews and receive
the call for submissions this winter.

www.terralinguaubuntu.org/enews

Questions? Contact Us through our website Or email langscape@terralingua.org



KEEP THE PRESSES ROLLING!

LANGSCAPE MAGAZINE
is an entirely not-for-profit publication and is made
possible by your subscriptions as well as by your
generous donations to Terralingua.

Subscribe to Langscape Magazine

www.terralinguaubuntu.org/subscribe

Or Donate to Support Langscape Magazine

www.terralinguaubuntu.org/donate

Or Sponsor an Issue!

www.terralinguaubuntu.org/Langscape/langscape-sponsorship

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'

www.terralingua.org

"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

