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UN forum delegates urge recognition of indigenous communities' right to water



Delegates at the ninth session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

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Indigenous communities are often not consulted when decisions are made on the use and management of water sources, despite the fact the access to the resource is vital for their cultural vitality and resilience, delegates attending the United Nation forum on indigenous issues said today.

“Indigenous peoples are either sidelined or marginalized” when authorities legislate on water, which is considered a resources for economic gain, and the right of indigenous peoples to “original ownership” of water is ignored, said Valmaine Toki, a member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues from New Zealand.

“Policies implemented by governments do not include an indigenous perspectives to water, rather what we see are examples of mismanagement, allocation to intensive agriculture practices and extractive industries... which obviously results in pollution of waterways, ecosystems and livelihoods causing detriment and harm to indigenous people,” she said.

“Indigenous voices call strongly for their rights to be recognized not only within management, but also the ownership and governance of water.”

Bertie Xavier, a member of the forum from Guyana, called for concerted efforts by States, organisations and UN agencies to draft a development strategy to protect the world's resources, particularly among indigenous communities.

Stressing the importance of conserving water sources for indigenous communities, Tia Oros Peters, a Native American, spoke of the world becoming "dry and barren" as a result of humanity's unsustainable use of water. She described the trend as "aquacide, the killing of water. We cannot survive if water is dead," said Ms. Peters.

"If indigenous people are unable to go the springs where our people first emerged from, if they are unable to go to inland lakes, the salt seas, where we give prayers and offering... the people die, the culture dies, the identity, a history, a knowledge that is linked to a place and to a life way, and to a world philosophy that is linked to a water way. That dies.

"That kills the ability of a people to perpetuate their self-determination and to continue to evolve their culture."

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