

International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples

The International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples on 9 August is a day to promote indigenous peoples' rights and celebrate indigenous communities, from the Inuit in the Arctic Circle to the Tuareg in the deserts of northern Africa.

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary

1. an ancestor
2. surroundings
3. deforestation
4. dominant
5. to conquer
6. to colonise
7. an acre
8. representation

Definition

- a. an official person or group that speaks and acts for someone else
- b. cutting down a large number of trees
- c. a unit for measuring area
- d. a member of your family who lived in past times
- e. bigger, more powerful or more successful
- f. to take control of foreign land by force
- g. the things and places around you
- h. to send people to live in and rule another country

International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples

Since 1994 the UN has celebrated the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples on 9 August with special events, conferences and meetings around the world.

Who are the indigenous peoples of the world?

Indigenous people are the first people to live in a particular place – the original population that first created a community on that land before other people came to live in, conquer or colonise the area. People self-identify as indigenous. That means they decide for themselves whether they consider themselves to be indigenous.

There are more than 350 million indigenous people living in 90 countries. They represent 5,000 different cultures and speak the great majority of the thousands of languages that are spoken around the world today. Indigenous communities often have distinct beliefs, culture and customs. Many indigenous people still live in very close contact with the land, with a respect for and understanding of their natural surroundings.

What challenges do they face?

Indigenous peoples are not the dominant groups in the societies they live in. The dominant groups are the people that arrived later. This means that indigenous peoples have suffered from many problems related to a lack of economic power, social protection and political representation.

Although indigenous people make up less than five per cent of the world's total population, they represent 15 per cent of the world's poorest people. They are more likely to have limited access to healthcare and education, and members of indigenous communities live shorter lives than non-indigenous groups. Their languages are not normally taught in schools, and many of these languages are in danger of disappearing. It is estimated that one indigenous language is lost every two weeks.

Many indigenous peoples do not have control over their land. Governments and companies take their land to cut down trees, to farm cows or for other activities that use these natural resources and damage the environment. This often forces indigenous people to leave their land, losing their ancestral homes and their source of wealth and food.

What has been done?

Recently, in New Zealand, one of the local Maori tribes won a legal battle to protect the river that runs through their land. The new law protects the river as if it were a person, a Maori ancestor or a member of the tribe. Another historic legal battle was won by the Waorani people of Ecuador, when they successfully stopped 500,000 acres of Amazonian rainforest from being mined by oil companies.

Making sure indigenous peoples have legal rights over their land and resources is a matter of human rights. It also brings environmental benefits to the planet. Deforestation rates in Bolivia, Brazil and Colombia were two to three times lower in forests officially belonging to indigenous communities.

Progress made by indigenous communities is supported by the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a document that has been agreed on by 148 countries. Importantly, the declaration defends indigenous peoples' right to make decisions about the use and protection of their ancestral land. It also sets out many rights, including indigenous peoples' rights to education and healthcare, participation in political and legal processes and the protection of indigenous languages.

What more needs to be done?

Despite the progress made, indigenous communities still legally own only a very small percentage of their land globally. The UN document is an important step, but more countries need to commit to it, and the countries that have signed need to do what they have promised. All around the world, indigenous people are fighting for their rights, as well as protesting against deforestation and climate change. Part of the movement to support them is the celebration of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples on 9 August. Why not join in?

Tasks

Task 1

Are the sentences true or false?

	Answers	
1. Indigenous people are the first people who lived in a place.	True	False
2. Indigenous people live in very few countries of the world.	True	False
3. Many indigenous peoples have problems related to not being the powerful group in society.	True	False
4. Some indigenous languages have been lost because no one knows how to speak them any more.	True	False
5. Many indigenous peoples have lost their homes because governments and companies take their land.	True	False
6. There is no legal protection for indigenous peoples in New Zealand or Ecuador.	True	False
7. Fewer trees are cut down in areas owned by indigenous communities.	True	False
8. The UN document on the rights of indigenous peoples has completely changed the lives of indigenous people all over the world.	True	False

Task 2

Complete the sentences with the correct word.

1. Indigenous people have a right to live on the land that belonged to their
2. Climate change and the loss of indigenous peoples' land are consequences of in the Amazon.
3. It is important for indigenous communities to have legal and political
4. The UN estimates that we are losing more than 80,000 of rainforest every day.
5. Many indigenous people have a lot of knowledge about their natural
6. In 2007 the UN created a of indigenous peoples' rights.
7. Protecting indigenous peoples' rights also brings environmental for the planet.
8. Action needs to be taken to make sure that indigenous people have equal access to education and

Discussion

What do you know about the indigenous peoples of your part of the world?

Answers

Preparation task

1. d
2. g
3. b
4. e
5. f
6. h
7. c
8. a

Task 1

1. True
2. False
3. True
4. True
5. True
6. False
7. True
8. False

Task 2

1. ancestors
2. deforestation
3. representation
4. acres
5. surroundings
6. declaration
7. benefits
8. healthcare