You're invited to a live Zoom event about Biocultural Abundance on Nov. 26th. Register here!

From the Field

A Quest for "Vitality" in Conservation: A Conversation Between ICCA Consortium Co-founder Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend and Terralingua Co-founder Luisa Maffi

After a promising early start in physics, Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend discovers what — and who — really matters in life.

September 28, 2025

Women discussing environmental care in Burkina Faso, 2004. Photo: Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend

A Conversation Between Two Powerhouse Women

What happens when two powerhouse women, whose ground-breaking social and environmental work has dovetailed for four decades, get together for a Zoom chat? You get an animated, wide-ranging conversation with plenty of surprises, insights, and humor along the way. And here you can be the fly on the wall!

Meet Dr. Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend, **Co-Founder and former Global Coordinator of the ICCA Consortium**, in conversation with Dr. Luisa Maffi, **Co-Founder and Executive Director of Terralingua**.

Physics? Easier Than It Seems!

Luisa: Grazia, we have known each other for forty years! Do you remember how we first met? It was in the mid-1980s at UC Berkeley, where I had just started my doctoral studies in anthropology. I saw that a seminar was being offered by a fellow Italian. The seminar was in the social sciences, but you were a physicist… That grabbed my attention!

Grazia: Ah, yes! I had been doing research in physics at Stanford, and my success at that, which came easy and fast, went a bit to my head. Once you learn the tricks, physics is easier than it seems. Many physicists, including me, can become *arrogant.* Since I had solved some problems in physics, I thought that nothing was impossible for me, including changing my field of research and tackling problems that had become infinitely more important to me than "helium abundance variations in the solar wind"! Problems like human suffering, hunger, injustice — I was about to find out how those subjects are much more difficult to address. But, for me, they would also prove to be far more engaging and rewarding.

Luisa: How did you come to that realization?

"What Truly Makes Sense for Me"

Grazia: After my PhD, what proved to be the good fortune of being unemployed led me to travel for a year in Asia — mostly India. It was there that I discovered what truly makes sense for me. India confronted me with an immense diversity of people and ways of living. It bewildered the young Italian *petite bourgeoise* who had studied two steps away from Galileo's villa and had known only a life of comfort. In India, I saw slums and open sewers, people going hungry, lines of beggars in front of temples, and police brutalities. But I also saw kindness and beauty, abundant everywhere.

When we met at UC Berkeley, Luisa, I had already met Professor Sheldon Margen, who had established the University's School of Public Health. Shelly, as he was known, had become my mentor. He helped me to start my new field of research and, on the side, get a Master's degree in Public Health. Soon, I was teaching with him on matters of health policies and international (so-called) "aid."

"This picture, taken in Southern India in 1979, changed my life. I had a large print of it in my house during all the years I worked in physics at Stanford U. Over time, this photo convinced me that although I excelled at research, I needed to do it for something meaningful to my fellow human beings." Photo: Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend

Luisa: Yes, I remember you were quite critical of "international aid" in the seminar I attended. And I recall our conversations — a cross-pollination of ideas seemed all too natural already then! Soon after our first meeting, however, I moved to southern Mexico for my fieldwork, and we lost touch for a while.

