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## Next Steps

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“A Challenge to Conservationists” appeared in *WorldWatch* close to a year ago – it came out in the November/December issue, but a near-final draft had already been circulating, informally yet widely, for a couple of months – and it had a far greater impact than I had imagined. On the one hand, it brought out into the open a number of negative trends that were being perceived by many people throughout the world. There was nothing new or original in what I wrote, and I believe that this was the primary reason so many people could identify with the article. They understood what I was writing about and many pointed to examples of similar abuses of power in their own regions. In the months following the publication of the article I received an avalanche of phone calls and e-mails that pointed to problems people were having with WWF, TNC, and CI in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Canada and the United States. The patterns were similar everywhere.

The responses of the three Big International NGOs, or BINGOS – a term first used by the collection of donors involved in early criticism of the conservationists, only to be discarded by these same donors as the controversy heated up – was defensive. In their letters to *WorldWatch*, all three used the same model, as if they had taken it from the same style manual: they began by claiming that the issues raised in the article were important and worthy of consideration; then they noted that it was a shame that the article contained so many errors (which they didn’t list); and finally they ticked off a string of examples of how they worked lovingly and successfully with indigenous peoples here and there. At the same time, they all mounted a blitz, on the radio and their web pages, and with their donors, to refute the article (this consisted mainly of more examples of “successful projects.” WWF even set up an office to deal with the article; it has been trying to piece together interviews with people overseas to highlight its successes with indigenous peoples.

My sense is that all three see the article, primarily if not exclusively, as a threat to their image, and of course if their image is tarnished they will suffer in the fundraising arena. It all comes down to money and their increasing dependence on large amounts of it to keep their ever expanding programs afloat. I have seen no particular interest on their part to change the substance of their programs. Note that all of the responses coming from the Big Three have been handled by their public relations divisions; everything dealing with the article is routed through these divisions and must be cleared by them before making its way back out to the public. They see this as a PR problem, something to be dealt with by the PR wings of the different organizations.

While the conservationist NGOs have been doing their best to sweep the controversy into the dustbin and continue on with business as usual, there has been a confused and

extremely ambivalent reaction from the private foundations and donors who have, for years, supported the conservationists. It should be remembered that some of these same foundations, big and small, were instrumental in first bringing the issues of abuse by the NGOs up for inspection. The Ford Foundation, having received a large number of complaints of abuses from the field, commissioned a study and hired two social scientists to investigate and write up the economic and social/institutional aspects of the relationship between the NGOs and “indigenous and traditional peoples.” Other foundations – MacArthur, Moriah, Wallace Global, Christensen, and CS Mott among them – were also involved in these discussions at the early stages, with a number of other donors observing timidly from the periphery. So we can say that these donors were at the very least disturbed by the increasing corpulence and arrogant behavior of the Big Three. While I was writing the article, several of them fed me information in the form of internal memos, reports, conversations, and summaries of meetings. Their general take was that the BINGOs had grown out of hand and in many cases were causing more harm than good. Several said they felt that the NGOs had lost their way, forgotten their mission, and were locked into battles among themselves to raise money. The drive to pull money out of corporations was heating up, with the Big Three going after the bank accounts of companies such as Wal-Mart, CocaCola, Merck, Chevron-Texaco, Shell, etcetera was quite disturbing, a sign that laying their hands on money was outstripping their sense of ethics. Some of the activities of these corporations were even causing increased deforestation, contamination, and the violation of human rights. All of these trends were behind their growing concern over the direction the BINGOs had taken.

When the article appeared, however, most of these same foundations scurried back into cover. It became evident to many readers that while the most intense light was shining on the conservationists, the donors agencies that had been funding them, and continued to fund them, were also exposed to criticism. Private foundations are held accountable for their grantmaking by their boards and they are extremely sensitive to criticism (USAID is likewise held accountable by Congress, while the World Bank is largely impervious to critique.). It doesn't reflect well on them if the organizations they fund are exposed as bloated and abusive frauds. The Ford Foundation, although it had spearheaded the investigation into the BINGOs, was doubly vulnerable because it was already being investigated by a congressional committee for alleged funding of terrorist groups in the Near East. Beyond all of this, foundations were spooked by ongoing attempts by congressional Republicans to strip them of their non-profit status and gut charitable giving. In this climate, what they least wanted was a scandal.

As a consequence, we ended up with a bitter-sweet situation in which many of the donors privately agreed with the tone and substance of the article while turning the other way in public. Some foundation representatives feared for their jobs and kept their distance. There were some attempts to bring the issues up in meetings of the Environmental Grantmakers Association, but these were promptly squashed. It was all very awkward. The end result was that few of the funders wanted to be in any way linked to follow-up on the BINGO controversy. It was simply too hot for them – they were standing too near the flame – and they quietly and discretely dropped it.

