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The Ethical and Legal Implications of Traditional Knowledge Studies: A Search for a New Direction in Applied Environmental Ethics

I will investigate questions related to the ethical and legal implications of collecting, using, releasing, and evaluating traditional knowledge. The term traditional knowledge has entered the ken of academics and policymakers since the late 1980s. Today a large number of publications on this topic are available, but the following fundamental questions remain relatively unexplored: Can or should traditional knowledge be “integrated” into or “validated” by scientific knowledge for better environmental management? How do we define traditional or indigenous knowledge? Who has the authority to determine the “authenticity” of traditional knowledge and its reliability? How do researchers and nongovernmental organizations, among others, ethically approach indigenous communities in collecting, using, releasing, and publishing indigenous/ traditional knowledge?

Answering these questions ultimately contributes to the study of the extent to which indigenous peoples and local communities are entitled to own and control their knowledge. It also clarifies the extent to which these people have power to design, plan, participate in, and take advantage of environmental management activities that affect their livelihood. This investigation can help us better understand ongoing debates over land and harvesting rights of indigenous peoples and local ethnic communities. Having research experience in both North America and Asia, I will attempt to place these issues in an international context and identify challenges international communities and academics face in recognizing and empowering the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities in different countries.