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Indigenous Stewardship of Ancestral Lands Activates Land and Culture: *Will We Listen?*

CYNTHIA WILSON and GAVIN NOYES

ABSTRACT

At Bears Ears National Monument (BENM) Indigenous wisdom-keepers have been transmitting knowledge and activating this “living landscape” and the Native cultures thriving within it across hundreds of generations. In this article we ask, “What should true collaboration look like between Tribes, federal agencies, grassroots Native communities, and the land?” In today’s dialogue around collaboration, US agencies are asserting Western ideas around “co-management,” “co-stewardship,” and “Traditional Ecological Knowledge” (TEK). Instead, this dialogue needs to begin at the community level to understand Native land ethics, “human” and “non-human” bonds, and kinship relationships that define reciprocity between Indigenous People and the land. Collaboration must begin by treating Native wisdom as proprietary, because knowledge in itself is a powerful entity. How we treat and use Native wisdom has consequences and, thus, transmission of such knowledge needs protection. Agencies should take steps to support Native communities themselves in passing this knowledge along to younger generations. Every Tribe might be at a different stage of maintaining or restoring cultural relationships to the land and each ancestral landscape will have different ecological needs. Co-management of ancestral lands by Tribes is a worthwhile step toward achieving true collaboration with federal agencies. And as Native People return to the land, they will also be seeking the return of buffalo, beaver, native plants, and many extirpated species in order to restore their own cultures and relationships to the Earth. And much like these human relationships that must be formed as collaborations are established, these ties between Native spiritual leaders, ancestral lands, and wildlife must also be restored. Finally, the first step in any collaboration is building trust. All of this will take time and must be done one ancestral landscape, one Native community, and one agency office at a time. True collaboration by federal agencies will allow Native People to practice spiritual sustenance, strengthen their languages and cultures, and keep ancestral landscapes activated and healthy while respecting Tribal sovereignty and self-determination. It should also be acknowledged that the benefits for land and people of leading with Native epistemologies, and ways of knowing and doing, extends well beyond Native communities and land and are vital to the resolution of the current biodiversity and climate crises.

INTRODUCTION

The Indigenous Grassroots Council (IGC)¹ began critiquing the word “co-management” in May 2022.² IGC is a group of Indigenous organizers, Tribal leaders, Elders, and youth who are all actively working on co-management concepts and are interested in building these policies from the grassroots level. In English, the word “manage” means “to be in charge,” or “to control.” A Diné storyteller elaborates: “The act of ‘management’ is a form of systemic racism. It is a trauma inducing word because Native People have been managed our whole lives by the federal government.”

Elevating humans as managers of our land, water, and wildlife “relatives” goes against cultural, social, and spiritual teachings within many Tribes. Co-management is a legal and Western concept that creates confusion because of its hierarchical decision-making structure. By beginning with the term “co-management,” federal agencies must first overcome the disconnect between Western culture, which largely views itself as separate from and dominant to nature and its inhabitants, and Indigenous perspectives, which are that Native People are interrelated to, part of, and on equal terms with

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the natural world. Understanding these incompatible views is essential to supporting Tribes and changing management practices.

Currently, Bears Ears National Monument (BENM) is completing a land planning process through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which has taken longer than expected due to political conflict. The 1.3-million-acre BENM was created by President Obama in 2016 at the request of five Tribes (Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute, Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, and Pueblo of Zuni),³ then reduced in size by President Trump in 2017 at the request of the state of Utah. This reduction was challenged in federal court and while that lawsuit is currently paused, it is still pending.⁴ President Biden

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restored Bears Ears to its full size in 2021, again at the request of the five Tribes. This lawsuit could be revived during President Trump's second term if the national monument is reduced again. BENM encompasses the ancestral lands of many Tribes, and all five Tribes trace their origin stories, powerful medicines, and histories to this large landscape. In each of these three Antiquities Act proclamations, the presidents created a Bears Ears Commission for Tribes to serve as co-managers of these federal lands. This co-management relationship between Tribes, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the United States Forest Service (USFS) has been underway for four years and its first outcome, a Record of Decision (ROD), is expected to be issued in January 2025.⁵ The ROD, which will establish a resource management plan for BENM, will ultimately lay the foundation for this co-management relationship. Many of the shared positions of Tribes and federal agencies are being protested by special interest groups and the State of Utah such as reductions in acres which allow cattle grazing, and a prohibition against target shooting designed to protect petroglyphs. Additionally, the 2021 BENM proclamation is being litigated in federal court.

