

Ecological Wisdom in Oral Traditions: Revitalising Environmental Conservation Through Indigenous Storytelling

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Abstract: This research paper analyses Indigenous oral traditions as authoritative repositories of ecological wisdom with important implications for environmental law, ethics, and governance. It conceptualises storytelling not merely as cultural expression but as a form of environmental jurisprudence that encodes ecological knowledge, resource-management norms, moral obligations, and intergenerational responsibilities. Drawing on environmental law, anthropology, ethical theory, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), the study demonstrates how Indigenous narratives articulate biocentric and ecocentric perspectives that challenge dominant anthropocentric legal paradigms. Focusing on Indian contexts—such as sacred groves, river personification narratives, and *Adivasi* ecological ethics—the paper illustrates how oral traditions sustain reciprocity, restraint, and accountability in human–

nature relations. Comparative insights from Indigenous traditions across the globe reveal shared narrative strategies that frame non-human entities as moral subjects and emphasise relational ecological ethics. These traditions affirm storytelling as a universal medium of environmental governance, cultural continuity, and collective memory. The paper advocates legal and policy reforms, including recognition of oral histories within evidentiary frameworks, *sui generis* protections for TEK, integration of narrative-based knowledge into Environmental Impact Assessments, and support for community-controlled knowledge systems. Incorporating these measures would strengthen the cultural legitimacy of environmental governance and embed ethical responsibility within legal frameworks. By centring Indigenous narrative traditions, the study highlights their capacity to inform legal reasoning, shape environmental norms, and contribute meaningfully to sustainable futures grounded in relationality, reciprocity, and ecological balance.

Keywords: ecological knowledge; environmental jurisprudence; Indigenous storytelling; traditional ecological knowledge; rights-of-nature; sacred groves

1. Introduction

Indigenous storytelling has long served as a profound form of environmental philosophy, articulating worldviews in which human survival and ecological integrity are deeply intertwined. Far from being mere cultural artefacts, oral traditions among Indigenous communities constitute sophisticated repositories of ecological knowledge, ethical norms, and sustainable resource-use practices developed over centuries of lived experience (Berkes, 2018). These narratives encode observations of climatic patterns, species behaviour, forest cycles, and hydrological changes in culturally resonant forms, functioning as both pedagogical tools and repositories of collective memory (Cajete, 2000, pp. 181–182).

Indigenous oral traditions advance a relational understanding of the human–nature interface. Unlike Western paradigms that often position humans as separate from ecological systems, these stories articulate an ontology in which humans, animals, plants, and spiritual entities coexist as interdependent beings in a shared moral universe (Kimmerer, 2013, pp. 9–11). Grounded in reciprocity, respect, and balance, they frame environmental degradation as a disruption of both ecological and spiritual relationships (Whyte, 2017).

The relevance of Indigenous storytelling to contemporary environmental law has grown, as national and international legal systems increasingly recognise traditional knowledge as central to biodiversity conservation, forest governance, and water protection (United Nations, 2007, arts. 25, 29, 31; CBD, 1992, arts. 8(j), 10(c)). Legal innovations such as recognising legal personhood for ecosystems reflect shifts toward ecocentric jurisprudence aligned with Indigenous moral principles (O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018, p. 3). Revitalising storytelling within environmental governance thus enhances conservation, supports participatory decision-making, and affirms Indigenous epistemic authority (Watson, 2020, pp. 56–58), offering an ethically grounded framework for reimagining human responsibilities toward nature.

2. Ecological wisdom, oral traditions, and Indigenous storytelling in India

India offers a uniquely rich and complex terrain for understanding ecological wisdom preserved and transmitted through Indigenous oral traditions. Across the subcontinent, *Adivasi* (Indigenous) knowledge systems, shaped by centuries of continuous interaction with forests, rivers, wildlife, and mountainous ecosystems, encode detailed ecological insights within myths, folktales, ritual songs, and seasonal narratives. These oral traditions are not merely cultural expressions; they serve as living regulatory frameworks guiding sustainable use, conservation ethics, and community obligations toward non-human life. These orally transmitted norms enabled Indigenous communities to maintain sustainable resource-use practices long before the advent of modern conservation mechanisms through the legal framework.

