Florida High Schools Model United Nations

FHSMUN GULF COAST 11

ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES

THE CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS OF COLONIALISM

Authors: Fay Zhao, Emily Dorman, Miki Kimura, Gabrielle Scott

December 2025

Introduction: Resource Extraction and Commercial Activity

There are approximately 476 million Indigenous people in the world, with 5000 unique groups living in more than 90 countries.[1] Indigenous land holds much of the world's natural capital. The indigenous peoples have fought to keep the lands beneath them theirs—for their uses, cultural practices, and right to self-determination. Land plays a pivotal role in shaping the cultural, social, and spiritual spheres of each indigenous community.[2] The fight to keep what is theirs is an ever ongoing process with the government, industries, and colonial powers seeking to extract resources and impose on Indigenous lands. Because of this, indigenous communities struggle to preserve their land, culture, and the longevity of their population.

In just Latin America, Indigenous peoples physically occupy 404 million hectares—greater than France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Norway, and Spain combined.[3] Out of the 404 million hectares, only 269.3 million hectares are recognized by governments. The remaining 135 million hectares, which largely consists of the forests in the Amazon Basin, are vulnerable to deforestation and commercial exploitation of the lands.

Among Brazilian Amazon indigenous territories, deforestation has increased by 129% since 2013 as well as an increase in illegal mining areas. Deforestation has drastically impacted the environment in which indigenous families live. As the trees reduce greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation led to an increase in 96 million tons of CO_2 into the atmosphere from 2013 to 2021 which is 1.83 times greater than the annual average of Brazilian emissions.[4] In addition to the environmental impact on the country as a whole, the commercial activities on the territory inhabited by indigenous people that are unprotected offsets the cultural practices of the indigenous people which are often performed in harmony with the environment. Such practices, including agroforestry, fishing, and subsistence hunting are stopped because of the commercial activities.

Because of the expansionary approach among different powers, extractive projects lead to the destruction of many indigenous cultural sites and cultural artifacts. While there have been legislation passed aimed at protecting these lands such as the Free Exercise Clause and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, the effectiveness of those acts are questionable. Often, judges fail to comprehend the spiritual significance of these lands, thus yielding these spaces for private and public sectors. An example of this include the destruction of sacred sites

---

[1] Indigenous Peoples, AMNESTY INT'L, https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-wedo/indigenous-peoples/ [https://perma.cc/D2ZQ-4AE2].

[2] UNPFII Mandated Areas - Environment, U.N. DEP'T OF ECON. AND SOC. AFFS., https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/mandated-areas1/environment. html [https://perma.cc/RZP3-2L6F].

[3] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *The Forests in the Indigenous Peoples' Territories*. Rome: FAO, 2021. Accessed October 31, 2025. https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/27b4e6b5-30b2-4e47-aaab-0505afa387d7/content/src/html/the-forests-in-the-indigenous-peoples-territories.html#map1

[4] Silva-Junior, Celso H. L., Fabrício B. Silva, Barbara Maisonnave Arisi, Guilherme Mataveli, Ana C. M. Pessôa, Nathália S. Carvalho, João B. C. Reis, Admo R. Silva Júnior, Nathalia A. C. S. Motta, Paulo Vinícius Moreira e Silva, Francarlos Diniz Ribeiro, Juliana Siqueira-Gay, Ane Alencar, Sassan Saatchi, Luiz E. O. C. Aragão, and Liana O. Anderson. "Brazilian Amazon Indigenous Territories under Deforestation Pressure." *Scientific Reports* 13 (2023): 5851. Accessed October 31, 2025.

such as Monument Hill due to construction of the U.S. border wall.[5] Projects such as Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) sparked national debate over fossil fuel infrastructure and the mistreatment of the Indigenous Peoples in the US. DAPL is a 1172 mile underground pipeline that transports crude oil. At its crossing over the Standing Rock Reservation, a leak could contaminate the reservation's water, causing great risk for the indigenous communities there. While the Crops protected Bismark residents by rejecting their initial proposal, they turned a blind eye to Standing Rock's same concerns.[6] This selective treatment reflects the lack of concern over indigenous populations and their resources.

While there are protective policies over indigenous lands and resources such as the UN declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, there is not enough consistency for policies to fully protect indigenous lands.[7] There are constant loopholes, lack of acknowledgement from institutional powers, and more which continues to impact indigenous people and their lands.

Funding

According to the 2025 State of the World's Indigenous Peoples, despite protecting over 80 percent of the world's biodiversity, Indigenous communities receive less than one percent of international climate funding.[8] This disparity is not rooted in a lack of capacity, but in systemic colonial patterns that concentrate resources in government and corporate control. Historically, colonial powers would extract wealth and materials from Indigenous lands without reinvesting local infrastructure or self-governance initiatives. Today, many of those communities are left with limited access and education about financial resources necessary to rebuild resilient ecosystems, develop sustainable infrastructure, and respond to climate disasters.