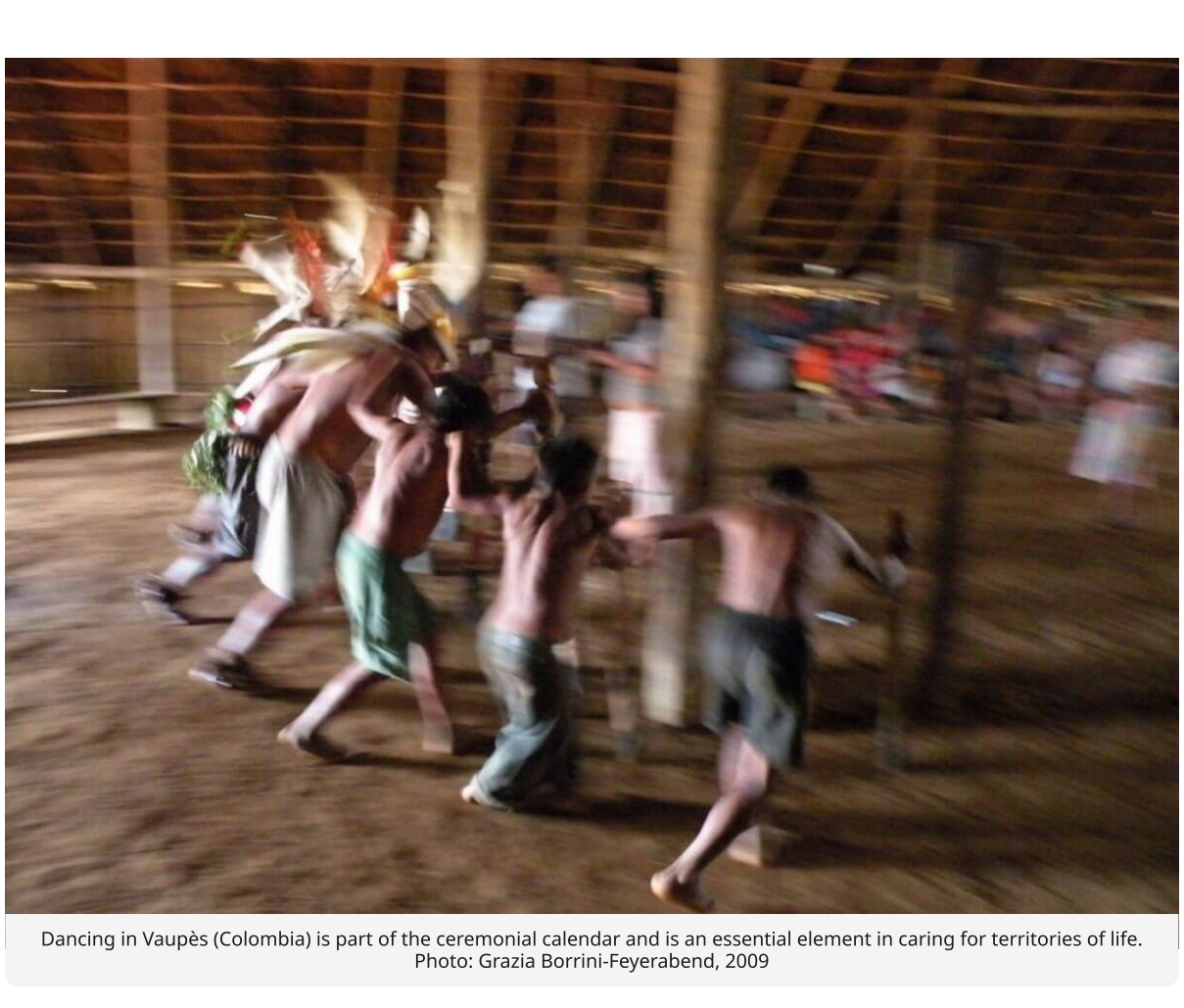
Grazia: In the meantime, Shelly was supporting me to work on interdisciplinary initiatives, in Ecuador, in India, and with the faculty seminars I organized at UC Berkeley. Eventually, I focused on communities empowering themselves to enhance their own health. This was included in the Primary Health Care strategy that the World Health Organization was pursuing toward Health for All by the Year 2000. I found this strategy fascinating, even though I saw it as relatively weak regarding the environmental, cultural, and political determinants of public health.

Luisa: That's really interesting! While doing my fieldwork in Chiapas, I was learning from Mayan people how language and culture are closely associated with the land and how the health of the land is closely associated with the health and well-being of people…

Community Self-determination for Health and the Integrity of Nature

Grazia: These subjects were ripe, were they not? The Declaration of Belém had brought to the fore the loss of Indigenous cultures intertwined with the loss of diversity in Nature. And the widespread reality of endless resource extraction and reckless exploitation of people was emerging. With that mood in the air, my exploration of the determinants of public health and well-being led me to developing the "primary environmental care" approach.

When I moved back to Italy, working at the Italian Institute of Health, I turned all my energy to formulating policies based on that approach and to supporting its practice. Primary environmental care recognizes that communities are intimately connected to their lands — soil, water, plants, animals — and that their health is intrinsically linked to the health of the territories of which they are part. But not only. A meaningful, vibrant culture and a peaceful and supportive political milieu are also necessary for any community to act in self-determination for its own health and the integrity of Nature.

