

Who are the indigenous peoples of the world?

Dictionaries define indigenous as "originating in a particular region or country; native; innate; inherent; natural." The word dates back to the 17th century Latin base *indigena*, meaning native or original inhabitant.

The word indigenous has many meanings. In every region of the world, many different cultural groups live together and interact, but not all of these groups are considered indigenous, or native, to their particular geographic area. In fact, it is those groups who claim a shared sense of identity who are internationally recognized as "indigenous peoples."



Indigenous peoples number over 300 million and represent approximately 4 percent of the world's population. Although they are united by many common experiences, including histories of being excluded from majority society and struggling for cultural survival, indigenous peoples are each unique and distinct.

Indigenous peoples have been working with the United Nations to identify and claim their collective rights for decades. August 9, the *International Day of the World's Indigenous People*, commemorates the first meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1982.

Indigenous Knowledge

With long histories of living in close relationship with the natural world, many indigenous peoples have developed extensive knowledge of the ecosystems in which they live. This knowledge of ecology and natural resource management is not only culturally valuable, it also has economic value in today's world.

For example, many traditional secrets await discovery with the medicinal plants used by the indigenous peoples of the rainforest tribes. So alluring are the mysteries of indigenous medical knowledge that over 100 pharmaceutical companies and even the U.S. government are currently funding projects studying the indigenous plant knowledge and the specific plants used by native shamans and healers. Long dismissed or ignored by science, indigenous peoples' plant knowledge is now thought by many to be a new resource in South America.



If indigenous knowledge is considered to be as valuable as gold, what kind of treatment will indigenous peoples face?

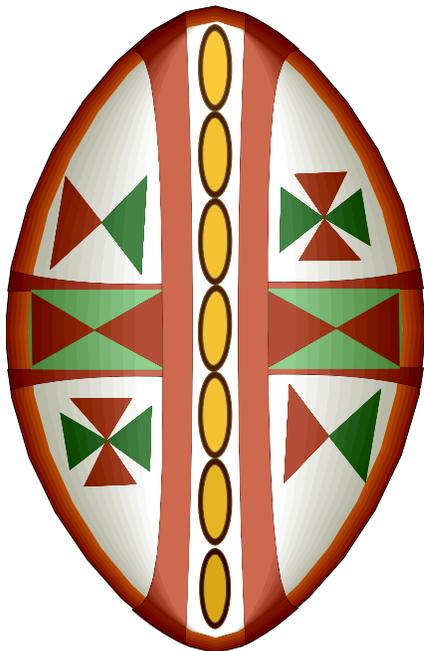
How will pharmaceutical companies "harvest" the knowledge held in the minds of indigenous peoples? Will indigenous peoples be compensated for sharing their knowledge?

As governments and private industries reach further into the historic and sacred territories of indigenous peoples, these concerns become very important. Indigenous peoples are now struggling for intellectual property rights to guarantee that their knowledge and expertise is not exploited in the future.

To honour and cultivate indigenous knowledge and ways of learning, some indigenous peoples have formed alternative educational programs and schools. Throughout colonial periods and into the present, schooling for indigenous children has often denied their unique languages and cultures. Instead of helping children grow and learn, non-indigenous educational systems were often based on policies of assimilation. To prevent this damaging process in the future and to support the indigenous knowledge of young people, educators are forming alternative schools, such as the Maori schools of New Zealand. For further details on Maori schools, refer to the following page of the UN Cyber School Bus website:
<www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/indigenous/explore_focus.asp>

Source:

United Nations, Cyber School Bus, Indigenous Peoples,
<www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/indigenous/identify_2.asp>
(Select "Where are the Indigenous Peoples?" to open a world map showing locations.)



Examples of Indigenous Peoples

Africa

- **Kung San** of the Kalahari Desert (Botswana, Angola, Namibia)
- **Berbers** of Morocco
- **Hadzabe** of Tanzania
- **Mbuti** (Pygmies) of Zaire
- **Maasai** in East Africa
- **Bantu** and other ethnic minorities in Somalia
- **Ogoni** in Nigeria
- **Tuareg** of Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso
- **Sahrawi** of the Western Sahara

Asia

- **Ainu** of Japan
- **Assyrians** of the Middle East (Aramaic-speaking Christians)
- **Kazakhs, Mongols, Tajik, Tibetans, Ugyur, and Eurasian Nomads** of Kazakhstan, eastern Russia, and China
- **Miao and Hmong** of southern China, Laos, and Thailand
- **Shan and Karen** of Burma /Myanmar
- **Chakma** of Pakistan
- **Kurds** of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, and parts of the former Soviet Union



Australasia

- **Maori** of New Zealand
- **Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders** of Australia

Europe and the Americas

- **Saami** of Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark
- **Inuit and Aleutians** of Canada and circumpolar Europe
- **First Nations and Métis** of Canada
- **American Indians** of US
- **Mayans** of Guatemala and Mexico
- **Aymaras** of Bolivia and other Indians of South America