The consequences of financial inequity are an intense obstacle to the well being of indigenous communities. In the United States for example, more than two dozen rural and tribal communities in Alaska sued the Environmental Protection Agency after the cancellation of $2.8 billion in flood mitigation and resilience projects in 2025.[9] For many Indigenous villages, some already facing coastal erosion and displacement, this funding represented the difference between adaptation and disappearance.

In the United States, the consequences of financial inequity are stark. In 2025, more than two dozen rural and tribal communities in Alaska sued the Environmental Protection Agency

---

[5] United States Government Accountability Office. *Southwest Border: Cultural and Natural Resource Impacts from Barrier Construction*, GAO-24-107127. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Accountability Office, October 18 2023. Accessed October 31, 2025.

[6] Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian. "The Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL)." *Native Knowledge 360° – Northern Plains Treaties: Is a Treaty Intended to Be Forever?* Washington, D.C. Accessed October 31, 2025.

[7] United Nations. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.* A/RES/61/295. New York : United Nations, 2007. Accessed October 31, 2025.

[8] https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/04/1162601#:~:text=Launched%20on%20Thursday%2C%20The%20State%20of%20the%20World%E2%80%99s,than%20one%20per%20cent%20of%20international%20climate%20funding

[9] https://www.kyuk.org/politics/2025-08-04/rural-communities-tribes-sue-epa-over-2-8b-in-canceled-funding-for-flood-mitigation-and-resilience-projects

after the cancellation of $2.8 billion in flood mitigation and resilience projects. For many Indigenous villages, some already facing coastal erosion and displacement, this funding represented the difference between adaptation and disappearance. The lawsuit underscored a deeper issue: despite being among the first to experience the climate crisis, Indigenous tribes often face bureaucratic barriers that delay or deny their access to national disaster relief and environmental funding. These gaps reflect systemic inequities rooted in a history of broken treaties and economic dependency enforced by federal control.

Similar challenges emerge in the Global South. Across the Amazon Basin, Indigenous communities in Peru have been excluded from carbon offset projects that use their territories for forest conservation. While these projects generate millions in international climate finance, local Indigenous nations often see none of the benefits, and in some cases, suffer land restrictions that limit traditional livelihoods.[10] In response, the creation of the Indigenous Amazon Fund, launched in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has offered a corrective model. This fund provides direct access to climate finance for Indigenous-led initiatives in forest preservation, education, and sustainable livelihoods, showing how Indigenous governance can be both environmentally and economically effective when adequately supported.[11]

In contrast, New Zealand's Māori iwi have made progress through the reinvestment of land settlement funds into Indigenous-run sustainability projects. Guided by the Māori principle of *kaitiakitanga*, guardianship of the natural world, many iwi have established environmental trusts to manage renewable energy initiatives, coastal restoration, and cultural education.[12] These projects not only generate revenue but also restore ancestral stewardship over land and water. The Māori experience demonstrates that when funding is paired with sovereignty and cultural knowledge, Indigenous communities can lead some of the most innovative environmental solutions in the world.

These case studies illustrate that the struggle for funding is ultimately a struggle for self-determination. The United Nations has called for the creation of Indigenous-led financial mechanisms, formal recognition of Indigenous governance systems, and protection of data sovereignty, ensuring communities control information about their lands and resources. To achieve true environmental justice, climate finance must move beyond token participation and instead empower Indigenous peoples to design, manage, and evaluate the projects that affect their futures.[13] Until funding structures are decolonized, climate action will continue to reproduce

---

[10] Lastra Landa, Dafne E., and Claudia V. Grados Bueno. "'Climate Change Might Have Caused Our Small Harvest': Indigenous Vulnerability, Livelihoods, and Environmental Changes in Lowland and High Jungle Indigenous Communities in Peru." Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences 12 (September 15, 2021). https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-021-00722-0.

[11] UNDP Climate Promise. "Direct Grants to Indigenous Peoples | UNDP Climate Promise," July 31, 2024. https://climatepromise.undp.org/what-we-do/flagship-initiatives/direct-grants-indigenous-peoples.

[12] Panther, Thomas. "Māori Land Conservation." ArcGIS StoryMaps. Esri, December 16, 2022. https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/6cb8b64158584ec68a3d434291e20bca.

[13] Sustainability Directory. "Decolonizing Climate Finance Mechanisms for Indigenous Communities → Scenario." Prism → Sustainability Directory, April 26, 2025. https://prism.sustainability-directory.com/scenario/decolonizing-climate-finance-mechanisms-for-indigenous-communities/.

the same patterns of exclusion that have long undermined both Indigenous rights and global sustainability.

Education

For many Indigenous peoples in Canada, education was historically a tool of erasure rather than empowerment. Colonial policies such as the residential school system sought to assimilate First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children, cutting them off from their languages, land-based traditions, and ecological knowledge. These schools not only cut off the transmission of culture, but also undermined the traditional stewardship that had for so long sustained the forests, rivers and wildlife in this region. In this evolution lies the fact that the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation of Canada (TRC)[14], established in 2008, recommended that the recognition of aboriginal knowledge systems be included in all educational curricula. Some provinces, such as British Columbia and Ontario, have followed the recommendations of this. Then there are those, as at the University of Manitoba or Trent, who have set up degree courses in which western ethology is combined with native cosmologies. At the University of British Columbia the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC)[15] works in partnership with First Nations to organize education directed towards restoring salmon spawning grounds, preserving the old growth stands of fir trees, maintaining cedar-kinship by learning their fishing traditions, learning how to handle the new growth and growing trees.