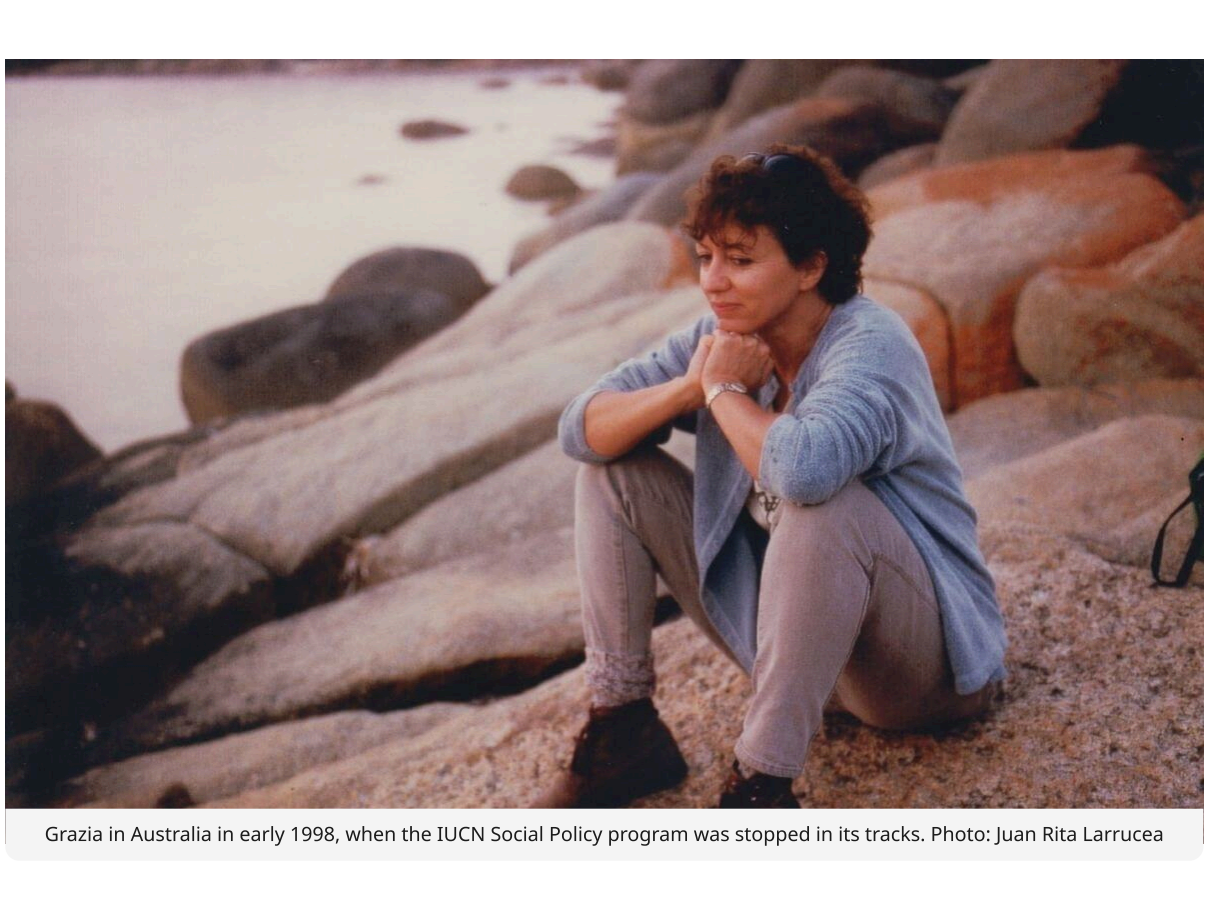

Dancing in Vaupés (Colombia) is part of the ceremonial calendar and is an essential element in caring for territories of life. Photo: Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend, 2009

Luisa: Yes, it was the heady era of the 1992 Rio Summit, when real progress on the environmental agenda seemed so tantalizingly close.

Grazia: There always were discordant voices, but primary environmental care became quite a hot topic! The approach got into Rio's Agenda 21, the revised World Conservation Strategy, the policy discourse of UNICEF, IIED, Oxfam, even OECD!

And then, based on my work on primary environmental care, the **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)** hired me, in late 1993, to set up its Social Policy Program. The program pulled together hundreds of experts who understood the value of engaging Indigenous Peoples and local communities in conservation. Some of them stressed equity considerations, others focused on demonstrated conservation effectiveness. In all, the visibility of "community conservation" bloomed within the Union, possibly even too much.

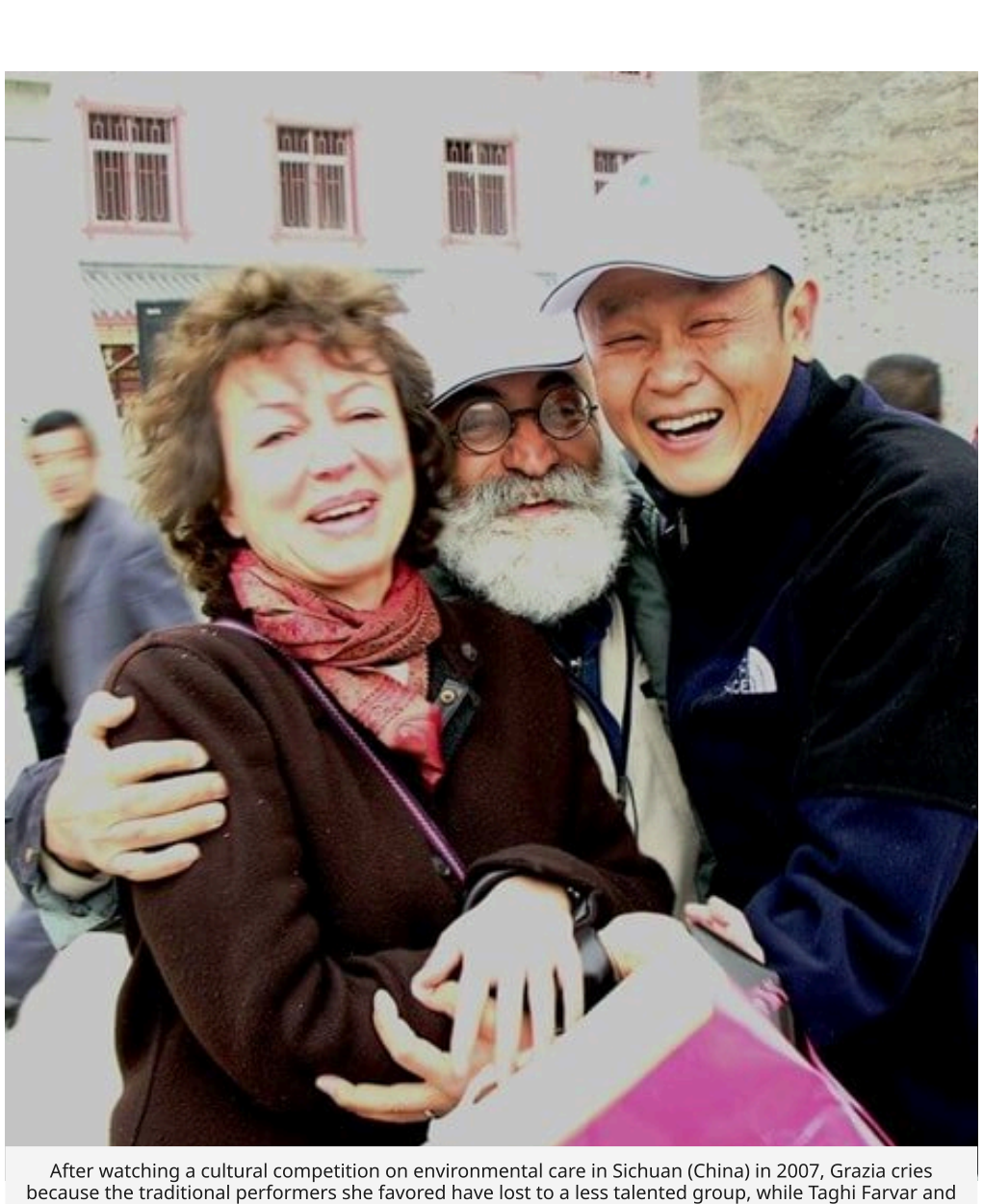
As described in my recent work on territories of life, the Rio Convention had generated a boom for conservation in general, and billions of dollars were pouring in. Inevitably, the substantial resources at play pushed quiet "community conservation" out of the way. In late 1997, the IUCN Social Policy Program was stopped in its tracks.