The ethical worldviews embedded in these narratives resonate strongly with principles of environmental ethics, particularly ecocentrism, relational stewardship, and duties owed to future generations. Indian Indigenous stories consistently emphasise humans as kin to the natural world and position ecological degradation as a violation of reciprocal moral obligations rather than a mere regulatory lapse. Such narrative frameworks offer a significant critique of anthropocentric models that have historically dominated state-led environmental regulation (Kothari, 2007, p.6).

Contemporary Indian environmental law has increasingly recognised the significance of TEK and Indigenous stewardship. The Supreme Court's forest jurisprudence in *T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India* reflects an evolving openness toward decentralised, community-led conservation, while judicial interpretations of Article 21 have acknowledged the cultural and ecological facets of Indigenous practices (Shah, 2018). Furthermore, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (Forest Rights Act, 2006, ss. 3–5) institutionalises the role of *Gram Sabhas* and customary norms in forest governance, implicitly validating the ecological wisdom embedded in oral traditions. State-level recognition and protection of sacred groves in Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Karnataka, and the Northeast further illustrate the legal relevance of Indigenous storytelling (Malhotra et al., 2001, p.15).

Revitalising these oral traditions within contemporary conservation strategies thus offers India an opportunity to construct ecologically effective governance models, culturally legitimate, and ethically grounded.

3. Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, doctrinal, and interdisciplinary research methodology, integrating insights from environmental law, Indigenous studies, anthropology, and environmental ethics. Doctrinal analysis is employed to examine statutory frameworks, international instruments, judicial decisions, and policy documents that recognise Indigenous ecological knowledge and oral traditions. This is complemented by an analytical approach to assess how Indigenous storytelling informs contemporary environmental governance, such as rights-of-nature initiatives and community-based conservation frameworks.

The study relies extensively on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journals ethnographic reports, historical texts, and environmental law scholarship. Important international documents such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, 1992), United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), and Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (ILO Convention 169) are examined to trace evolving global norms on

traditional ecological knowledge. A thematic analysis of literature is undertaken to identify recurring constructs—such as relational ontology, reciprocity, kincentric ethics, sacred landscapes, and customary regulatory systems—that underpin Indigenous ecological epistemologies. The Indian context is explored through documented case studies on sacred groves, river personification, community forest rights, and species-based cultural conservation. This methodology ensures a holistic, contextualised, and conceptually rigorous understanding of how Indigenous storytelling revitalises environmental conservation and shapes emerging ecocentric legal frameworks.

4. Review of Literature

The relationship between Indigenous storytelling and environmental conservation has been widely examined across disciplines. Berkes (2018) conceptualises TEK as a cumulative knowledge system transmitted primarily through oral traditions, highlighting its adaptive, relational, and holistic nature. Indigenous narratives encode ecological observations, ethical duties, and resource-management norms, offering a knowledge framework distinct from Western scientific rationality. Cajete (2000) emphasises storytelling as a pedagogical tool that fosters ecological consciousness grounded in community, spirituality, and experiential learning.

Anthropological research demonstrates that ecological wisdom is embedded in oral traditions. Studies on totemism, sacred groves, and animistic cosmologies show that Indigenous stories assign rivers, mountains, and animals agency and moral standing, providing a conceptual basis for contemporary rights-of-nature jurisprudence. Environmental ethics literature positions storytelling as an ethical framework operationalising reciprocity, kinship, and moral restraint toward nature (Whyte, 2017; Leopold, 1949).

Legal scholarship recognises the relevance of Indigenous narratives in environmental governance. Boyd (2017) and O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones (2018) link cosmologies with the global movement for legal personhood of ecosystems, illustrating how narratives legitimise ecocentric reforms. The CBD and UNDRIP codify State obligations to respect and integrate Indigenous knowledge.

In India, ecological anthropology and environmental history document sacred groves, taboo species, and ritual landscapes as

vernacular conservation systems rooted in storytelling (Gadgil & Guha, 1992; Gadgil & Vartak, 1976; Xaxa, 2005; Baviskar, 1995). Oral traditions continue to regulate forest use, agricultural cycles, and water stewardship, influencing contemporary conservation initiatives. Despite extensive scholarship, few studies systematically link environmental law with Indigenous storytelling. This study addresses that gap, providing an interdisciplinary analysis of how oral traditions function as ecological, ethical, and regulatory systems informing modern governance.