So, where are we with the central theme of relations between BINGOs and indigenous and traditional peoples? My sense is that the BINGOs are not going to change their behavior in any meaningful way. They are too big, too rich and powerful, and they don't want to overhaul their programs and take in indigenous peoples. To emphasize this stance, they have largely dropped the term "indigenous" and substituted "poor," "disadvantaged," and "marginalized" people. They have openly rejected the Millennium Development Goal of alleviating poverty, saying that they are concerned with conservation, not "social welfare." They want to continue controlling the conservation agenda and they will continue to be gatekeepers and run their own offices in as many countries as possible. They will continue to move away from the strategy, so widespread a decade ago, of building local capacity to carry out conservation work as they move into the spotlight themselves.

All of these various trends have money at the root. The Big Three are large and need constant infusions of cash to survive and continue expanding. I believe that while we will have trouble influencing their behavior and bringing them back in line with their original missions, we can have influence over those that support their work: the donors. This is where we should concentrate our efforts over the coming years.

Donors of all types – private foundations, NGOs, European organizations, and bi- and multilateral agencies – frequently express the view that programs being carried out in indigenous regions need to have the full participation of the local population. But while this is a stated principle, the reality is often otherwise. At the present time, there are few indigenous organizations that donors feel confident enough about to give their support. Those indigenous organizations that do exist tend to be weak both administratively and programmatically, and they are often unable to satisfy the legal requirements that most donors demand. For these and other reasons, donors generally avoid indigenous organizations. If they do make an effort to support them, they tend to go through intermediary groups – an arrangement that sometimes works but is more often unsatisfactory to the indigenous peoples who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of the assistance (the use of WWF, TNC, and CI as intermediaries is a case in point). Today, even this minimal level of support is shrinking, to the point where many indigenous organizations are withering and disappearing.

If there is a genuine desire to reach indigenous peoples, build the capacity of their organizations, and foster their self-determination, we need to first understand why this situation exists. We can only do this by looking at the way indigenous peoples and their organizations operate, the way they make decisions and go about implementing them, their strengths and weaknesses, their assumptions and expectations, and their needs. The assumptions, expectations, and operational style of the various donors that presently touch or might possibly touch the lives of indigenous peoples also need to be looked at. In this way, the different perspectives and worldviews can be compared and discussed, and perhaps with this we can begin to understand the dynamics of the relationship. Then we might be able to figure out how indigenous peoples and donors can work together to their mutual benefit and satisfaction.

What are we currently dealing with? Funding patterns for years have favored the large NGOs over small NGOs, and especially over indigenous organizations. This is particularly evident with the bi- and multilateral agencies, whose procedures are tailor-made for the big NGOs. They operate with large grants – in the millions of dollars – and find it difficult, if not impossible, to support the smaller groups overseas, which quite simply cannot manage large sums of money (and it would be disastrous for them to try). Beyond this, many of the bi- and multilateral grants are for regional programs spanning several countries, something that calls for trans-border coordination that indigenous organizations cannot readily handle.

Private foundations likewise find it hard to work with small local groups overseas, for somewhat different reasons. While they don't generally have the "problem" of sending out grants of \$5 million to \$30 million (unless they are located in San Francisco), they have trouble supervising grants in the field. Whether they are large or small, they tend to have small staffs, their representatives spend little if any time visiting grantees in distant jungles, and they are justifiably skittish about giving grants to groups they don't know well and have little opportunity to monitor. (European agencies, discussed below, have similar difficulties; but they often hire consultants to be their eyes and ears.)

There are also cases where foundations have given grants to indigenous peoples, with disappointing results. During the flurry over the Quincentenary (1992), the MacArthur Foundation gave out some 40 grants to indigenous groups throughout the Americas. There was no monitoring in the field. When the program was finished, an evaluator found that the only eight final reports had been submitted. It was not that the groups had not used their money wisely; it was just that they didn't do the required reporting. In large part this was due to misunderstanding, where the Foundation and its grantees were carrying different assumptions and different standards.

Also, few foundations have program offices into which indigenous peoples can easily fit. Many indigenous organizations end up being tossed into either the Human Rights or the Environment office. This is often a bad fit (Human Rights officers, for example, tend to see "ethnic" groups as outside their sphere for historical reasons.). When indigenous peoples in Latin America are lumped with peasants (Mestizos, Ladinos), they generally lose out because they are less aggressive in the pursuit of funds. Environmental officers, for their part, often come from the biological sciences and have no expertise in working with indigenous peoples.

These are, to a large extent, structural problems that can be addressed. But first we have to try to understand them. To meet this need, I propose an in-depth, multi-year assessment of the relations between indigenous peoples and donors, with an eye to emerging with recommendations and guidelines as to how grantmaking to indigenous organizations might be effectively carried out. Latin America would be an excellent place to start.