

# The Avava Language Of Central Malakula (Vanuatu)

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Research, part of a Special Feature on **Conceptual, Methodological, Practical, and Ethical Challenges in Studying and Applying Indigenous Knowledge**

## The challenges of maintaining indigenous ecological knowledge

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**ABSTRACT:** Increased interest in indigenous ecological knowledge (IEK) has led to concern that it is vulnerable amidst social and ecological change. In response, multiple authors have recommended the establishment of programs for the maintenance and revitalization of IEK systems. However, few studies have analyzed the methods, opportunities, and challenges of these programs. This is a critical gap, as IEK maintenance is challenging and will require layered and evidence-based solutions. We seek to build a foundation for future approaches to IEK maintenance. First, we present a systematic literature review of IEK maintenance programs ( $n = 39$ ) and discuss the opportunities and challenges inherent in five broad groups of published approaches. Second, we use two case studies from the Republic of Vanuatu to illustrate these challenges in more depth. The first case study takes a community-based approach, which has inherent strengths (e.g., localized organization). It has, however, faced practical (e.g., funding) and epistemological (changing modes of knowledge transmission) challenges. The second case study seeks to facilitate IEK transmission within the formal school system. Although this model has potential, it has faced significant challenges (e.g., lack of institutional linkages). We conclude that supporting and strengthening IEK is important but that serious attention is needed to account for the social, situated, and dynamic nature of IEK. In closing, we use the review and case studies to propose four principles that may guide adaptive and flexible approaches for the future maintenance of IEK systems.

**Key Words:** cultural revitalization; indigenous ecological knowledge; Malakula; traditional ecological knowledge; Vanuatu

### INTRODUCTION

A wealth of evidence indicates the need for diverse solutions to challenges in social-ecological systems (Ostrom et al. 2007). Indigenous ecological knowledge (IEK) represents a key source of ideas because it is grounded in diverse and creative understandings of local environments (Berkes 2012). Not only does IEK represent detailed ecological information (e.g., Johannes 1998a, 1998b), but it also underpins management strategies (e.g., Fernandez-Gimenez 2000) and fosters adaptive capacity to environmental variability (McIntosh et al. 2000). Perhaps most importantly, IEK systems can be a vehicle for shaping just, people-centered resource governance approaches (Ross et al. 2011).

There is, however, mounting evidence that IEK is at risk (reviewed in Zent and Maffi 2009). All aspects of culture are dynamic (Gómez-Baggethun and Reyes-García 2013) and components of IEK do persist over time (Zarger and Stepp 2004), but as globalization continues apace, the transmission of IEK is increasingly threatened. This is corroborated by an established body of quantitative evidence showing the degradation of IEK (e.g., Betz et al. 2006; Bete et al. 2007), as well other indicators, such as the parlous state of the world's vernacular languages (Moseley 2010). The degradation of IEK is a critical concern given that IEK is the foundation for local management strategies across large parts of the planet and shapes both local livelihoods and the trajectory of local biodiversity (e.g., Pangett et al. 2012).

In response, there has been a groundswell of calls for the maintenance and revitalization of IEK systems (e.g., Harnon 2002; Maffi 2002; Harrison 2007). Such calls have come from academia (e.g., Zent 1999), conservation practitioners (e.g., Ford and Martínez 2000), indigenous groups (e.g., Maffi and Woodley 2010), and intergovernmental agreements (e.g., the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Articles 11 and 31). Discussion and action on IEK maintenance has paralleled

developments in other fields (e.g., linguistics, education, and development studies) that have focused on support of cultural diversity (e.g., Florey 2009). However, unlike in other fields, there has been little theoretical and practical development of methods, best practices, and constraints of IEK maintenance. This is a critical gap, as the maintenance of IEK systems is rife with theoretical and practical challenges.

We begin to address this literature gap and provide a foundation for future approaches to IEK maintenance. Our analysis is organized into three sections. First, we present a systematic review of published studies of IEK maintenance ( $n = 39$ ), and discuss the approaches used and challenges faced during these projects. Second, we demonstrate the practical challenges of IEK maintenance with two case studies from the Republic of Vanuatu. We close by suggesting four principles that will help guide IEK maintenance projects in the future.

### STRATEGIES FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE (IEK)

#### What is IEK maintenance?

We treat IEK as largely synonymous with related terms (e.g., traditional ecological knowledge), and define it as "a cumulative body of knowledge, belief and practice, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission" (Berkes 2012:7). We prefer the term "indigenous" over "traditional" because it better represents the dynamic and fluid nature of IEK. We recognize, however, that all definitions in the field are contentious: for instance, important environmental knowledge is held by nonindigenous groups (Nadasdy 1999).

Following this, we define IEK maintenance as "practical efforts designed to ensure the continuation of, or a revival in, the application and transmission of IEK." This definition is broad and is meant to encompass the variety of approaches in use, which span from large government-sponsored programs to small

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