

Living Heritage and Climate Change: Interconnections & Possibilities

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Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is manifested in our oral traditions, art and craftsmanship, rituals and sports, traditional knowledge of biosphere, natural resource use and management. Unfortunately, just as we have seen denial in the past in accepting the realities of climate change, ICH is still missing in the mainstream dialogue and discourse on actions to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Perhaps this culture-nature divide is a symptom of larger processes which have put us in an unsustainable path. The following sections explore the ways in which climate change is affecting our intangible cultural heritage and the role of heritage professionals in bridging the gap between climate change and heritage conservation and safeguarding.

While working with the indigenous communities, we find how closely nature is connected to their way of life. I am from the eastern India. I have been working with the forest communities in Jangal Mahal or the land of the forests in eastern plateaus and in the Sundarbans. Kurmi, Orao, Munda, Santhal are some of the Adivasis or indigenous communities living in these forests and they have a very sustainable relationship with their living environment. They express their reverence and gratitude to nature in their songs.

*“Johar Johar Marangburu
Duniyak Tahara Guru
Sirjon Duniya Tahar
Liha Hiya Khulesa Nehar”*

*“Marangburu, the Big Hill,
You are the ancient teacher of this forest.
You are the creator of this world.
We give you all our love and affection from the bottom of our heart.
We indigenous people of this land,
All of us seek your blessing.
We worship you with flowers and garlands.”*

In this song they are praying to Marangburu or the Big hill who they believe is the Supreme Teacher.

We know about the climate change impacts like rising temperatures and sea-level, acidification of the oceans, extreme precipitation, flooding, coastal erosion, drought, desertification, wildfires and their effects on biodiversity and eco systems. Climate change is also disrupting the ICH eco-system. It is affecting our food production, food safety, and supply chain and resulting in water scarcity. Environmental degradation is leading to the loss of traditional livelihoods. Agriculture and pisciculture are affected by the loss of biodiversity and the changing weather conditions. Plant and animal species are shifting with change in climate. For some practices, climate change is posing the challenge of loss of materials. All across the world people make basketry and mats with natural fibre. From the Maoris in the islands of New Zealand to the Dumbara mat makers of Sri Lanka, we hear of challenges in access to raw material.



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The lower hills of the Himalayas were known for the orange orchards. Rising temperature is shifting orange cultivation to higher altitude. Communities are facing new challenges with biome changes like increased locust invasion. Our greatest challenge is the limited human ability to anticipate the ecological and sociological effects of ongoing environmental changes. The COVID-19 pandemic has given us a feel of the challenges we face with limited human knowledge to cope with Anthropocene impact on environment. With displacement and forced migration, customs and cultural practices, languages and traditional skills are at a risk of disappearing. In a globalised world we are in the ages of Supra-diversity, where culture travels across continents as people migrate for education, and employment opportunities.

Small island communities have already started facing the loss of cultural continuity where islanders disperse and traditional social systems are disrupted. Coastal communities are already threatened. Boatmen in the Sundarbans used to sing Bhatiyali songs on nature and rivers. Today there are only a handful of Bhatiyali singers. There is loss of traditional knowledge on predicting the weather conditions or species movement or practices like vernacular architecture mitigating risks of disasters. Thus we see that climate change, be it the slow onset processes or the sudden calamities, threatening the sustainability of ICH. Natural spaces and cultural sites, necessary for expressing ICH are being lost or destroyed. Traditional festivals and cultural exchanges are no longer happening. Loss of ICH practices and cultural spaces where people met and interacted, are disrupting the social anchors which make communities cohesive and resilient. There is increased threat of conflict and breakdown of community-institutions. These intangible dimensions of impacts of climate change, the gender dimensions, the non-economic losses pertaining to the loss of cultural heritage, and the rights pertinent to local communities need to be assessed and documented by heritage professionals.

Integrating traditional knowledge in nature conservation is the key to averting, reducing and addressing economic as well as the non-economic losses resulting from climate change. The knowledge of local communities is vital for developing effective nature based solution to protect, manage, and restore natural and modified ecosystems. The Conference of Parties (COP 26) has recognised the need to strengthen knowledge, technologies, practices and efforts of local communities and indigenous peoples related to addressing and responding to climate change. Environmentalists are using nature-based solutions to protect, sustainably manage and restore natural and modified ecosystems. Indigenous and local communities must be included in community based social ecological monitoring and climate change hazard impact assessment to leverage their traditional knowledge.

The Sundarbans is the worlds' largest mangrove delta and a region extremely affected by climate change. Mangroves provide a natural defence against storm surges, coastal erosion, and coastal flooding. There are failure stories of mangroves being planted and not surviving. During the re-introduction and re-establishment of assemblages of native mangrove species to sites to develop the mangrove ecosystems, community was not consulted and inappropriate species were planted. As a result, the efforts to rebuild the mangrove eco-systems failed. Climate change impact assessment tools are now mandated to consult the communities to develop understanding on local biodiversity and technology traditionally used. Communities living in the Sundarbans know how to trace honeycombs in dense forests from the drone of the bees. They know which are the breeding seasons when fishing is avoidable and do not fish in the breeding areas of the river. They understand from