5. Conceptualising Oral Traditions as Ecological Knowledge Systems

Oral traditions constitute complex, dynamic, and highly adaptive ecological knowledge systems that have enabled Indigenous communities to sustain their environments across generations. These traditions encompass a diverse range of expressive forms, stories, myths, epics, songs, chants, proverbs, ritual narratives, and performance practices that encode detailed observations about ecological patterns and resource-use norms (Berkes, 2018, pp.9-10). Far from being mere folklore, these forms function as mnemonic devices that assist communities in remembering and transmitting critical knowledge about the timing of seasons, animal migration and behaviour, plant regeneration cycles, hydrological changes in rivers and wetlands, and the risks associated with extreme climatic events (Gadgil et al., 1993, pp.151-152).

The epistemological features of oral traditions distinguish them from conventional scientific knowledge systems. Knowledge embedded in narrative form is holistic, relational, and contextual, integrating ecological observations with cosmological beliefs, ethical obligations, and social norms. It is transmitted through elders and custodians of sacred sites who serve as cultural authorities responsible for maintaining the integrity of ecological knowledge. This mode of knowledge transmission ensures that ecological wisdom is not abstracted from its socio-cultural context but remains embedded within lived experience.

Indigenous storytelling interprets ecosystems as interconnected wholes, where human, animal, and spiritual worlds coexist in dynamic

balance. Correspondingly, Western environmental law tends to emphasise regulation, enforcement, and institutional monitoring, whereas Indigenous traditions internalise moral constraints that discourage overuse and encourage reciprocity with nature. These ethical dimensions of oral traditions represent a form of environmental governance grounded in values rather than command-and-control legal mechanisms.

Oral traditions also exhibit remarkable adaptive resilience. They evolve in response to shifting ecological conditions, enabling communities to adjust to climate variability, resource scarcity, and natural hazards without losing cultural coherence. In the face of contemporary pressures such as globalisation, deforestation, extractive industries, and displacement, oral traditions preserve cultural identity while offering flexible, community-based strategies for environmental conservation.

6. Ethical Frameworks in Indigenous Storytelling

Indigenous storytelling functions not only as a cultural expression but also as a highly developed ethical framework that directs human behaviour towards nature. Central to this framework is the principle of reciprocity, which highlights that any use of natural resources must be balanced by acts of restoration or gratitude. Stories from diverse Indigenous communities across the world narrate duties to rivers, forests, animals, and ancestral landscapes, embedding moral obligations into everyday life (Kimmerer, 2013). These narratives cultivate an ecological conscience by teaching that taking without giving back disrupts the equilibrium that sustains both human and non-human life. Embedded in these traditions is the recognition of the intrinsic value of nature. Animals, plants, rivers, and landscapes are treated as moral subjects endowed with agency and deserving respect. Their personification in stories is not a poetic device but an ethical assertion of mutual existence within a shared world (Cajete, 2000). Such portrayals counter the objectification characteristic of certain strands of Western environmental thought and place moral constraints on exploitation.

Indigenous oral narratives also operate as mechanisms of environmental accountability. Many contain cautionary tales where violations of natural laws that are manifested through greed, waste, or

disrespect result in ecological disharmony or spiritual retribution. These narratives function as traditional regulatory systems, guiding sustainable behaviour long before the emergence of statutory environmental law (Berkes, 2018). The threat of communal imbalance or supernatural consequences reinforces ecological restraint.

Sacred groves, ritual rivers, and holy mountains thus act as culturally enforced conservation zones protected through taboos and ritual obligations (Gadgil et al., 1993, pp.151-153). Underlying these frameworks is a kincentric ethic that views humans as relatives—not rulers—of animals, plants, and spirits.

7. The Convergence of Indigenous Storytelling and Environmental Law

The relationship between Indigenous storytelling and environmental law represents a significant convergence, sharing the normative aim of ensuring long-term ecological sustainability. Global legal developments increasingly recognise Indigenous ecological knowledge, preserved through oral traditions, as a vital resource for biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, and environmental governance, marking a shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric jurisprudence (Boyd, 2017, p.165).

Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Customary Knowledge

International instruments such as UNDRIP (2007) and ILO Convention No. 169 explicitly acknowledge Indigenous knowledge for environmental protection. Articles 25–29 of UNDRIP affirm Indigenous rights to maintain spiritual relationships with lands, waters, and resources, while mandating State obligations for conservation. ILO Convention 169 similarly requires States to safeguard Indigenous territories and respect local customs in resource policies.

