

# Visions of the Environment through Three Colombian Ethnic Groups: a contribution from research to environmental education

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## Introduction

Since 1991, the Institute of Environmental Studies (IDEA) within the Universidad Nacional de Colombia's environmental education programme has been reflecting on the Colombian environment. This elicited the need to investigate the cultural elements characteristic of Colombian indigenous communities which maintain distinctive man-society-nature relationships and management of their natural resources. This interest in looking for the elements of the culture which are extant, but unknown or forgotten, and by means of which it is possible to understand the harmonic relationship between man and nature frequently present in the Colombian indigenous communities, has motivated us to propose research on visions of the environment, working with three Colombian ethnic groups. This work may orientate us in the construction of attitudes and values of respect towards all forms of life, as well as enhancing the environmental education project that the <sup>1</sup>0<sup>0</sup> has been developing.

The three milestones of this research (environment, ethnic diversity and education) constitute fundamental elements in the construction of nationality and cultural identity. This research intends to enrich the work that IDEA has been carrying out on environmental education, with the support of the Indigenous Students Programme which is part of the University's Welfare ViceRectorate. This programme seeks to educate professionals who will be leading and generating the processes of development within indigenous communities, as well as recognize the diversity of these communities through their presence at the university. We consider the research will contribute particularly to the following:

*Interdisciplinary aspect.* It is impossible to find either all the information or all necessary conceptualizations and methodologies to understand the environment within only one discipline or knowledge area. Each one of these points out valid arguments in our understanding of the problem. However, a global explanation is not given by just the summation of arguments, but by interdisciplinary construction in a common space of analysis. That is why we chose an interdisciplinary approach to the issue of the environment. In order to accomplish our research goals, different members of the team looked at the relationship man-society-nature from their own perspectives, that is from sociology, anthropology, psychology, administration and design.

*Intercultural aspect.* The Indigenous Students Programme offers indigenous students the possibility of enrolling in the University. In this way the University has, since 1986, recognized Colombia's cultural diversity. However, this diversity has not been sufficiently appreciated. In an attempt to diminish the gap, this research was proposed in order to open a space for making this intercultural dimension a reality by means of a joint effort between researchers and indigenous students from the Inga, Uitoto and Wayuu ethnic groups as co-researchers. These students, through their values and ways of living, provide interesting elements for innovative proposals related to cultural diversity not only for the University but also for the country.

*Environmental education aspect.* Environmental education is a decisive strategy to facilitate the construction of an alternative culture, based on respect for the other, for boosting bio-diversity, and for the preservation of natural resources. The construction of new educational proposals will be

possible as long as the elements found during the research process allow the building up of new altitudes and values whose foundations are based on respect for all forms of life, multicultural diversity and democracy for future generations.

## **Issues**

The research, *Visions of the Environment Through Three Colombian Ethnic Groups*, has led the team not only to gather knowledge, *per se*, and go deeper into environmental issues, but also to enrich personal experience of interchanging sensitivity and knowledge. Summarizing this valuable interchange will always be difficult. Nevertheless, up to this point, there are some aspects worth mentioning:

- orality; the importance of interaction;
- the reality of our interculturality and of recognizing the other;
- the construction of an environmental ethic, and
- the value of education in the process of constructing responsible attitudes towards the environment.

## **Orality/Writing, Bilingualism, Monolinguisism**

Writing down memories has been a difficult process particularly for indigenous co-researchers. They have created different ways to reflect upon themselves, one being through intimate conversations (brother-brother; father-son, friend-friend, or relatives). Part of these conversations is recorded in their diaries that demonstrate that orality, a characteristic of the Amerindian peoples, is a process of construction and re-creation of a more complex, deeper, and richer perception of the world than researcher had imagined. Because of this, the use of tape recorders was suggested. A very significant linguistic point when reflecting upon interculturality is that co-researchers' childhood memories are generally expressed in their mother tongue (Wayuunaiki or Inga), while recent memories are talked about in Spanish.

## **Discrimination**

During the use of the intensive diary technique among co-researchers the memory of socio-racial discrimination was recurrent. This is important because it makes us face processes that have not sufficiently been made explicit, as well as the fundamental fact that we have been working with people who have left a state (community) but who do not yet belong to another (city). These are *interstructural* people, called *liminares*, (based on to van Gennep's ritual concept used by Turner, 1980), who have not yet entered a new clear and defined state. In this sense they are transmitters of ambiguous and even paradoxical messages which should not be considered as being bad or terrible, but as creative (following Bateson, 1991).

