

PROJECT GREEN CHALLENGE 2025

Day 13

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Greener challenge

INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: THE CASE OF THE SAN PEOPLE OF BOTSWANA

Introduction

Across the world, Indigenous peoples face growing challenges that threaten their rights, livelihoods, and ancestral lands. From deforestation in the Amazon to mining and pipeline construction across sacred territories, Indigenous communities are often at the frontlines of environmental degradation and human rights violations. Despite these pressures, they remain among the most effective stewards of the planet's ecosystems, sustaining biodiversity and cultural heritage through traditional knowledge and community resilience. In Africa, many Indigenous groups continue to defend their lands and way of life against extractive industries and restrictive conservation policies. One such community is the **San people of Botswana**, whose enduring struggle highlights the deep connection between Indigenous sovereignty, environmental protection, and global justice.

The San People of Botswana

The San, also known as the Basarwa or Bushmen, are among the oldest Indigenous peoples in Africa, having lived in the Kalahari Desert region for over 20,000 years. Their livelihood as hunter-gatherers depends on intimate ecological knowledge of the land, flora, and fauna — a knowledge system that has sustained both people and nature across generations. However, over the past few decades, the San have been forcibly removed from their ancestral homes within the **Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR)** under the justification of wildlife conservation and diamond mining (Survival International, 2024).

Although the **Botswana High Court** ruled in 2006 that the government's eviction of the San was unlawful and that they had the right to return to their land, subsequent restrictions on hunting, access to water, and residency permits have continued to undermine their rights (Human Rights Watch, 2014). The San's cultural and spiritual life — deeply tied to specific landscapes and sacred sites — has been gravely affected by these ongoing violations.

Indigenous Leadership and Resilience

In response, the San have organized through movements such as the First People of the **Kalahari (FPK)** and alliances with human rights and environmental organizations. They have used a combination of legal advocacy, international campaigns, and traditional ecological practices to assert their sovereignty. Their resilience is expressed through storytelling, cultural revival, and the protection of ancestral knowledge systems that embody sustainable coexistence with nature (Hitchcock & Vinding, 2004).

The struggle of the San people exemplifies Indigenous leadership rooted in resilience, adaptability, and unity. It highlights that Indigenous resistance is not only about defending territory, but also about preserving worldviews that value balance, respect, and interdependence.

Why Their Struggle Matters

The San people's fight for land and recognition is significant beyond their community. It underscores that environmental protection cannot be achieved without respecting Indigenous rights. By defending their land, the San are also defending one of Africa's most fragile ecosystems — the Kalahari Desert — which plays a crucial role in regional climate stability and biodiversity. Their leadership demonstrates that Indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice are inseparable, reminding the world that protecting Indigenous lands is vital for the well-being of the planet and all its people.

Call to Action

Protecting the rights of the San people — and other Indigenous communities across Africa — requires global solidarity. One concrete step others can take is to **support organizations**

advocating for Indigenous land rights, such as **Survival International**, **IWGIA**, or local San advocacy groups. Sharing their stories, raising awareness about their legal struggles, and supporting fair conservation models that respect Indigenous sovereignty can help ensure that the San's voice, culture, and land continue to thrive for generations to come.

References

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