

Reciprocal learning around burnings: towards participatory and intercultural fire management policy in Venezuela, Brazil and Guyana

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ABSTRACT – There is growing scientific evidence that fire management, as well as other sustainable Indigenous practices, help mitigate climate change, protect the biological and cultural diversity of ecosystems, and promote resilience. However, Indigenous peoples' participation in policy making and management of their own territories is very limited. This paper presents findings from a fire management workshop where experiences and perspectives were shared among 60 academic, government and Indigenous representatives from 25 organisations from Venezuela, Brazil and Guyana. The workshop was divided into different group working sessions that used the soft systems methodology of analysing the current situation with regards to the importance of fire in everyday life and Indigenous culture, b) institutional, scientists and Indigenous perspectives, approaches and concerns about fire management in Indigenous territories, c) new approaches to an intercultural and participative fire governance. In spite of the tensions and concerns expressed by the different groups of participants around the past imposition of a dominant fire exclusion discourse of governmental institutions in Indigenous territories, a shared sense emerged during the meeting: to go beyond bitter experiences of the past in order to build a new fire management policy that integrates Indigenous knowledge together with scientific and institutional knowledge and skills. Thus, the evidence and experiences shared at the meeting allowed the participants to: a) acknowledge the importance and value of fire for long term sustainability of ecosystems, humans culture and survival; b) accept new approaches and perceptions about fire (“fire as friend”, “fire as a tool”, “management, planning, prevention, and control of fire”, instead of “combat, suppression and exclusion of fire”, “fire as enemy”); and c) integrate and transcend different ways of knowing, perspectives, lessons learned and understanding fire behaviour and its impacts through the ‘intercultural interface’ of institutions working on environmental management and governance. The creation of a “Participatory and Intercultural Fire Management Network” by all the meeting participants and elaboration of a common declaration and next steps to enhance a sustainable fire policy and practice implementation, revealed the conviction of working and learning together for Indigenous fire management legitimization and strengthening in countries of the region.

Keywords: Fire management policies; Indigenous traditional knowledge; intercultural; Venezuela; Brazil; Guyana

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