Grazia in Australia in early 1998, when the IUCN Social Policy program was stopped in its tracks. Photo: Juan Rita Larrucea

Culture and Conservation

Luisa: While you and the Social Policy Program were still thriving within the IUCN Secretariat, I was gravitating toward IUCN and WWF International, and we came into contact again. After my PhD, I had developed the **concept of biocultural diversity** and co-founded Terralingua. You reached out to me to contribute to initiatives on social sustainability and shared governance of nature. I do remember the regression in the field that was countering your and others' efforts… But we did fight back, did we not? Soon, Terralingua and WWF International were developing the first global map of biodiversity and cultural diversity, which came out in 2000.

By then, you were back in the academic branch of IUCN, I'm sure more congenial to your independent spirit than the IUCN Secretariat! If I remember correctly, you were Vice-Chair of two Commissions, working closely with the late **Dr. Mohammed Taghi Farvar**, a champion of community conservation who was then Chair of IUCN's Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy (CEESP).


After watching a cultural competition on environmental care in Sichuan (China) in 2007, Grazia cries because the traditional performers she favored have lost to a less talented group, while Taghi Farvar and Li Bo gently make fun of her tears. Photo: Unknown photographer

Grazia: Yes! And you were one of the first members of CEESP. I remember inviting you to join as soon as I saw your map of the overlaps between biological and cultural diversity! CEESP had the courage to focus on the issues that conservationists tended to overlook: governance, equity, culture, human rights, energy consumption and climate change, extractivism, lack of accountability of the private sector.

For example, the IUCN Secretariat was, by then, insisting on working on "poverty." The compass of international donors had moved toward "eliminating poverty" as a main goal, and working on poverty and the environment would attract at least part of donors' resources. As you know, however, more than poverty it is *wealth* that damages the environment! By seeking, extracting, and consuming ever more resources to feed their own material development and wealth, governments, the rich, and the very rich have immense impacts on Nature.

> *More than poverty, it is wealth that damages the environment!*

Few in conservation organizations had the nerve to discuss such subjects. But CEESP did exactly that. We also discussed that the connections between communities and their territories is fundamental for conservation. And you helped, Luisa, for instance by co-editing the issue of CEESP's ***Policy Matters on Culture and Conservation***.

Luisa: Yes, I very much agreed then, as I still agree now, that culture is the lifeblood of whatever we call "conservation"…

Is "Conservation" a Colonial Idea?

Grazia: All concepts remain, at least in part, embedded in the history and cultures that gave them birth. The conservation institutions that govern protected areas, for instance, emerged from imperial, colonial, and neo-colonial history. Many still strongly reflect such roots, as well as the post-World War II hegemonic powers that divided the world between "developed" and "under-developed" regions and separated all that needs to be exploited from all that needs to be conserved. Because of that, remote professionals keep defining how others should develop, how they should relate to nature, how they should demarcate and run protected areas, and so on.

> *Conservation needs more than investments and detached professionals! It needs community custodians and vibrant cultures.*

All this seems normal to those of us who have internalized the discourse and ways of being of capitalism and professionalism rather than those of pluralism, collective care for Nature, and self-determination. But conservation makes sense only in the long-term and, in the long-term, it needs much more than investments and detached professionals! It needs community custodians and vibrant cultures. It needs live local knowledge and abundant mētis — the tacit capacity to deal with unique local contexts described by the late James C. Scott. It needs experience, care, and social projects in tune with the land.

