

**50th Anniversary of the MaB Programme
1971 – 2021 UNESCO
Proposed Programme: Tapestry of Proverbs
Spanish Network of Biosphere Reserves (RERB)**

“We humans have always been inseparably connected to nature, and today we live in a world more connected than ever, but that doesn’t make it fairer. The aspiration to always consume and accumulate more tramples the universal right to enjoy a full relationship with the tapestry of life, because according to the laws of physics and biology, if too many threads are devoured in one area of the tapestry, holes inevitably appear elsewhere. These holes are growing in number and are very poorly distributed, resulting in an unprecedented scale of environmental and global injustice. (...) There is very little time left and it will be very difficult, but there is still time to reweave this tapestry and to weave ourselves back into it. Each thread may be fragile, but the tapestry as a whole has the strength of the many—a strength made from many fragilities. I dedicate this award to all the fragile ones, upon whose loving struggle the persistence of the Tapestry of Life on Earth depends and will depend.”

Sandra Myrna Díaz, Princess of Asturias Award, 2019

50 Years Later, Let Us Seek Wisdom at the Margins of MaB... We Are Biosphere

The UNESCO Man and the Biosphere (MaB) Programme was created to test and try to restore the essential bond with nature that every human society needs. Its very name offered a solution through a conjunctive phrase—**Man AND Biosphere**—as opposed to the mistaken disjunctive notion of **Development OR Nature**, a mindset that has led us to the problematic future we now face, and which we foresee as the future for our children, fifty years on.

Western Culture Colonized the Planet and Spread Its Faith in Technology

Over the past four centuries, the advancement of science, technical innovations, and cultural creativity toward endless Progress has largely revolved around the Atlantic Ocean. By daring to cross it, the cultures of the smallest and most fragmented continent achieved an initial expansion of Europe’s sphere of influence, beginning with the colonization of the Americas. Three centuries later, in the United States, a global, ever-expanding corporate culture emerged—one that operates as if the world could grow without limits, echoing the astonishment at discovering the size of the Planet upon stumbling across the New World while searching for India.

This feverish illusion persists today—with the pursuit of new technologies, corporate gains, and Promethean worlds—without accounting for the mineral demands, ecological footprint,

or cultural shifts involved; and without acknowledging that the inherent complexity of the biosphere, and our interaction with it, makes this relentless quest for novelty more like navigating oceans of uncertainty in search of terra incognita—with no available maps.

Complexity Is the Mirror by Which Our Species Measures Its Intelligence

Island Cultures, Indigenous Cultures, Societies Conscious of Their Limits

In a striking visual metaphor, French philosopher **Bruno Latour** recalls Galileo Galilei using one of his early telescopes in the Venetian lagoon—lifting his gaze from ships to nearby stars. By asking what those stars had in common with our planet, Galileo contributed to the birth of Science and Modernity, a journey that paralleled Europe’s scientific exploration of the world.

Latour concludes that science today must change its focus—turn its instruments and gaze back toward our planet, and ask about the phenomenon of Life that makes it habitable, in a way so different from those same nearby stars. **Who makes this planet habitable?**

Likewise, each culture in each reserve will have its own unique characteristics, and what they have in common may be essential in helping us identify our current ignorance about nature. On the 50th Anniversary of MaB, we propose a learning exercise focused on the indigenous cultures that coexist with the planet’s most pristine natural areas: **Biosphere Reserves (BRs)**.

Particularly, some islands designated as Biosphere Reserves by UNESCO offer beautiful examples of self-imposed limits and the defense of development models rooted in local conditions. These cultures, deeply connected to their natural surroundings, sometimes find inspiration in their very constraints. By embracing their uniqueness, they incorporate it into their identity.

In all Biosphere Reserves, designation includes ecosystems where human cultures maintain practices that support biodiversity and natural resources essential for social life. These practices often result from generations of trial and error, and the reasons for doing things in a particular way may no longer be consciously remembered. That is why it is crucial to analyze the implicit wisdom in native languages, which hold long-kept, sometimes forgotten knowledge. It may even be that metropolitan cultures are the ones failing to properly translate the essential indigenous terms.

