

## **Qashqai leader addresses main plenary at Durban World Parks Congress, September 2003**

*The 5<sup>th</sup> IUCN World Parks Congress in Durban, South Africa, was the first that saw a considerable number of participants in representation of Indigenous peoples and local community custodians of territories of life (then termed 'community conserved areas'). Just before the Congress, about 20 representatives of mobile Indigenous peoples from several continents met for about a week with the empowering facilitation and leadership of the late Dr M. Taghi Farvar. The discussion of common predicaments prompted the group to create there and then the World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples (WAMIP). Uncle Sayyad, a traditional leader of the Qashqai mobile Indigenous peoples of Iran, then drew from the common discussion and developed a speech that was read during a main opening plenary at the Congress. For many, such a speech marked a crucial moment in the long-standing conflictual relationship between mobile pastoralists and conservation advocates. The address was read in English by a young Qashqai lady in traditional attire, as Uncle Sayyad proudly stood by her. With the back screen showing magnificent pastoral landscapes and traditional flute music playing in the background, the 'declaration' of readiness for a mutually respectful alliance between pastoralists and conservationists prompted the beginning of a change in perspective for many...*

I am Aghaghia Rahimzadeh and I have translated and will read the speech of Uncle Sayyad Soltani. Some images of the pastoral landscape of his tribe will be shown as a background.

**Ladies, Gentlemen, and Honourable Excellencies,** I have come from Iran. I am the elected chair of the council of Elders of the Kuhi sub-tribe of the Qashqai Confederation, one of the largest pastoralist communities in Iran. We are nomadic herders.

The memory of our tribe goes as far back as 5000 years, and the livelihood of our mobile communities has always been sustained by raising goats and sheep. We never stay in one pasture long enough to do it damage. We may now be a pale remembrance of what we were, but we see signs of resurrection, signs that are very important for conservation.

The tale of my tribe is a long one. We used to graze large herds of sheep and goat on vast pastures and grasslands, which sustained the livelihoods of thousands of mobile households. The plant diversity of our pastures and the health of our wetlands endured over generations. We grazed on higher elevation pastures in the summer and returned to lower elevations in winter. Twice a year, we moved through magnificent migration routes carved, known and improved through centuries of care. We shared our landscape with wildlife— deer and gazelles, wild goats and sheep, lions, leopards, cheetahs, caracals, foxes, jackals and wolves and resident and migratory birds. We told the stories of these animals in our tales and our songs and our migration time has been-- for centuries-- a time of celebration, learning and spiritual renewal. It has also been a time to connect people and nature in the landscape.

Unfortunately, throughout the twentieth century, forced sedentarization was inflicted upon us. Pastures and natural resources were seized from us by various governments. Our migratory paths were interrupted by all sorts of 'development' initiatives including dams, oil refineries, and military bases. Our summering and wintering pastures were consistently degraded and fragmented by outsiders. Not even our social identity was left alone. Our tribal foundations

were forcibly “restructured” and our image has been cast as that of backward, stubborn peoples who do not wish to adapt to modernity. Our story is similar to the story of nomadic pastoralist peoples all over the world, under all sorts of regimes that do not bear to let us manage our lands and lives. In fact, in recent times, some of our people have nearly forgotten the magnificence of our pastoralist lifestyle. BUT NOT YET ENTIRELY!

**Honourable Friends,**

We, pastoral peoples, have always considered our land what you would call a “*protected area*”. We have always embraced “conservation” not as a professional activity but as intimate duty and pride of every member of our tribes, as the heart of our livelihood, because our very subsistence depends on it. I hear you talk of ecosystems, landscapes and connectivity. We have always known about this without using your terms. Our migration patterns transfer seeds. Our grazing patterns shape the landscape. We subsist on our land, we know and care for its diversity of plants and animals. We pray on this land, and we guard its many sacred spaces. For the land provides us also with spiritual well-being.

But we can no longer do it alone. In the world of today, we need the concurrence of our governments and all the support that others can give.

Let me give you an example. In the summering grounds of my tribe is a marvellous, life-giving wetland called Chahar Tang-e Kushk-e Zar. It is surrounded by tall reeds and fields of lush grass, and for hundreds of years it has been used and protected by our ancestors. Today, the water is being diverted for unsustainable agricultural purposes. The wetland’s migratory birds, coming from lands far away, are hunted down as soon as we leave for the wintering season. We have been witnessing the shrinking of this wetland, and the destruction of its flora and fauna. I am proud to announce— however— that the Kuhi pastoralist community has discussed this with our government. We have agreed that our wetland will soon be legally recognised as a “Community Conserved Area”. When its management will be entrusted to us, we will know how to protect it, and we will do our best to restore it to its past splendour.

**Honourable Friends,**

Before the beginning of this congress, the representatives of mobile peoples from many countries convened and reflected on how to solve our common problems. We have drawn several action points, which we will further refine during this congress, but— basically— **we are here to extend our hand to you. Together, we can be very powerful allies for conservation. Alone, we are likely to act at cross-purposes and waste the best of our energies.**

Please help us maintain our nomadic lifestyles. This is not only the heart of our livelihoods. It also creates the bio-cultural corridors that you conservationists need as much as we do. Stand on our side in opposing the forcible settlements of our people and herds. Allow us to preserve the splendid genetic diversity of our herds, as well as the wildlife diversity that depend on it. Help us preserve our cultural integrity and build our capacities. Talk to us, involve us in decisions, refuse to understand us by stereotypes, and tell us how we can help you. We, the mobile peoples and pastoralist communities of the world, are prepared to be your strongest allies in conservation. Are *you*?