Luisa: That's right! I believe we both strove to change the narrative in conservation, as we both understand that the narrative determines action and inaction…

Shifting Narratives

Grazia: Exactly! Until about thirty years ago, conservation was all about *management* — the realm of technical proficiency, of reaching management objectives effectively and efficiently. But *governance* is more important than management. It is about who decides objectives and rules and who makes sure, and how, that the objectives and rules are implemented and adhered to in society. Governance is about rights, responsibilities, capacities, and will. And much of that is embedded in the culture of custodian communities.

Governance has been my personal focus for nearly thirty years, including at two World Parks Congresses — in Durban in 2003 and in Sydney in 2014. As I accompanied the narrative shift towards governance in the world of conservation, much changed, within IUCN and in the programs and decisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Some of these changes are dear to both of us, such as connecting custodian rights and responsibilities for nature.

Grazia in front of one of the lagunas of Mojanda, Ecuador, in 2015. These lagunas are protected by rules designed with the active engagement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Photo: Jorge Nahuel

Luisa: You may remember that, during the World Parks Congress in Durban, some of my colleagues started putting out the idea that biocultural diversity had great relevance for protected areas. By then, I think you and I already had a fascinating confluence of perspectives, but that became crystal clear to me only more recently, when I had in my hands your book ***Territories of Life***. Exploring vitality of governance for conserved and protected areas.

There is so much in it that I find germane, but what you just mentioned was truly striking for me: the fact that in the book you stress the importance of **combining collective rights with collective responsibilities**. I believe the separation of rights from responsibilities is fundamental to our disconnection from nature, something I think emerged in the West, from illuminism, rationalism, and industrialization.

A Consortium for Territories of Life

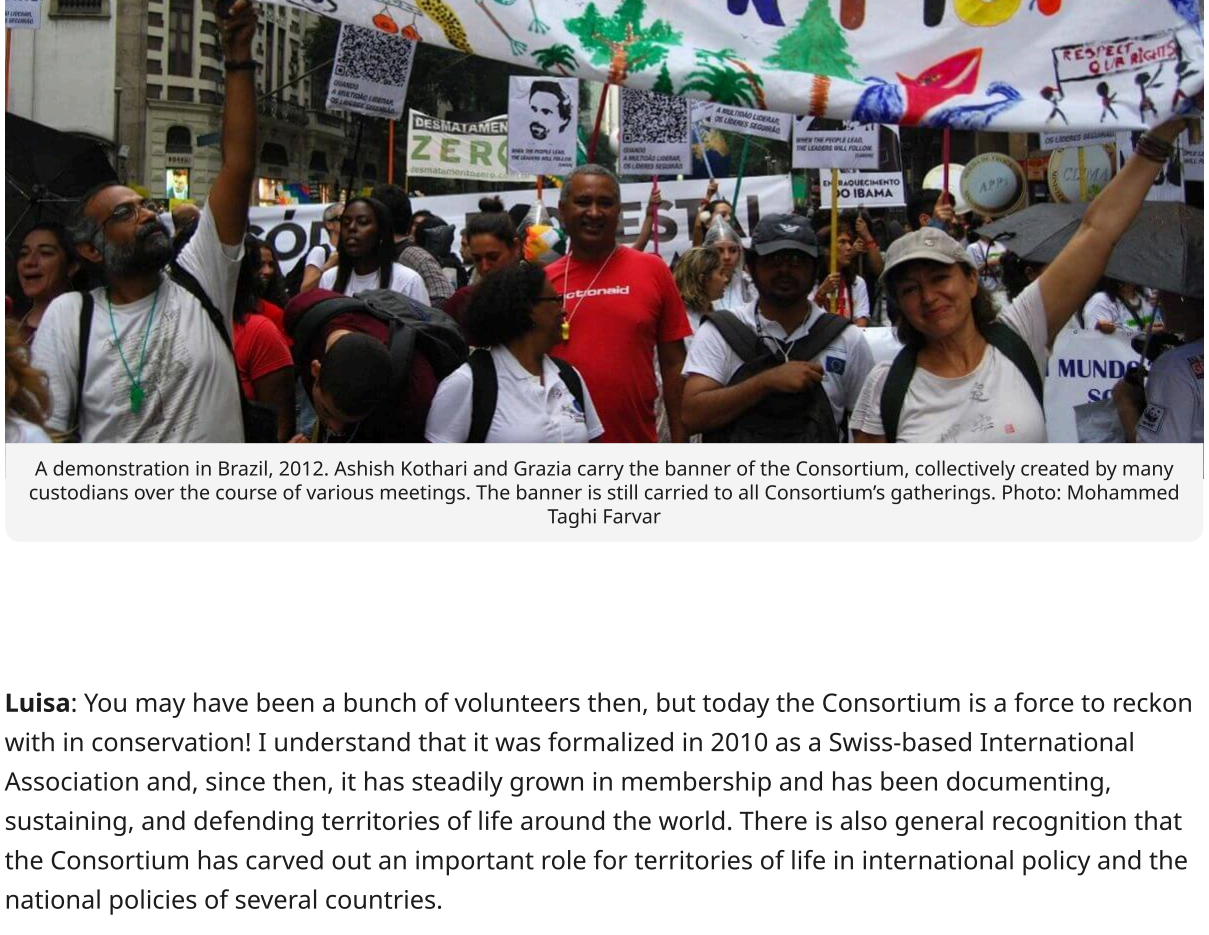
Grazia: One of the benefits of working with international organizations is that it provides opportunities for pulling together diverse experiences. Paying attention to custodians and inviting them to meetings meant that they could share ideas, discuss what they had in common, what they needed.