This article will question the use of Western approaches to land stewardship such as co-management, and instead will ask what models of collaboration might be adopted

to better serve Tribes, grassroots Indigenous People, and large ancestral landscapes, with a focus on BENM. This article will also explore differences in knowledge-keeping and land stewardship practices between Western and Native land stewards. Before Tribes share their Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) with the federal agencies, as a first step relationships between Native People and the land need to be re-established. Native wisdom-keepers need first be granted access to ancestral lands, and barriers removed that prevent them from practicing their culture. This process alone might serve to initiate communications between Tribes and federal agencies so that shared grassroots stewardship and management goals can begin to be achieved. One central theme across many Tribes might be prioritizing the restoration of Native cultures, languages, and Indigenous relationships to ancestral lands. These actions might be called "co-management" by federal agencies, but it is important that this form of management recognize that the most important role of federal agencies is to create space and remove barriers for Native relationships, and for restoration of animal relatives to take place. Tribes and Native grassroots communities may already know how each of their living landscapes should be stewarded. It is the building of collaborative relationships and trust, however, that must be established before shared leadership and co-management can be effectively realized.

COLLABORATION AS A MODEL INSTEAD OF CO-MANAGEMENT

What is true collaboration between Tribes and federal land management agencies? This article will examine the triangle of collaboration between Tribal governments, their own grassroots Native communities (which at BENM include over 20,000 Tribal members who live within 50 miles), and federal agency staff. However, there are also many other interest groups across every off-reservation landscape. In the case of BENM, primary collaborators are the five Tribes, two federal agencies (BLM and USFS), and 10 Indigenous communities on immediately adjacent lands in southern San Juan County, Utah. Other major entities include the state of Utah (including the Division of Wildlife Resources, State Historic Preservation Office, School Institute for Trust Lands, Division of Water Quality, etc.), other federal agencies (Bureau of Indian Affairs, US Fish & Wildlife Service, National Park Service, and others), and dozens of special-interest groups including conservation organizations,⁴ recreation groups,⁵ Indigenous focused non-profits,⁶ and many others. Finally, there are local non-Native communities that depend on these lands (there are four mostly white communities in the northern part of San Juan County, Utah), and millions of Americans who have weighed in to express

their opinion on whether and how federal agencies should or should not protect BENM. These are contested and cherished lands. Interestingly Native People were never effectively removed from this landscape,⁷ making it an ideal landscape for Native-led collaborative stewardship to be realized.

As the federal decision-makers at BENM, USFS and BLM are responsible for including and balancing diverse public interests, and they ultimately define and direct what co-management and collaboration with Tribes looks like. The five sovereign Tribes also hold responsibility to their own Tribal members (who are all American citizens too), but these Tribes may not have the capacity, or even the necessary trust in place, to ensure Elders and wisdom-keepers will contribute to BENM land planning. This triangle of collaboration is tied together at the top by a government-to-government relationship serving grassroots Tribal members at the bottom. Tribal governments tend to prioritize sovereignty, funding, decision-making, and political power in this triangular relationship. Yet, it is their Tribal members, the grassroots Elders, knowledge keepers, cultural practitioners, and spiritual leaders who are on these lands every day and are passing the Tribe's cultural knowledge down to the next generation person by person. These Elders and cultural practitioners are less concerned with government policy, especially when worrying about things like feeding their families (sometimes supplemented through hunting and gathering on federal lands) and serving their communities (through prayer, ceremony, and teaching of cultural practices). There is often a disconnect between the needs of grassroots people on ancestral lands and the priorities Tribal elected officials can serve in such limited roles. Collaboration should include these thousands of grassroots cultural practitioners who depend on BENM for spiritual, cultural, and sustenance reasons and are the only people who hold these reciprocal relationships with the non-humans of Bears Ears.⁸

