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Title: Navigating the Spaces between Human Rights and Justice: Reshaping Indigenous Representation in Global Environmental Governance

As peoples who govern 22% of the global land base, 80% of remaining biodiversity, and 20% of global forest carbon, Indigenous Peoples are critical actors for achieving sustainable development goals that include local livelihood advancement and environmental conservation. The literature on global environmental governance is rich with accounts of the growth of non-state actors in environmental treaty negotiations, especially related to climate change and biodiversity, yet the primary focus has been on the engagement of large, international NGOs in these processes. There is less attention directed to the extent to which and how more marginalized and vulnerable communities directly engage in global environmental governance. Using data collected at four global events through collaborative event ethnography—the 10th Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the 2014 World Parks Congress, the 21st Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the 2016 World Conservation Congress—our research examines how, why, and with what effect Indigenous Peoples and organizations cultivate power to advance their agendas. Through our attention to the politics of representation that emerge at sites of global environmental governance, our research finds that despite promising trends towards indigenous rights and direct representation in global environmental governance, the tendency for nation-states and NGOs to emphasize human rights as the primary, and sometimes sole, objective for addressing the justice concerns of Indigenous Peoples can, instead, further marginalize them. In response, Indigenous representatives leverage tensions between human rights and justice through sometimes surprising acts of resistance. By challenging the sufficiency of human rights as a tool for advancing justice, Indigenous Peoples have steadily carved out a distinct political role in global environmental governance that offers potentially more effective, multivalent, and just modes of governance.

The bold aspiration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to “leave no one behind.” Indigenous Peoples, however, have largely been overlooked in global SDG processes. Our research advances insights to help rethink the possibilities for how SDG governance is constituted and ensure that Indigenous Peoples can continue to make critical and unique contributions to advancing sustainable development on a global scale.