Biodiversity and Ecosystem Conservation

The CBD (1992) reinforces this intersection, with Article 8(j) mandating the respect, preservation, and promotion of traditional knowledge relevant to biodiversity. Oral traditions provide detailed

ecological baselines on keystone species, sacred landscapes, and no-harvest zones (Berkes, 2018, p.18). Conservation planning increasingly integrates Indigenous stories in ecosystem management, wildlife corridors, and species recovery.

EIA and Cultural Narratives

Environmental governance now recognises that scientific mapping alone cannot capture the full ecological and cultural significance of landscapes. Indigenous storytelling complements EIA processes by documenting sacred sites, ecological corridors, and intangible heritage, encoding indicators such as breeding grounds, water recharge zones, or migration routes. This enhances ecological completeness, procedural justice, and community participation, amplifying voices traditionally excluded from governance.

Legal Personhood for Natural Entities

Recognition of legal personhood for rivers, forests, and ecosystems—such as the Ganga, Yamuna, Whanganui, and Atrato Rivers—reflects Indigenous cosmologies where rivers and landscapes are sentient beings. By personifying natural entities, storytelling provides a philosophical foundation for rights-of-nature jurisprudence (O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018, p.4).

8. Indigenous Storytelling in the Indian Context

India's ecological wisdom is profoundly shaped by its wide diversity of Indigenous communities, often collectively referred to as *Adivasis*, whose storytelling traditions constitute some of the oldest and richest ecological knowledge systems in the world. These narratives vary across ecological landscapes—from forests and plateaus to coasts, plains, and mountains—yet share common themes of reciprocity, sacredness, and environmental responsibility. Across Central India, communities such as the *Gond*, *Santhal*, *Bhil*, *Koya*, *Baiga*, etc., rely on storytelling to teach principles of forest management, wildlife behaviour, and agricultural cycles.

In the North-East, Indigenous groups such as the *Ao* and *Angami Nagas*, *Khasi*, *Garo*, and *Mizo* integrate forest lore, shifting cultivation (*jhum*), and community water management into narrative frameworks. Himalayan communities such as *Ladakhi*, *Lepcha*, *Bhutia*, and various *Pahari* groups use narratives to warn against disturbing glaciers, polluting springs, or entering avalanche-prone zones. These stories encode climate literacy, hydrological stewardship, and alpine biodiversity knowledge.

One of India's most important examples of narrative-based ecological governance is the institution of sacred groves. Nearly every Indigenous community maintains protected forest patches known as *Devrai* in Maharashtra, *Devarakadu* in Karnataka, *Kavus* in Kerala, *Sarna* among Central Indian tribes, where the extraction of natural resources is strictly prohibited. The protection of these groves is enforced by stories of guardian deities who punish violations (Gadgil & Vartak, 1976, p.152).

Indian oral traditions are replete with stories that personify rivers as living goddesses. These narratives impose moral duties on humans, in the sense, polluting a river is not merely a physical act but a spiritual transgression. Stories of tigers, elephants, snakes, monkeys, and birds cultivate cultural taboos that prevent indiscriminate killing. The hornbill conservation success among the *Nagas*, derives from traditional stories that treat hornbills as kin and forest guardians—narratives that now underpin community-driven conservation programmes. Similarly, snake worship traditions across India reduce retaliatory killings, aiding reptile conservation.

India's Forest Rights Act, 2006, recognises the customary rights of forest-dwelling communities, and is deeply influenced by Indigenous worldviews and oral traditions. Storytelling documents centuries-long relationships between communities and their landscapes, serving as evidence for community forest resource claims.

9. Comparative Perspectives of Environmental Ethics in Oral Traditions

Environmental ethics embedded in Indigenous oral traditions across the world reveal striking commonalities, despite cultural and geographical diversity. These shared values, such as reciprocity, restraint, reverence

for non-human life, and intergenerational stewardship, demonstrate that Indigenous epistemologies constitute a coherent global ecological ethic. Examining comparative traditions highlights how diverse societies have historically constructed moral relationships with nature, providing insights that can enrich contemporary environmental governance.

In *Māori* cosmology, environmental ethics are embedded in the principle of *kaitiakitanga*, or guardianship, which conceptualises humans as protectors of land, rivers, and oceans on behalf of ancestors and future generations. Narratives that describe natural entities as kin, such as the *Whanganui* River being recognised as *Te Awa Tupua* that establish binding moral obligations toward non-human beings (Ruru, 2018, p.216). These ethical foundations informed New Zealand's recognition of the *Whanganui* River as a legal person under the *Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017*.