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the tidal flow the direction of cyclone. Harnessing such local knowledge systems, traditional early warning systems and working with communities to make micro plans for climate action will support improving conservation. Climate research and policy platforms need to integrate cultural heritage - traditional knowledge systems, bio-cultural practices, food adaptations, tools and governance mechanisms on biodiversity, managing landscapes and seascapes. The operational directives of UNESCO 2003 [Convention on Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) highlights the need for scientific studies and research with communities and ensuring the viability of diverse traditional knowledge and practices related to nature, in order to respond to climate change challenges at the local, national, and international levels. The Kalbelias are the nomadic communities of the Thar deserts. Their songs and dances are inscribed in the UNESCO Representative list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity. They have rich knowledge of traditional medicines and desert biodiversity. Frameworks for ethical engagement of indigenous knowledge holders and ethical use of local and indigenous knowledge within the context of climate change policy and action should be established. Traditional knowledge of local community in managing natural resources and community-based decision-making models should be integrated in planning mitigation strategies and innovating models for resilience and adaptation. ICH is indeed an asset for sustainable development. New innovations can effectively use the rich wealth of traditional knowledge and practices as tools for climate action. Stilt houses, can be adapted for flood prone, rural areas to cope with the hazard. Traditional knowledge of local community in managing natural resources and community-based decision-making models should be integrated in planning mitigation strategies and innovating models for resilience and adaptation.

ICH is a powerful tool for mobilising change. In COP 26, art and culture was used in varied ways for influencing change of attitudes and strengthening advocacy for action. Globally we all need to adopt a different way of living and working for adaptation and mitigation. This communication needs to reach everyone. The aspirations for a good life should pivot on sustainability. Minimalism, slow food, slow fashion, lowering energy use, minimising footprint - how can these become the Mantra of our collective life? Cultural narratives have great power to enhance understanding within diverse audiences about climate change and the urgency of climate action. ICH is the wellspring of creativity embedded amongst us. Every community has tradition of social communiques - through art and songs, storytelling and satirical drama. Worldwide let us work with the communities to integrate local cultural belief system and leverage heritage values, into risk communication and mitigation measures. In the Sundarbans, communities worship the Bonbibi, meaning the lady of the forest, as the protector of the people and the forest inhabitants. The story of popular folk drama, Bonbibir Pala, centres around a little boy who is protected by Bonbibi from tiger attack. The play shares on the importance of protecting the natural resources. Since generations, communities in these islands pray to Bonbibi before entering the forest. The story has sensitised them into managing the common resources without conflict. The drama troupes nowadays have created productions on contemporary issues ranging from man animal conflict, impact of climate change, to stopping animal and human trafficking. Investment is needed, for capacity building of tradition bearers to work with the communities, to enhance understanding about climate change, and need for action. The dialogue for adapting to climate change needs to overcome the barriers of a few languages in which documents are published. Use of ICH will create the much needed buzz.

ICH can play an enormous role in strengthening climate science education and improving climate literacy. How can we give young people opportunities to learn about values and

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knowledge embedded and transmitted through in ICH practices? Educational and cultural institutions, museums can play a key role in inspiring young people to work for development of heritage information for effective policies as a field of practice. By learning about values and knowledge embedded in ICH, creativity of young people may be unleashed for imagining possible futures.

The potential of using ICH for developing alternative livelihoods, generating income, promoting entrepreneurship and strengthening local organisations is not adequately tapped. Nature based solutions for eco system conservation and restoration are promoting agro-biodiversity and agro-ecological productions. Integrating traditional knowledge and skills is leading to development of green and resilient livelihoods. Sola or pith is a reed which grows in the riverine areas of Gangetic Bengal in eastern India. The pith helmet used to be popular in Europe in the early 20th century. The communities traditionally made ritualistic products and festive decorations. Capacity building in developing contemporary products supported the women collectives with income opportunities when two successive super cyclones and the pandemic had created a difficult situation disrupting agriculture and livelihood. Community led cultural tourism based on ICH and eco-museums support green tourism, builds resilience, and engages young people in safeguarding and conservation. Responsible and sustainable cultural tourism based on ICH builds on local resources, empowers the communities and has low footprint. Community museums or eco-museums sharing about ICH and cultural landscape can become powerful conduits of awareness and advocacy for adapting and mitigating climate change impacts.

The Culture-Nature Journey (CNJ) is an informal space for collaboration between ICOMOS, IUCN and a range of partner organisations including ICCROM, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, and the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity and others. Experts, researchers, practitioners and policy makers are working to create new knowledge and methods to address problems arising from the embedded separation of nature and culture in conservation processes. In 2016 IUCN World Conservation Congress, Culture-Nature Journey participants shared on the interconnected nature of natural and cultural heritage and committed to 'Mālama Honua – to care for our island Earth'. In 2017, the ICOMOS General Assembly at Delhi drew up the statement of commitment 'Yatra aur Tammanah'. The doctrine on Yatra and Tamanna speaks about Kuleana - our role as custodians, responsible caring and stewardship of our land and seas, our responsibilities and our rights. As heritage professionals let us use available platforms to discuss, document and promote the role of intangible cultural heritage in improving conservation outcomes, and work towards sustainability objectives.

I learned in a conference about the Island Ark Project where digital technologies are being used to safeguard ICH of the islands of Asia Pacific and bridge the gap between the migrants and their home communities. We need to ensure funding and technology support for enabling access to traditional knowledge while respecting customary practices governing access to specific aspects. Participatory ethno-ecological research, training and exchanging experiences, access to financing mechanisms for documenting ICH at risk, ethical engagement and use of ICH are some of the key areas of action. Appropriate legal, technical, administrative and financial measures are needed to identify, enhance and promote effective systems and practices, conserve and protect natural spaces whose existence is necessary for expressing the intangible cultural heritage. We have a long road ahead and let us work together.