It was in such meetings that many of us came to understand that traditional knowledge and language are fundamental for territories, but also that, without a firm basis in specific territories, they can easily become abstract. How can they remain alive "up in the air," how can they naturally evolve without connecting to the specific territories that gave birth to them?

> *We had zero money, although we were rich in hugs and volunteering spirit! With that alone, we went on for years.*

This was the shared understanding of many of us who converged in CEESP and worked together for the two World Parks Congresses I mentioned. In-between the two, at the 2008 IUCN Congress in Barcelona, we founded the **ICCA Consortium**. As you know, ICCA is an abbreviation. It stands for "territory or area governed, managed, and conserved by a custodian Indigenous people or local community."

Today, we better and more humanly describe all that as a **territory of life** —and, frankly, I can no longer even stand hearing about "ICCAs"! But I must admit that the abbreviation was useful. Indeed, it helped to elevate the role of community custodians among conservationists. If I recall the time of our founding, I can only smile. We had zero money, although we were rich in hugs and volunteering spirit! With that alone, we went on for years.



A demonstration in Brazil, 2012. Ashish Kothari and Grazia carry the banner of the Consortium, collectively created by many custodians over the course of various meetings. The banner is still carried to all Consortium's gatherings. Photo: Mohammed Taghi Farvar

Luisa: You may have been a bunch of volunteers then, but today the Consortium is a force to reckon with in conservation! I understand that it was formalized in 2010 as a Swiss-based International Association and, since then, it has steadily grown in membership and has been documenting, sustaining, and defending territories of life around the world. There is also general recognition that the Consortium has carved out an important role for territories of life in international policy and the national policies of several countries.

Grazia: Territories of life have existed, and thank goodness still exist, everywhere in the world. They have thousands of local names and represent the **vitality** of diverse culture-based institutions governing and caring for nature under an immense variety of circumstances. But only and solely when there is a **custodian community** can we say that there is a territory of life. And what defines a custodian community? It is not the fact that it is local or Indigenous *per se*, but that it preserves powerful, **multidimensional, multi-generational bonds that connect it to its territory of life**.

In its **Manifesto for Territories of Life**, the Consortium has clearly expressed that, and its members commit to seeking the necessary level of **self-determination** that allows them to maintain themselves and their territories. So, the Consortium has not invented anything. It has only called attention to a magnificent phenomenon that — along with the languages you care so much about, Luisa — was fast being "disappeared" in front of everyone's eyes. We can measure the value of the Consortium by its capacity to pull together custodians, support their global, national and local constituencies, and maintain the vitality of the cultures and Nature that, in turn, keep them alive.

Self-Determination and Conserved Areas

Luisa: You accompanied the Consortium during its first and most difficult ten years and are now a member of its Council of Elders. I wonder how you see the organization now. Among the amazing wealth of subjects you pulled together in your recent book, you stress that custodians should seek self-determination and empowerment first, and look for support from the outside, including financial resources, only later, once they are strong and clear in their role.

This reminded me of the Zapatista uprising of the mid-1990s in Chiapas, where I had conducted my doctoral research. The Zapatistas were seeking respect for collective governance and responsibility, while the government negotiators callously focused only on money. Unsurprisingly, they failed to reach an accord with the Zapatistas.

> *The Zapatistas are an amazing example of empowered custodians of a territory of life. They did not let themselves be infantilized by financial incentives.*

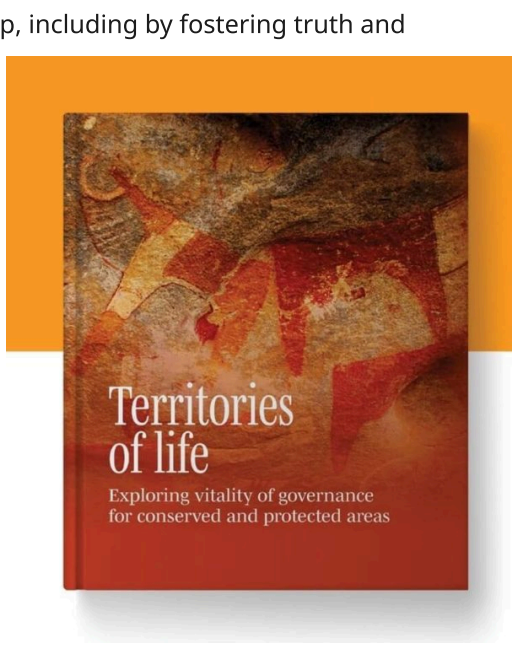
Grazia: Indeed, Luisa, the Zapatistas are an amazing example of a self-determined and empowered people, custodian of a territory of life. They did not let the government infantilize them through financial incentives but upheld their rights and responsibilities to their territory. Some national governments have simply denied the custodian roles of communities as a sort of continuation of colonial attitudes. Other governments work in partnership with communities to nourish their "conserved areas." And many situations are in-between: the communities keep struggling to secure their role as custodians with no help, and often with hindrance, from government institutions.