Similarly, Aboriginal Australian Dreaming stories articulate ecological norms through ancestral beings whose actions created landforms, species, and the laws governing human behaviour. These narratives provide regulatory instructions on hunting periods, waterhole protection, and fire management, reflecting a dynamic understanding of ecological balance (Rose, 1996, pp.53-57).

In Native American traditions, the “seventh-generation principle” emphasises long-term environmental foresight, ensuring that decisions are evaluated for their impacts on people seven generations into the future (Cajete, 2000). This ethic resonates strongly with intergenerational equity and the precautionary principle in contemporary environmental law and climate governance. African oral traditions also embody sophisticated environmental ethics. Among the *Maasai*, stories emphasise harmonious coexistence with wildlife and sustainable pastoralism, while *San* stories teach drought resilience, water conservation, and respect for animal spirits (Biesele, 1993, p.40). These oral traditions function as normative systems governing resource use, ecological restraint, and community accountability.

10. Storytelling as Environmental Education and Ethical Formation

Indigenous storytelling serves as one of the oldest and most enduring modes of environmental education, functioning as a pedagogical

system that translates complex ecological relationships into accessible forms. Oral traditions through myths, folktales, ritual narratives, and seasonal stories communicate the dynamics of ecosystems in intuitive and memorable ways. They enable young listeners to understand concepts such as interdependence, biodiversity, and ecological limits without relying on scientific abstractions. By situating ecological principles within narrative structures, these stories enhance moral reasoning, encouraging learners to internalise environmental norms as part of their social and ethical identity rather than as externally imposed rules.

The transmission of ecological literacy through storytelling is effective because it embeds practical environmental knowledge within culturally resonant narratives. Seasonal cycles, climatic variations, soil characteristics, hydrological patterns, medicinal plant use, and animal migration behaviours are conveyed metaphorically, symbolically, or through character-driven narratives (Berkes, 2018, p.19).

The affective dimension of storytelling is also equally significant. Emotional engagement evoked through humour, fear, admiration, and empathy deepens ecological sensitivity and fosters compassion toward non-human beings. Narrative personification of animals, rivers, and forests is not merely a literary device; it cultivates ethical obligation and recognition of non-human agency (Kimmerer, 2013, 358). Such emotional-moral learning is crucial for instilling long-term environmental commitment, particularly in younger generations. Storytelling also sustains intergenerational continuity, ensuring that ecological knowledge persists despite external pressures such as globalization, environmental degradation, and cultural assimilation. The act of passing stories from elders to children reinforces community identity, anchors social memory, and strengthens stewardship responsibilities across generations (Whyte, 2017, p.61).

11. Integrating Oral Traditions into Environmental Law and Policy

Oral traditions have long served as repositories of ecological knowledge, ethical norms, and community governance systems among Indigenous societies. Recognising these narrative forms strengthens environmental protection while upholding cultural rights and advancing

epistemic justice. Customary rights provide a key pathway for integration, with courts and legislatures increasingly accepting oral narratives as credible evidence of land occupancy, resource use, and sacred heritage.

Formal consultation mechanisms are essential for embedding oral traditions into environmental governance. EIAs, forest diversion processes, and wildlife planning often overlook lived experiences and narrative knowledge. Practices such as storytelling sessions, community-led cultural mapping, and narrative documentation ensure policies reflect the ecological and spiritual relationships Indigenous peoples maintain with their environments. International frameworks like UNDRIP mandate culturally appropriate consultations, including oral forms (UNDRIP, arts. 19, 32(2), 13(2)), enabling policymakers to view resource conflicts as threats to community identity and cosmology.

In India, community reserves and Biodiversity Heritage Sites increasingly incorporate local narratives and customary practices into management. Similar models in Australia, the Philippines, and the Arctic integrate seasonal calendars and cosmologies into wildlife monitoring, fire management, and habitat restoration (Berkes, 2018). Storytelling grounds conservation in ethical relationships rather than purely regulatory frameworks.

Documenting oral traditions through community archives, digital storytelling platforms, and local festivals preserves myths, songs, and place-based narratives for future generations, ensuring intergenerational transfer of ecological ethics and providing policymakers with accessible knowledge resources.

