

Introduction to Indigenous People

Indigenous people is defined as having a set of specific rights based on their historical ties to a particular territory, and their cultural or historical distinctiveness from other populations that are often politically dominant

There are more than 300 million indigenous people, in virtually every region of the world, including the Sámi peoples of Scandinavia, the Nenets in Russia, the Maya of Guatemala, numerous tribal groups in the Amazonian rainforest, the Dalits in the mountains of Southern India, the San and Kwei of Southern Africa, Aboriginal people in Australia, and, of course the hundreds of Indigenous Peoples in Mexico, Central and South America, as well as in North America.

Despite the enormous diversity that exists among indigenous people across the globe they share some common values derived in part from an understanding that their lives are part of and inseparable from the natural world.

Onondaga Faith Keeper Oren Lyons once said, “Our knowledge is profound and comes from living in one place for untold generations. It comes from watching the sun rise in the east and set in the west from the same place over great sections of time. We are as familiar with the lands, rivers, and great seas that surround us as we are with the faces of our mothers. Indeed, we call the earth Etenoha, our mother from whence all life springs.”

When contemplating the contemporary challenges and problems faced by indigenous people worldwide, it is important to remember that the roots of many social, economic, and political problems can be found in colonial policies, and these policies continue today across the globe. The most basic rights of indigenous people are disregarded, and they are subjected to a series of policies designed to dispossess them of their land and resources and assimilate them into society and culture. Too often, policies result in poverty, high infant mortality, rampant unemployment, and substance abuse, with all its attendant problems.