## **Importance of Interaction**

At the beginning of the research, our plan was linear: dealing with the coresearchers progressively to reach expected outcomes, Nevertheless, the process that would take us to an end became an end in itself. In other words, throughout the constant meetings, the practice of diary writing, the

field trips and the individual work, little by little the significance of the group encounters and the collective sessions were highlighted as a way of making explicit what we were constructing. Although it may seem obvious because this is part of research methodology, it was not so. For us, conversing has been a real encounter (linguaging as Maturana (1993) would say); an encounter when dialoguing, an encounter in emotioning (again Maturana), when considering the others, legitimate coexisting and interacting others. As Benjamin Jacanamijoy beautifully expressed it one day, when we remain samai, this is to say, with the others breathing in our heart. At the beginning, this process was not taken as meaningful and as valuable as it is now. It has allowed us to abandon our anxiety for controlling the research, the researchers and ourselves. In brief, we consider that we are constructing the space and the time of a genuine encounter, which will warrant us a deeper understanding of the Inga, Wayuu and Uitoto ethno-visions.

### **Interculturality: recognition of the other**

It will be clear that the cultures represented in the three ethnic groups show a different view of the world from ours: a conception of the environment and of the human task based on coexistence, and on the search for welfare beyond the present time. Knowledge of the world and of others advances as you get a better knowledge of yourself. The point of departure is necessarily a holistic vision, integral unity between man and nature. Man is just only a part of it and not its maker or its absolute modifier. The other culture's concept of welfare differs from our conception in the gathering of things and of others, instead of concentrating on the group, the collectivity and the preservation of the environment for the joy (in the broad sense of enjoyment and joy) of those who will come in unlimited time. This, for example, was one of our difficulties at the beginning, and today the source of personal pleasure: the absence of haste in presenting results, in interviewing, in giving talks, in reading and commenting: the extension of time in confrontation.

There is evidence here of the importance of recognizing the complexity of others knowledge, and of their accumulated experience. There is also evidence of the significance of interchanging, of getting closer and understanding that we are not the only ones who contribute to knowledge of the world and the environment; that their contribution and knowledge broaden and give another direction to the construction of the world which we have so far lived in.

Through this research, the value of the sense of belonging and the construction of an identity not only of an individual, but of a group, is made evident.

### **The Construction of an Environmental Ethic**

It is from the recognition and respect of the other, and as we come to understand that we are part of the environment in which we interact as one of its members, that we will make an environmental ethic a reality. Valuing what belongs to you, what constitutes life quality and welfare shared by all or, at least, by the majority of the group members, we feel will result in commitment and a responsible attitude towards the environment. But how can you recognize the others, appreciate diversity and learn from them? This can only be through a new concept of learning that the construction of environmental attitudes which allow for thinking, feeling and acting is made possible. Learning, based on a change of behavior no matter what the price, is not a solution. The capacity to learn as a synonym of nearly unlimited manipulation is, in our society, a function of success- And success is the reward and the only motivation to learn- Thus we forget the rest of human productive stimuli, many of which, by not being recognized, verbalized and taken into

account, become the accumulated unproductive potential able to generate aggressive attitudes which burst in and inhibit the possibilities of expressing feelings, and of valuing the individual and his interaction with the environment,

We conclude, then, that it is necessary to give teaching a different character, to involve the boys, the girls and the youths who interact with us today in a pedagogy of life. A pedagogy through which they recognize their own needs and interests, the intrinsic value of each human being, of each object with which we interrelate and the interdependency which must exist between our own acts and interests and those of others. This is very well exemplified by our coresearchers' languages where the first person singular pronouns are not very much used, giving way to the collective, to plural expression of feelings and acts which indicate a wish, a hope, a common present and future. In this sense this research shows us different interactive ways and collective construction: in essence a utopian task, but which should begin at least in the field of knowledge in which each can operate, The attitudes towards the environment will be aimed, through pedagogy, at the task of interweaving new dynamics for learning, learning which takes as its point of departure parents, teachers, adults capable of thinking themselves as part of a whole, of looking for their selves and then being able to start with the other: child, pupil, another, a common search for actions and events.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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