Native wisdom among communities is held by individuals. Cultural practices at each Tribe are embodied in these intimate relationships between people and the land. The land itself is a teacher and Elders coexist with plants, animals, water, air, and rocks through ongoing dialogue based on the teachings inherited from their ancestors. Elders teach cultural practices that require large landscapes, or enough time and space and non-human relatives to engage the human senses to express gratitude, presence, and permission. An activity like making an offering to a mountain is reciprocal in that it both helps the person, family, or community with the

request being made, and it activates the living mountain itself, which might be engaged through a song, medicine, or other offering. This deep and mutual relationship is a form of bonding for people and the land, and is a cultural living practice that enriches everyone involved.

Young Tribal members learn Native wisdom and practices by living within natural landscapes and learning not just from the Elders, but through the complexity of the natural world in these moments. A person's emotional, sensory, and contextual experiences lock these teachings into cultural memories and lived realities that shape who they are, where they come from, and why they do what they do as Earth surface beings. Embodied and reciprocal relationships with the land activates both the landscape and the ancestral wisdom embedded in the environment as a whole. By contrast, a management document must contain a chapter, a page, and an approved set of words, often written by people who, while they may have regularly been to the place, may have not tasted many of the foods which grow there, or placed an offering on the land to help them understand the meaning behind the recommendations they write—people who often see the land as a resource, rather than a relative, and, as a result, necessarily have a limited vision, lexicon, and/or toolbox to ensure the most potent protection and stewardship of land and waters.

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Tribal governments are also responsible for ensuring their own members can access off-reservation ancestral lands. This is complicated by the fact that many Tribes are operating governments using procedures forced upon them by the United States instead having been able to adopt traditional government structures and systems. This means that sometimes traditional leaders within a Tribe might keep information from their own Tribal governments to protect and pass down these traditions in traditional settings. As a result, many of the most knowledgeable Elders and spiritual leaders can be left out of both planning and the reactivation of ancestral lands. Internal politics of Tribal governments

are complex, and finding unity, even in how to engage in off-reservation cultural revitalization programs or recommend conservation policies, can be challenging. Collaboration with Native communities at BENM, especially on the Navajo Nation where many wisdom-keepers speak little English, needs to be understood in all of its complexity if it is going to work.

GRASSROOTS INDIGENOUS LEADERS—WHAT DO THEY WANT?

IGC began raising co-management issues in 2022, and, after internal consultations, in September hand-delivered a letter (cited at Note 2, above) to Secretary Deb Haaland, Department of Interior, and Secretary Tom Vilsack, Department of Agriculture. The subject line of the letter read: “Co-management is about restoring inherent human rights and relationships to the land through respectful management by the federal government.” IGC recommended broadly that Indigenous grassroots people want three priorities highlighted through new co-management structures being set up through their own Tribes. Quoting verbatim from the letter (except for emphasis added), the priorities are:

- **Access and Protection.** Native communities inherently deserve *access and perpetual rights to ancestral lands, water, and wildlife*, especially in places that have *not* been polluted or degraded in recent centuries. This means securing protection of important places and *setting aside land for protection*. Agencies should also create welcoming spaces for Indigenous People who need privacy and to have genuine prayer and discourse while reconnecting to ancestral homelands. What Tribes mean by protection must also be defined. To achieve some management goals agencies need not extract traditional knowledge from elders, they simply need to allow Native People to restore existing relationships to the land. Access is also about free prior informed consent and consultation which requires communications with decision-makers.
- **Land Management Policy Reform.** Tribes need policy change to remove barriers to cultural practice, to rekindle Indigenous relationships to the Earth, and to recognize the roles we play in activating lands through cultural practice. For example, our spiritual leaders may need to be able to safely kindle a fire during fire season, or we may need agencies to monitor the health of specific plants which have historically been left unmanaged. We must design co-management policies to best serve each Tribe. We need cross-cultural education between agencies and Native communities to achieve improved communications. Much like agency staff might not understand the role

of rituals during hunting season, Native wood cutters may not understand the meaning of a “Wilderness Study Area” or a public right of way through a private inholding. Tribes need a voice and role in reviewing and shaping policies throughout decision-making and to review process on all policies that affect us. Overall, *we need new policies that recognize ancestral homelands as holding their own rights*, acknowledging traditional sacred practices.

