

**WCS Statement Delivered April 23, 2025, at the 24th Session of
The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**

**Agenda Item 3 Implementing the UNDRIP within UN Member States and the UN
System: Identifying Good Practices and Addressing Challenges**

[Link to video testimony](#)



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We, Sushil Raj, Executive Director of Rights and Communities, and Dawa Yangi Sherpa, Global Social Safeguards Specialist, are honored to address you today on behalf of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), working across more than 60 countries around the world. Our vision is for life across the planet to be rich and regenerative, where Indigenous Peoples flourish, their rights are secured, and their stewardship of ancestral lands respected. Our vision draws from Indigenous values where humanity recognizes itself as part of nature – not separate from it.

In order to further this vision, we center the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in our work and ally with more than 205 Indigenous Peoples and 1500+ local communities to implement a human rights-based approach to conservation that protects and restores nature as a whole. We do so while addressing multiple threats of the climate crises, biodiversity loss, and zoonotic pathogens that endanger our collective health and well-being.

As a global conservation organization WCS has a unique role working in collaboration with governments and Indigenous Peoples & Local Communities (IP&LCs) where we often play a bridge. Through these partnerships, we aim to drive meaningful and positive changes in our conservation efforts by focusing on the implementation of

UNDRIP and **CEDAW General Recommendation No. 39** on Indigenous women and girls.

We are working with Indigenous Peoples & local communities (IP&LCs) to sustain biocultural diversity by **integrating the principle of self-determination** into our institutional and operational practices. Through this approach, we have co-designed strategies with Indigenous communities across our field sites, ensuring their values, knowledge, priorities, and expertise guide our work. For example, in Canada, WCS has partnered for over a decade with the Ross River Dena Council, along with the Yukon Government and Government of Canada, honoring self-determination of Kaska Nation's vision for an [Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area](#) that sustains the biocultural diversity of their ancestral lands.

In our commitment to upholding the UNDRIP through concrete, field-level implementation, we have developed **FPIC (Free, Prior, and Informed Consent) guidance materials for our field teams** that operationalize UNDRIP in areas where implementation is complex and unclear. These tools provide practical support for honoring the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples across all stages of our project and program activities. As an example of the meaningful implementation of the right to self-determination, we spent seven years engaging in an extensive [Free, Prior, and Informed Consent \(FPIC\) process with over 9,000 Indigenous Peoples from more than 100 communities in Papua New Guinea](#). This process led to the co-creation of two Marine Protected Areas. The result is a win-win for all: Indigenous Peoples, the national government, conservationists, private actors, and nature itself.

Given the nature of threats our planet faces, we need a greater alignment between Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, local communities, funders, academics, and conservation organizations. We have dedicated efforts to creating **intercultural spaces** through the Conservation and Human Rights Forum that promotes dialogue and mutual respect among diverse cultures, worldviews, and expressions while simultaneously centering UNDRIP. By fostering these exchanges, we aim to build shared knowledge that shapes our thinking, design, and governance.

Apart from sharing some good practices, we would like to request the UN Permanent Forum to prioritize the following in its recommendations to address what we see as the challenges of realizing UNDRIP:

1. **Advance the Indigenous Peoples' inherent collective rights to lands and territories**: We urge UN Member States to mainstream Indigenous Peoples' rights by fully operationalizing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the rights to self-determination within their national frameworks. Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) should be a major point of reference for addressing the challenges Indigenous Peoples face in the context of laws, policies, programs and activities that affect their rights.
2. **Recognize Indigenous Peoples as right holders over their lands and territories**: In alignment with the UNDRIP (Article 32), we urge UN Member

states to recognize Indigenous Peoples as right holders, rather than stakeholders or beneficiaries, to affirm their autonomy and self-determination.

3. **Center Indigenous Peoples worldviews and traditional knowledge to promote their well-being:** Indigenous Peoples worldviews hold specific attachment deeply rooted in their spiritual, cultural, and ancestral connection to lands and territories. Their distinct modes of production are grounded in deep knowledge of their environment, shaping unique systems of governance, customary laws, and norms that are linked to their well-being. Therefore, we urge UN Member States to recognize and address the hierarchical structures in knowledge production that excludes, marginalizes and fails to integrate Indigenous Peoples worldviews and traditional knowledge.
4. **Advance awareness of Indigenous Peoples rights to self-identification and self-determination:** There is a persistent exclusion of Indigenous Peoples rooted in a widespread lack of awareness—including decision-making authority within governments, law enforcement authorities and judiciary bodies —of Indigenous Peoples rights, including legal protections, and their fundamental rights to self-identification and self-determination. We urge UN Member States to address barriers to legal awareness both within UN member states and Indigenous communities and address gaps in Indigenous Peoples’ rights to identity and self-determination.
5. **Prioritize Indigenous Youth through leadership:** In addition to a lack of awareness about their rights to self-identification and self-determination, Indigenous Youth are struggling with identity and awareness of their rights due to the historical and political context of marginalization, discrimination, exclusion, along with a legacy of assimilation and colonialism. We urge UN Member States and the UN System to prioritize Indigenous Youth leadership, adopt an intersectional approach, and simultaneously address intergenerational trauma.

For any questions or comments, Dawa Yangi Sherpa, Social Safeguards Technical Specialist, WCS at dsherpa@wcs.org.

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