Grazia's Book as "Required Reading"

Luisa: I saw many and diverse examples of such situations in your ***Territories of Life*** book — which for me should be required reading for any contemporary conservationist! The volume describes **vitality of governance** as the **demonstrated capacity** of an institution **to function through time, fully and in inspiring ways**, including by **evolving** in the face of challenging circumstances for conserved and protected areas alike. It explores traditional forms of **custodianship**, juxtaposes ways of governing conserved and protected areas, situates the recent policy discovery of "community conservation" and its oscillating fortunes, and includes tools for self-assessing vitality, policy suggestions, an innovative lexicon, and a lot more.

Grazia: Thanks, dearest Luisa. I understand the book is challenging in size and scope — and its 1,700 footnotes and pages of references may scare non-academic readers. But they should only read the footnotes if seeking to go deeper into topics. My hope is that the volume will help more people understand that **territories of life are an indispensable component of any livable future**. And that their vitality needs a foundation of self-strengthening — what Indigenous scholars like Jeff Corntassel and Sutej Hugu call "resurgence," "regeneration," and "de-colonization" — meeting half-way with policies that recognize and support custodianship, including by fostering truth and reconciliation and restorative justice.

A member organization of the ICCA Consortium has proposed a new motion for the upcoming IUCN World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi (October 2025). The motion stresses that territories of life will remain alive only if the diversity of cultures, knowledge, and languages of their custodians will also remain alive. In this, Luisa, lies the key reason why the Consortium and Terralingua should collaborate as closely as possible. And I am delighted that you and I are doing our best toward it.


Territories of life
Exploring vitality of governance for conserved and protected areas

Luisa: Thank you so much, Grazia! I really enjoyed our conversation. May our friendship and collaboration stay strong. I love the ongoing discovery and solidarity that goes with it!

For more on territories of life, custodianship and vitality of governance:

- Grazia's *book, Territories of life*, is available as a **free download in English** (and soon in Spanish and French). On the same page, Grazia explains her book's contents in a short video.
- Read volume 13 of Terralingua's *Langscape Magazine*, on **Territories of Life: Sources of Biocultural Diversity, Resilience, and Self-Determination**.
- Explore Terralingua's comprehensive **Biocultural Diversity Toolkit**.

Global Crises Language & Culture Nature & Culture People & Culture

Sign Up for our E-News

First Name Last Name

Email

Univ./Organiz'n

CAPTCHA

☐ I'm not a robot reCAPTCHA
reCAPTCHA is changing its terms of service. Take action. Privacy - Terms

Submit

Stories

Zero Mile

A soldier fights for his Gowari community's right to peace, justice, and recognition as a distinct Scheduled Tribe in India.

Read more…

Birth of a Red Cedar Canoe

Creating a traditional dugout canoe reconnects a Lil'wat youth to his ancestors.