- **Funding.** Some Tribes require and would benefit from *federal, state, and county funding to restore streams, native plants, and wildlife*. Youth “Guardian Programs,” or a “Native Climate Corps” could assist with wildlife monitoring, wild food management and other conservation practices. These actions would strengthen our cultural ties to the land, as we heal, stay connected with elders, and speak our languages. It is not enough for the federal government and sovereign tribal leaders to do this work. *Many Tribes lack the funding and capacity to engage their own elders* in off-reservation land management and assistance should be provided for them to do so. Alternatively, *Native communities might organize internally to bring land-based issues to their own leadership* by seeking private funding for grassroots advocacy. Native communities need more meetings with tribal representatives and agency officials, and funding for specific natural resources or location-based task forces. *Agencies can and should hire more Native People* who already hold expertise across our ancestral homelands. Understanding lands is embodied within our people which can be deployed through employment.⁹

The above excerpt from the IGC letter offers ideas for how Tribes and federal agencies can strengthen collaboration through deepening community engagement to the land and expanding the capacity of Tribes.

TEK COLLECTION BY FEDERAL AGENCIES

Co-management policy is asking that TEK sharing be expanded to include agencies; however, trust seldom exists for this to occur due to internal and external divides within Tribes and among surrounding non-Native communities. Native wisdom-keepers are the hunters, firewood collectors, medicinal herb experts, and ceremonial practitioners, yet Tribal governments¹⁰ have had little if any say over public lands.¹¹ Furthermore, the sharing of TEK should not be a priority or goal of Tribal or US co-managers. Everyone recognizes that Native knowledge has been eroded during the colonization period across ancestral lands, but a tremendous amount

of wisdom and embodied knowledge still exists. This knowledge will require ongoing transmission within Tribes if it is going to keep ecological, spiritual, and cultural ties activated.

There may be a need to fund traditional community-level knowledge transmission to younger generations, which is an important role federal agencies or private funders can play.

The first step in this federal-Tribal collaboration should be to ensure public land access allows space for Tribal members to put into practice embodied teachings that already exist. This engagement will occur on ancestral lands and in direct relationship with the plants, animals, insects, fire, wind, landforms, rivers, and all other living beings on the lands. There may be a need to fund traditional community-level knowledge transmission to younger generations, which is an important role federal agencies or private funders can play. What is most important in all of this is that Native People be entrusted by the US and Tribal governments with the work of reactivating their own cultures, languages, and their ancestral landscapes through direct access to and protection of public lands. These access permissions will lead to deeper collaboration with federal agencies and discussions around Native rights to practice their cultures and moral livelihood (medicinally, for food sustenance, spiritually, etc.).

Instead of continuing the age-old practice of extracting knowledge from Tribes (and resources from the land), it is important to build ancestral lands collaborations to ensure Native knowledge is passed on in cross-cultural ways, to both ensure the preservation of rich Native cultures, but also to protect the land itself. There is no need to share Native knowledge with federal agencies so long as it is being practiced and transmitted effectively by locals with experience and who are living in relation to the land and non-humans.

Unlike in Western academia, knowledge transmission within Tribes is often not open or shareable to all members. Knowledge acquisition must be either inherited through maternal lines, or earned through proper livelihood, spiritual practice, or trust. Unlike Western land

managers, Native American youth must demonstrate their adherence to, and respect for the land, prior to receiving embodied knowledge from Elders. And in Native cultures, these naturally and spiritually rooted wisdom-keepers are usually the most respected members of society.

The problem with agencies trying to collect TEK is that doing so ignores the ancient process of wisdom transmission, the broader powers this wisdom holds, the role of language or song,¹² and the safekeeping of knowledge within Tribes. Collecting knowledge and instructing land managers who don't understand these contexts to use it threatens to repeat harmful acts of dispossession of Native People from their ancestral lands. TEK collection and its sharing should be led by traditional cultural practitioners, and the levels of trust and collaboration that exist today may not allow sharing with agencies to happen for some time. Instead of sharing TEK, Native relationships to, access across, and protection of ancestral lands should be restored.

CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING IS ESSENTIAL TO COLLABORATION

Grassroots wisdom-keepers need protection of, support from, and collaboration with their own Tribes and Native communities to steward cultural knowledge across ancestral lands. In many locations this will require the support of federal land agencies and private funders to fix current access and capacity problems. However, we must also recognize that volumes and volumes of wisdom exist across US ancestral landscapes and there are reasons (e.g., mistrust) that explain why so much land stewardship knowledge has never been shared (even in many cases with a wisdom-keeper's own Tribal Historic Preservation Office or Tribal government). The five Tribes of Bears Ears know the legal limits of co-management policies they face as well as how far up the ladders of power in Washington, D.C., their policy goals might reach. These goals are important, yet the deepest wisdom and the oldest vestiges of land stewardship knowledge and practice might only sit within grassroots Native communities across the US and on the land itself. The federal power dynamics at the top need to change, but every community in the US can also recognize Native spiritual Elders as "experts" who might embody more history and knowledge of place than any farmer, rancher, or scientist, and then grant them the permission and privacy they might need to practice and teach this wisdom to Native youth.

For example, Native people have a relationship to fire and wood harvesting dating back millennia, yet each summer since BENM was established, fire restrictions

have prohibited campfires on federal lands across southern Utah. This has meant that every summer Utah Diné Bikéyah's founder and spiritual advisor, Jonah Yellowman, has explored time-consuming and expensive workarounds in order to hold spiritual ceremonies at Bears Ears. Yellowman explains, "every spiritual ceremony begins with 'a spark in the darkness.' Lighting the kindling for a fire during ceremony is both an essential ritual and the medium through whom the creator is invited into ceremony." To address such concerns at BENM, an applied collaborative research study¹³ was initiated in 2015 with the explicit goal of centering Indigenous needs, meaningfully partnering with local wood haulers, and utilizing the best scientific methods and most current technologies to collect and measure dynamic human and natural systems. People and nature are complex and because this research is meant to be implemented and used by sovereign Tribal Nations, significant time and resources have been spent communicating goals, gaining permissions, listening to traditional knowledge holders, and involving firewood users at every step of the way.

Co-management through the utilization of Native firewood harvest to improve forest management provides significant opportunities at BENM to:

- Improve government-to-government relationships to restore human and Indigenous connections on the land.
- Recruit Native community members and wood haulers who hold traditional knowledge to Tribal and federal agency positions.
- Create new programs and jobs to benefit local communities and protect the land through existing policies and funding opportunities.

Firewood use is an ideal subject for Tribes to bring to co-management with federal agencies because it is less political and engages cross-cultural learning. There is broad agreement around its value and Native people hold deep wisdom and can advise on how to manage forests while utilizing firewood. It is a complex and rapidly changing resource issue that requires all of our attention.¹⁴

"LIVING LANDSCAPES" AND "TRUE COLLABORATION"

The BENM proclamation¹⁵ highlights Bears Ears as a "living breathing landscape," with "living spiritual significance to indigenous peoples," and as a "cultural living space." Furthermore, the Inter-Governmental Cooperative Agreement¹⁶ states that "Bears Ears is a

living landscape that provides opportunities for Elders to convey to younger generations the stories, traditions, and practices of their people; to help them understand where they came from, who they are, and how to live." The term "living landscape" hopefully makes all Americans ask, "what is our role and responsibility as humans living in coexistence with the natural world?" When will we realize and prioritize the moral values of living landscapes over legal concepts of "co-management?" In the context of collaboration, Whyte¹⁷ describes TEK as "the living environmental governance of Indigenous peoples stemming directly from their cosmologies in relation to the environmental challenges they have faced over many generations." He further adds that engaging in the moral ethics of true collaboration is a way of respecting multiple ways of knowing to restore balance and bring healing to the people and the land.

