

# *The Cultural Conservancy*

*P.O. Box 72086 Davis, CA 95617 Phone: (415) 455-5957 or (916) 759-2285 Fax: (916) 759-2268*

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## Native Knowledge Working Group

*Fall 1994 Update*

In June, 1993 *The Cultural Conservancy* founder, Patricia J. Cummings organized an invitational gathering entitled The Commodification of the Sacred (COS). The purpose of this gathering was to bring native elders and leaders together to identify efforts to expropriate native knowledge and ways of life, and to discuss and define the appropriate strategic responses. Briefings were given on threats to endangered traditions from biotechnology and life form patenting, the Human Genome Diversity Project, bioprospecting and intellectual property rights, free trade and the new colonialism, cultural preservation and the loss of traditional knowledge. In participant Dagmar Thorpe's words: *"At this important gathering the Native participants affirmed the development of an alliance, the Native Knowledge Working Group, to advance strategic thinking and planning with regard to the issues defined during the gathering. We affirm the leadership of the Cultural Conservancy and their role as an information clearinghouse."*

Over the last year, since the COS gathering, The Conservancy has been building alliances with native groups locally, nationally and internationally along with the Indigenous Peoples' Biodiversity Network (IPBN). TCC Board member Alejandro Argumedo, who is Director of Cultural Survival Canada, is the interim director of IPBN. He has traveled to Geneva and worked with the UN to further lay the foundation for IPBN and has been setting up regional centers in Canada, South America, and Africa. The Cultural Conservancy is the regional center for the U.S.

TCC Executive Director Melissa Nelson attended a recent UNEP meeting in Geneva, Switzerland to represent indigenous concerns in regards to international policy on the Biodiversity Convention. TCC Board member Mililani Trask represents Pacific Islanders, her nation of Hawaii and TCC at UN meetings, and with Patricia Cummings, who is the director of TCC's Native Knowledge Working Group, is active in formulating and implementing indigenous rights policy internationally.

The purposes of the Native Knowledge Working Group are:

- ▶ *Evaluate and make recommendations on international and national policy*
  - ▶ *Build solidarity through IPBN and other native groups and coalitions*
  - ▶ *Educate policy makers and the general public about native knowledge issues*
  - ▶ *Reformulate and adapt legal and institutional structures to native needs*
  - ▶ *When requested by a native group or individual, assist in documenting traditional knowledge systems, conduct educational or technical assistance programs or help design and implement a campaign to save native knowledge and traditional native ways of life.*
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