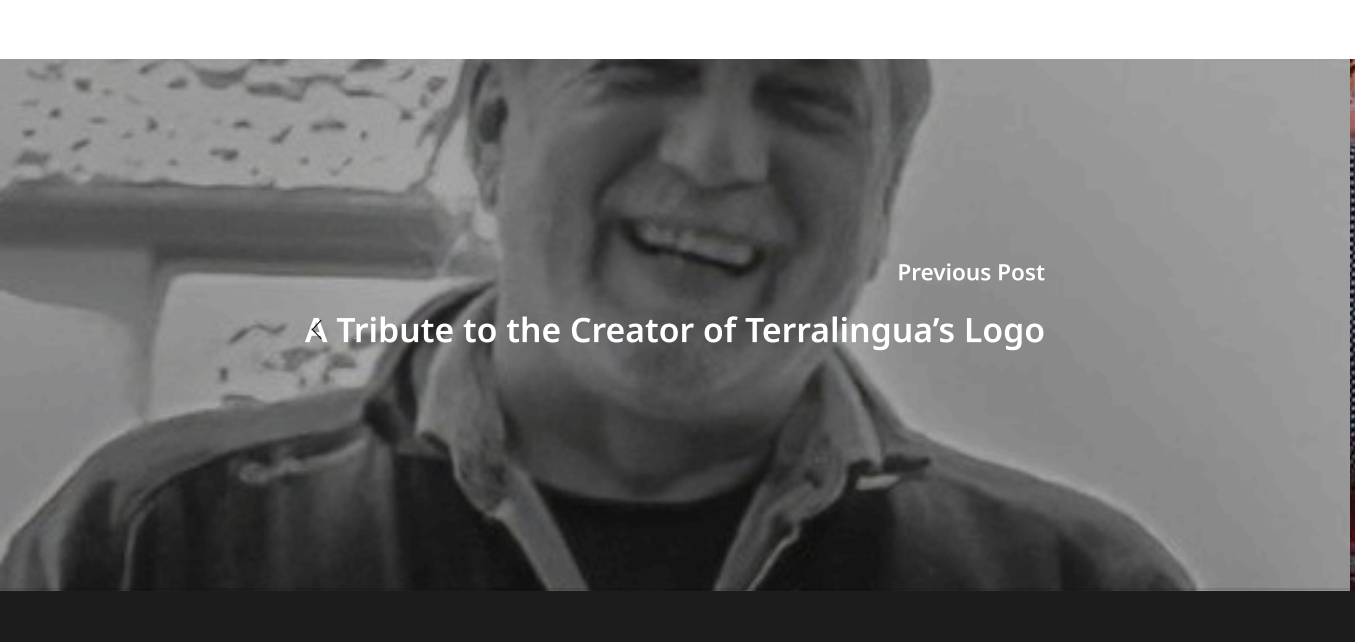
Read more…

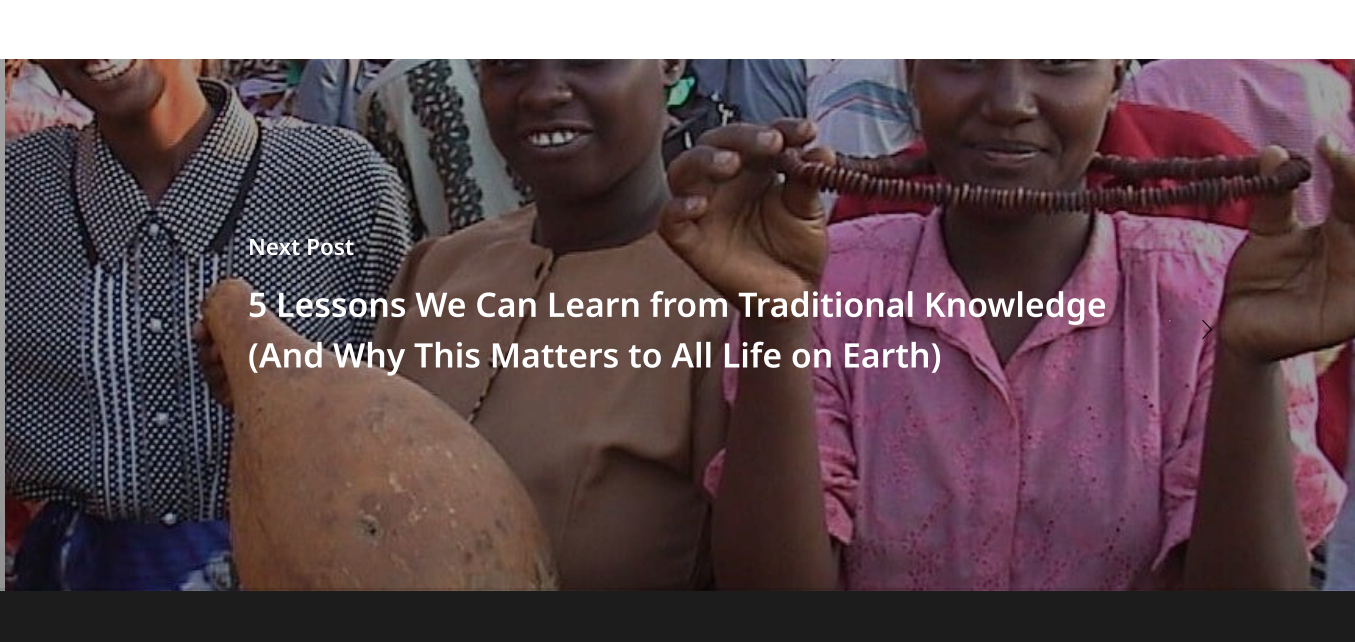
News and Views

Get Our Latest Issue of Langscape Magazine!

We Are Now Mailing Print Copies of the Latest Issue of Langscape Magazine: Order Yours Today! Terralingua thanks you for…

Read more…


Previous Post
A Tribute to the Creator of Terralingua's Logo


Next Post
5 Lessons We Can Learn from Traditional Knowledge (And Why This Matters to All Life on Earth)

Our Commitment to Indigenous Peoples

We are deeply committed to participating in righting the wrongs of colonialism and of the oppression and forced assimilation of Indigenous Peoples worldwide, by engaging in not only reconciliation but also reconcili-action.

Read Our Full Commitment

Helpful Links

Langscape Magazine
Indigenous Youth
Storytellers Circle
What is Biocultural Diversity
Biocultural Diversity Toolkit
BCD Conservation Projects
Publications & Media
My Account
Terms & Conditions
Privacy Policy

Stay Connected

Contact Us

We are deeply grateful to **Synchronicity Earth** for its generous support of the redevelopment and redesign of our website and the creation of our new Learning Center and Stories Directory.

© 2025 Terralingua. | All Rights Reserved | Terralingua is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in the U.S.A. (#38-3291259) and a registered charity in Canada (#85590 3266 RR0001)