CONCLUSION

Tribes envision language revitalization, food system recovery, youth leadership development, and well-paid jobs in stewardship positions for Tribal members across ancestral landscapes. However, these changes may be most powerful if led and developed by each Tribe and across each ancestral landscape. In many cases, the federal government might continue to manage public lands so that Tribal members can once again interact freely with human and non-human relatives in sacred spaces like at Bears Ears National Monument. Co-management is a helpful start toward collaboration and dialogue aimed at realizing a shared future between the United States land management agencies and Tribes. However even greater gains might be realized if we allow each Indigenous community to define what is needed for the land and their own people and for Tribes to co-lead this government-to-government relationship forward.

So how will Indigenous knowledge transmission stay alive at BENM? And how might we steer co-management to achieve all three parties' goals? Collaboration between grassroots Indigenous communities, federal agencies, and the five Tribes will determine the answers to these questions as the concept of co-management deepens to include Native perspectives, belief systems, and thousands of additional grassroots Native wisdom-keepers.

ENDNOTES

1. Indigenous Grassroot Council members comprise Indigenous organizers, Tribal leaders, non-profit and Tribal staff, as well as Elders and youth actively working on co-management concepts alongside

Tribal nations. IGC states: “We are interested in building these policies from the grassroots council level.” IGC leaders share in common efforts to protect ancestral lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the desire to follow the traditional teachings of Elders within their Native cultures.

2. Letter from IGC to Secretary Haaland and Secretary Vilsack dated September 16, 2022: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DUJL_MH6H7RDXQzpsvIAP19IKjbFKZsf/view?usp=sharing
3. This was the first time in US history that Tribes asked for the Antiquities Act to be used on their behalf, and the first time Tribes were appointed to serve as co-managers. Note: there is disagreement between BLM, USFS, the Council on Environmental Quality, and the five Tribes on the definition of the term “co-management,” and the use of the Antiquities Act to create Bears Ears National Monument is currently being contested in federal court by the state of Utah.
4. Bears Ears Litigation: <https://www.nrdc.org/court-battles/nrdc-et-v-trump-bears-ears>
5. BLM Planning Link: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2020347/510>
6. Southern Utah Wilderness Association, Grand Canyon Trust, Sierra Club, The Nature Conservancy, Bears Ears Stewardship Coalition, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, The Wilderness Society, Conservation Lands Foundation, etc.
7. Backcountry hunters and anglers, rock climbing groups, motorized recreation groups, whitewater rafting groups, archaeology groups, biking groups, horseback riding groups, etc.
8. Utah Diné Bikéyah, Women of Bears Ears, A’Nuche, INDIGENOUS LED, Pandos, Tewa Women United, etc.
9. The Avikanuche Band of Ute People effectively kept LDS Church settlers out of BENM until 1923, which helped avoid waves of logging of ponderosa pines, mining, and cattle grazing that changed most other western US landscapes between 1849 and 1923. Road building, cattle grazing, and uranium mining have impacted the land since then, but grassroots Native People never stopped occupying and using these ancestral lands. See Ute efforts to tell their stories at: <https://100yearsofsilence.com/>.
10. Navajo Nation citizens living in close proximity (50 miles) to BENM might number 20,000 people, yet Utah Navajos are among the least-served communities in the US. Navajo headquarters in 2½ to 4 hours away from Utah Navajo communities, and government services, like water, power, and internet reached fewer than 60% of homes in 2020.
11. Letter from IGC to Haaland and Vilsack, cited at Note 2 above.
12. At least prior to the Forest Protection Act of 2015.
13. Except where explicitly granted in treaty language.
14. Robinson, Jake M., Amy Annells, Christian Cando-Dumancela, and Martin F. Breed. 2024. Sonic restoration: Acoustic stimulation enhances plant growth-promoting fungi activity. *Biological Letters* 20(10): 20240295. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2024.0295>
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16. Noyes, G. 2023. Firewood policy analysis report and recommendations: Protecting people & forests through fuelwood management. Unpublished report. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RUNsJn9x99jS3dbKLSv8ITUn9UfYfu3r/view?usp=sharing>
17. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/10/08/a-proclamation-on-bears-ears-national-monument/>
18. <https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2022-06/BearsEarsNationalMonumentInter-GovernmentalAgreement2022.pdf>
19. Whyte, Kyle Powys. 2013. On the role of Traditional Ecological Knowledge as a collaborative concept: A philosophical study. *Ecological Processes* 2(7): 1-12.