Nevertheless, the task ahead is demanding, since differences in financing, varying and uneven implementation across the provinces, and the need for new organisations, especially those under aboriginal control, continue to impede progress. Education, empowered by the culture and the knowledge that it derives from it, seeks to repair both the spiritual and the material damage left behind by colonial policies. The teaching of young First Nations people that caring for the land is part of their very being, and all students that view the land with this relational lens, all learners are able to transform education from a colonial tool of control into a common stewardship through education.[16] Canada's experience, however, suggests that educational justice is essential to support equal rights to the land.

Cultural Preservation and Language Revitalization

Throughout history, colonial powers sought to dismantle Indigenous identity by suppressing languages and cultural practices. Missionary education and boarding school systems in North America, Oceania, and Latin America were designed to "civilize" Indigenous children

[14] "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada." NCTR, April 21, 2025. https://nctr.ca/about/history-of-the-trc/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-of-canada/.
[15] "About FNESC." First Nations Education Steering Committee FNESC. Accessed October 30, 2025. https://www.fnesc.ca/about-fnesc/
[16] First, "First Nation YouthBuild Canada." First Nation YouthBuild Canada, 2018. https://fnybc.org/global-partners.

by erasing their native languages and replacing community-based knowledge with Western norms. These policies severed generational ties to cultural expression and collective memory. Because language encodes ecological wisdom, such as knowledge of local plants, water systems, and seasonal rhythms, its loss signifies cultural erosion and the loss of sustainable environmental practices.

Today, Indigenous communities around the world are leading efforts to reclaim their languages as a means of rebuilding both identity and governance. In Aotearoa, New Zealand, Māori revitalization has flourished through *Kōhanga Reo* (language nest) immersion preschools and *Kura Kaupapa Māori* schools, which teach entirely in te reo Māori[17]. These institutions have not only revived fluency but also re-centered environmental stewardship under the Māori concept of *kaitiakitanga*, the sacred duty of guardianship over the natural world. Similarly, in Hawai‘i, the *Aha Pūnana Leo* movement (founded in the 1980s) transformed the near-extinct Hawaiian language into a thriving medium of education[18]. Hawaiian language immersion has strengthened local land management projects by reconnecting youth with ancestral ecological principles embedded in words describing winds, currents and soils.

In North America, the revitalization of Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) across the Great Lakes region is another example. Community-run immersion camps and intergenerational storytelling projects have restored linguistic fluency while reinforcing environmental governance rooted in reciprocity with the land[19]. Digital tools (including online dictionaries, podcasts and language apps) further expand access for dispersed tribal members, ensuring that revitalization is not confined to geographic boundaries.

These initiatives demonstrate that language revival is more than cultural preservation, it is political and ecological resurgence. When Indigenous peoples reclaim their words for soil and spirit, they reassert their authority to define sustainable futures on their own terms. For OAS member states, supporting Indigenous-led language revitalization programs is essential not only to protect cultural heritage but to advance environmental justice, biodiversity, and self-determination across the hemisphere.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Indigenous peoples across the world continue to face systemic challenges rooted in colonial exploitation, from resource extraction and environmental degradation to inequitable funding, educational suppression, and cultural erasure. Despite these obstacles, Indigenous communities have demonstrated resilience and leadership in protecting biodiversity, advancing sustainable development, and reclaiming their cultural and linguistic heritage. Their struggles for land rights, equitable access to climate finance, and culturally grounded education

[17] Smith, Graham H. “The Development of Kaupapa Māori: Theory and Praxis.” PhD diss., University of Auckland, 1997.
[18] ‘Aha Pūnana Leo. “About Us.” *‘Aha Pūnana Leo*, 2024. https://www.ahapunanaleo.org/about
[19] ‘About us.’ Aanjibimaadizing Culture and Language Revitalization Project. https://www.culture.aanji.org/about/

reveal that true progress depends on honoring Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge systems. When Indigenous voices are centered in governance, funding, and education, the result is not only cultural survival but the restoration of balanced relationships between people and the planet. Achieving justice for Indigenous communities is thus essential to achieving global sustainability and environmental resilience.

Guiding Questions for Research

1. How can OAS member states address environmental degradation that continues to harm Indigenous communities?
2. What has your nation already done to address environmental injustice?
3. How can UNDRIP and other international frameworks be built upon to best assist Indigenous communities in the Americas?

Guiding Questions for Debate

1. What initiatives can be implemented to acknowledge Indigenous voices and ensure their participation in the decision-making process?
2. How can financial transparency and accountability be maintained in decisions involving Indigenous communities?
3. What sustainable solutions can be implemented to promote land sovereignty and cultural preservation?