Thus, we understand that societies in BRs possess cultural knowledge and relational dynamics—among themselves and with surrounding nature—that are the product of their shared history, economic and political decisions, conflicts, and cooperation. This is not about quantifying or creating new social typologies, but rather using **qualitative research techniques** to highlight what is truly at stake in their relationships with nature.

Words and proverbs, with all their emotional and meaningful weight, are a window into the social representations of those who inhabit a territory—how they live it, interpret it, suffer it, or enjoy it. In this way, communities can communicate their experiences to managing institutions through their own expressions.

We Speak of a Tapestry of Words → A Tapestry of Proverbs: Human Bonds with Nature

In this 21st century, it is important to reflect on how we arrived at this point. Something has been lost in Western culture—something that prevents it from recognizing the unsustainability of its limitless greed and unchecked expansion. That "**something**" relates to how humans position themselves in relation to nature, how we disconnect from our involvement in the biosphere, and how we ignore our interdependence with others.

Lolita Chávez, Indigenous Guatemalan leader, spoke about this in the course "*Facing the Anthropocene*" in 2019, during the centenary of César Manrique, at the Saramago Hall of his Foundation on Lanzarote Island. She discussed how the Indigenous cultures of **Abya Yala** still refer to **Mother Earth** in their daily language, because they feel the human community as an inseparable part of her. In all Indigenous cultures around the world, the relationship between the **Cosmos, the Planet, Human and Non-Human Life, and the Physical Environment** is recognized.

If the West lost something during its planetary expansion, we propose to seek in the **margins of this now metropolitan civilization** the words or phrases that hold the keys to the human–nature relationship. Some will be remnants of the past that have endured until today; others will be newly coined terms that still speak of old and new relationships.

The Essence of This Open and Collaborative Proposal (next page)
The initiative began with the approval of the **Scientific Committee of the Lanzarote Biosphere Reserve**, and gained the support of all Spanish Biosphere Reserves and their Scientific Council, with the aim of submitting it to the Spanish MaB Committee. If it captures interest, it can then be presented to **UNESCO** and shared with the **World Network of Biosphere Reserves**—especially at the **5th World Congress of Biosphere Reserves in China, 2025**.

Proposal 2025:

Tapestry of Proverbs

We propose that **UNESCO** launch the **Tapestry of Proverbs Initiative** for the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, to identify and select **words, proverbs, sayings, riddles, prayers, and oral traditions** that recognize the **human-nature bond**, originating from **native languages spoken by communities** within the global network.

The oral elements sought by the **Tapestry of Proverbs Programme** include:

- **Natural Limits**
- **Eco-dependence**
- **People in Society**

We are part of Nature · We are Biosphere

One of the abandoned terms in the West was **Gaia**. Around the same time the MaB Programme was created, Western scientific development—through **J. Lovelock** and **L. Margulis**—had to go back 25 centuries to retrieve the name of a Greek goddess, Gaia, for a hypothesis (now a scientific theory) that shows unequivocally that **everything is interconnected**. The web of life that makes the planet habitable is of enormous complexity, with systemic integration levels that should inspire greater humility and caution in our development activities.

September 2023 · Spanish Network of Biosphere Reserves

The **Tapestry of Proverbs Programme** was approved by the **Council of Managers of the Spanish Network of Biosphere Reserves** in **September 2024**, with the goal of disseminating forgotten knowledge that can help us move toward sustainability.

Its aim is to **identify proverbs used or remembered by communities living in Spain's Biosphere Reserves**, and present them on the **International Day of Biosphere Reserves**, designated by UNESCO.

Since 2023, a **working group from RERB** has been meeting periodically to discuss this initiative, under the coordination and leadership of **Aquilino Miguélez López**, Manager of the **Lanzarote Biosphere Reserve**, to monitor the programme's progress.

This programme will be presented at the **5th World Congress of Biosphere Reserves** in **Hangzhou, China**, by the **Spanish Network** and the **Technical Secretariats of the thematic networks** in which Spain is involved:

- **World Network of Island and Coastal Biosphere Reserves**



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RESERVAS DE LA BIOSFERA ESPAÑOLAS**
Órgano asesor del Comité Español del Programa MaB de la UNESCO

- **World Network of Mountain Biosphere Reserves**