

## Talking to the clouds and listening to the trees

Posted on June 17, 2010 |  1 Comments

**By David Braun**

**Tofino, Canada**--Sometimes it really is a case of not being able to see the woods for the trees. Or is it the other way round?

I attended recently a congress of the [International Society of Ethnobiology](#), in Tofino, Canada--guest of The Christensen Fund, a Canada-based charity that supports stewards of cultural and biological diversity.

Getting there is a bit of an adventure, even in this age of rapid mechanized transport. It involves a couple of flights, a ferry, and a long drive on a winding road through the Vancouver Island Ranges.

There's plenty of time for a pilgrim to admire the magnificent bays and inlets, the snow-capped peaks, and the ancient temperate rain forests, some of them containing cedars that were already many centuries old when the first European explorers first saw them hundreds of years ago. Yet the seeds of these awesome trees sprouted when First Nations like [Nuu-chah-nulth](#) had been on the island for millennia already.

There's plenty of time to think on such a journey--and something on my mind a lot was our relationship to such an ecosystem of ancient trees and peoples.

Biocultural diversity is a concept that had not meant too much to me before I traveled to Tofino. But the more I understood and thought about it the more sense it seemed to make. In many ways it's intuitive, because all the components of the concept are right in front of us, like the trees in the woods.

At the conference I met Luisa Maffi, linguist and anthropologist and one of the founders of the field of biocultural diversity. She is co-founder and director of the international nonprofit [Terralingua](#) and is based in British Columbia, Canada. She is also co-author of *Biocultural Diversity Conservation: A Global Sourcebook*.

I read the book on the flights into Vancouver, which is why I had plenty to think about while driving through the mountains and along the cedar-lined Pacific Rim Highway to Tofino.

This video is of Luisa Maffi explaining what biocultural diversity is all about, and why she wrote the book.

My understanding of the theory of biocultural diversity is that humans and nature are one. Human diversity, including language, was shaped by the environment--and the environment was shaped in turn by humans. For thousands of years this took place in specific locations, sometimes in small and relatively isolated pockets.

Researchers have found that for the most part cultural diversity and biological diversity tend to mirror one another. Places with high biodiversity generally also have the richest cultural diversity; Locations that have the greatest range of plants and animals also have the richest variety of languages and cultures.

This is why the advocates of the concept of biocultural diversity say it is important to link conservation of biological diversity to preservation of languages and cultural diversity.

Landscapes and human cultures are entwined, each shaping the other in ecosystems that are in dynamic equilibrium, creating a resilient system that is capable of withstanding external and internal stresses/changes, without losing its functionality. Degrade one and the other suffers--or at least an ecosystem that evolved over many thousands of years unravels with consequences we don't even begin to comprehend.

As the global human population reaches 7,000,000,000 it is not too late to do some profound and new thinking about who we are and where we are going. We originated on Earth and most likely we will perish here. How we manage our species going forward will depend entirely on how we come to terms with the planet that supports us.

For the half of the world's seven billion humans that live in urban areas the connection between people and nature may be out of sight and mind--but it should never be forgotten. Every person in a city needs the lifelines that the Earth provides: air, water, food.

Cities draw massively on nature, with sometimes devastating effect. But in our urban comfort we don't see how forests fall, oceans are trawled empty, rivers run dry in the process of satiating the needs of billions of appetites. If we did see those consequences we might be more easily persuaded to change our reckless ways.

Out on Vancouver Island and in many other parts of the world there are still many people who know how to use nature in a respectful and reciprocal way, where there is no "externality" and everything is one, as our Nuu-chah-nulth hosts told us. But imagine what they feel when they see entire ecosystems collapse because of the appetites of billions of people over the horizon.

It's not only a matter of illegal logging and poaching or the impact of the dominant economic and cultural system on their own communities, youth, languages, and culture. There's also the pervasive impact of climate change, ocean acidification, and destruction of ancient animal migrations. Such things have an impact on every remote corner of Earth, and even tribes who choose to be "uncontacted" in the Amazon rain forest cannot escape all of them.

There is much we can learn from indigenous people about how to relate to the world in a respectful and reciprocal way, as if it were our true home that gave us shelter and food and made our survival possible. We may even depend on this knowledge to show us what to do if (many would say when) the urban way of life collapses. How many of us know how to gather and hunt for our food? What plants to use for medicine? How to keep warm without a power supply? Or, as my host Gleb Raygorodetsky, of The Christensen Fund, puts it, "how to talk to clouds and listen to trees"?

In the long story of human development it is only relatively recently that all humans were part of indigenous cultures, adapted to the environment that supported them. We shouldn't assume that the migration to big cities is an irreversible march to progress. We may need to return to our roots--if we can find them.

And as much as we need the planet's lifelines to sustain ourselves, Earth needs us, especially now, in times of great change. Earth needs the greatest diversity of cultures and all ancient indigenous knowledge, including concepts unique to individual languages, to help sustain the diversity of ecosystems on which all life depends.

We dare not risk complete homogenization into a globalized urban culture, without regard for our traditional stewardship of the planet.

We may need to reassess the way we view and interact with the world. Clearly, there are way too many things breaking down in ecosystems that took millions of years to evolve.

Biocultural diversity conservation--the preservation and respect of all human diversity within the diversity of the rest of life on Earth may be a good place to find solutions.

**Additional information:**

[\*Biocultural Diversity Conservation: A Global Source Book\*](#)

[Bio-Cultural Diversity \(IUCN website\)](#)

[Linguistic, Cultural, and Biological Diversity \(Luisa Maffi in \*The Annual Review of Anthropology\*\)](#)

[Language: A Resource for Nature \(Luisa Maffi in \*The UNESCO Journal on the Environment and National Resources Research\*\)](#)

[Biocultural Diversity and Sustainability \(Luisa Maffi in \*The Sage Handbook of Environment and Society\*\)](#)

[Backing the stewards of cultural and biological diversity \(The Christensen Fund\)](#)