



Expanding the scope of planetary health education: the International Decade of Indigenous Languages

“Language is the connection to the living beings”

Sahtu Dene Elder Be'sha Blondin, 2022

Indigenous languages are the heart of the Earth; they are like a musical blueprint of the traditional ecological knowledges that stretch back thousands of years. Indigenous languages are directly rooted in and interconnected with Indigenous Lands and waters throughout the world and, because they are verb based, they embody the processes and teachings of the planet. It is believed by some Indigenous Nations, such as some First Nations of Australia, that the Earth itself gave birth to language and culture and thus they are inseparable. Due to the interconnectedness between Earth and language, when Indigenous Peoples have the rights to their Lands taken, the risk of losing their languages increases, and the ability to protect Mother Earth is substantially strained. When Indigenous Peoples' ability to protect the Earth is strained, it affects everyone on the planet.

Indigenous Peoples' knowledge has been increasingly recognised as crucial in curbing biodiversity loss and protecting the planet.¹ This recognition is further magnified by Indigenous Peoples currently hosting and living with 80% of the world's biodiversity. Indigenous languages, however, are the underappreciated conduit between traditional ecological knowledges, biodiversity, and planetary protection.² Traditional ecological knowledges are deeply rooted within Indigenous “names, oral traditions and taxonomies”, which can be lost when a community switches to another spoken language.² Biological diversity, planetary health, and Indigenous languages are completely interconnected.³ In some regions, a loss of Indigenous speakers has been shown to have a direct, negative effect on local biodiversity.⁴ This negative effect is concerning, given that one Indigenous language is estimated to be lost every 2 weeks around the globe.⁵

Indigenous Peoples speak more than 4000 of the world's languages despite making up less than 6% of the global population.⁵ In Australia alone, there are more than 250 Indigenous languages—including approximately 800 individual dialects. Each

language and dialect is specific to place and peoples. The importance of the conservation of Indigenous languages for Indigenous communities and for their planetary stewardship is severely underappreciated. Consequently, Indigenous languages were identified by an Indigenous collective as a fundamental determinant of planetary health.⁶

The period between 2022 and 2032 has been proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, “to draw global attention on the critical situation of many Indigenous languages and to mobilize stakeholders and resources for their preservation, revitalization and promotion”.⁷ Indigenous Peoples have long assumed the importance of Indigenous languages to human and planetary sustainability and survival, and with the proclamation of this international decade, we hope to see language revitalisation efforts urgently amplified in a holistic manner. As representatives of our own respective Indigenous Nations, we strongly believe that planetary health education should be inclusive and prioritise Indigenous language revitalisation efforts in concert with Indigenous Land rights movements.

Indigenous languages not only represent a large body of traditional ecological knowledge but are additionally a powerful way of viewing, relating, and interconnecting with the world (exemplified by the concept of interconnection within nature, which is one of the five foundational domains of the planetary health education framework⁸). We therefore amplify here an Indigenous-led research team from Port Hardy (Canada) that is setting a precedent for “language revitalization by developing a unique approach that will teach people how to ‘live’ their language”.⁹ Similarly, Fort Lewis College (USA) has created an All Our Nations Language Revitalization Hub, which focuses on Indigenous cosmology and the centring of “Indigenous knowledge as valuable and necessary for survival”.¹⁰ Despite Indigenous languages being important for many determinants of planetary health,⁶ we have seen substantially more funding go into nature preservation projects than Indigenous language preservation.

Indigenous language educational pedagogies are functionally connected to land-based educational pedagogies that themselves embrace “an Indigenous epistemological stance that views the relationship to the Land as the source of all experiential and theoretical knowledge”.¹¹ It is therefore impossible to disaggregate individual, community, and planetary health within the Indigenous language learning process. Due to this, and the many additional elements covered in this Comment, Indigenous language revitalisation and preservation strategies are a key feature of planetary health education that are currently undervalued, and in need of substantial amplification in broader planetary health movements. The proclamation of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages is but one launching point for allies, organisations, and funders to consider the relevance of Indigenous language in planetary protection and operationalise the educational support that is needed.

“Indigenous languages are medicine for our people and their revitalization is vital to our individual and collective wellness and the wellness of the earth.”⁹

Sara Child, 2022

We declare no competing interests.

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