Globally, storytelling has directly influenced environmental protection. *Māori* cosmology informed the Whanganui River's legal personhood in 2017. Amazonian forest narratives regulate hunting practices (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, p.472). *Khasi* sacred groves, African *San* and *Maasai* narratives, and *Inuit* stories encode ecological and climate adaptation knowledge, reinforcing sustainable practices and informing policy while preserving cultural cosmologies.

12. Environmental Ethics Through the Lens of Indigenous Storytelling

Indigenous storytelling has long served as a repository of ecological wisdom, moral instruction, and community governance. These narratives embed sophisticated environmental ethics grounded in reciprocity, restraint, kinship with nature, and responsibility across generations, predating contemporary environmental law. Storytelling offers philosophical insights and functional regulatory principles that complement modern legal frameworks and can inform environmental governance.

Moving Beyond Anthropocentrism

A central contribution of Indigenous storytelling is its challenge to anthropocentric worldviews. In many Indigenous cosmologies, land, rivers, mountains, and animals are living beings, ancestors, or partners in reciprocal relationships. *Māori* narratives, Aboriginal Dreaming stories, and Native American “all my relations” tales establish biocentric or ecocentric ethical frameworks (Berkes, 2018, p.66). By attributing agency, spirit, or kinship to non-human beings, these stories expand the moral community, recognising intrinsic value in rivers, forests, and animals and enriching legal innovations such as rights of nature, legal personhood, and ecocentric constitutionalism.

Moral Obligations Toward Future Generations

Indigenous narratives institutionalise intergenerational stewardship. Principles like the “seventh-generation responsibility” guide present decisions based on their long-term impact (Whyte, Kyle Powys, 2017, p.22). Oral stories embed ecological warnings about overharvesting, water misuse, or seasonal disruption, aligning with intergenerational equity, sustainable development, and long-term planning in contemporary law.

Responsibility Rather Than Rights

Indigenous ethics emphasise duties toward land, waters, ancestors, and non-human beings (Coulthard, 2014, p.60), complementing rights-based legal frameworks. This duty-oriented approach strengthens precautionary principles, relational accountability, and ecological jurisprudence, providing a moral foundation for holistic decision-making.

Restoring Moral Imagination

Storytelling revitalises moral imagination, helping societies perceive ecological interconnectedness, empathise with non-human beings, and envision sustainable futures (Kimmerer, 2013, p.139). Rivers become mothers, mountains guardians, and animals teachers, fostering value transformation and turning environmental protection into an ethically lived commitment rather than mere legal compliance.

13. Indigenous Storytelling and Environmental Law in India

India presents a rich tapestry of Indigenous ecological storytelling, embedded in the cosmologies of *Adivasi* communities such as the *Gonds*, *Santhals*, *Todas*, *Bhils*, *Nagas*, *Mizos*, *Khasis*, and many others. These narratives, often tied to sacred groves, ancestral hills, forest spirits, crop deities, and river mothers, have long functioned as environmental regulatory systems. As mentioned above, the sacred grove stories prohibit extraction, ensure biodiversity protection, and preserve water recharge zones, etc.

Modern Indian environmental law is increasingly recognising the value of such oral ecological knowledge. The Forest Rights Act, 2006, acknowledges customary rights rooted in “traditional knowledge” and “community tenures.” Many community claims under the Act rely on oral histories that establish long-standing relationships between people and forests. Similarly, the Biodiversity Act, 2002, recognises traditional knowledge as a component of biodiversity governance.

In India, the judicial developments also echo Indigenous storytelling ethics. In *Mohd. Salim v. State of Uttarakhand* (2017), the High Court recognised the *Ganga* and *Yamuna* rivers as living entities—a decision influenced by traditional beliefs of rivers as mothers or deities. While stayed later, the judgment marks the convergence of Indigenous cosmology and environmental jurisprudence. Cases involving sacred groves, like *Tarun Bharat Sangh*

v. *Union of India* (1993), also reflect judicial acknowledgment of community-driven ecological ethics.

Ethically, Indigenous storytelling reinforces principles central to Indian environmental law: the public trust doctrine, sustainable development, intergenerational equity, and respect for cultural diversity under the Constitution of India. India thus stands at a critical juncture: it has both the legal frameworks and the cultural richness necessary to embed Indigenous storytelling into national environmental governance, thereby ushering in a more ethical and inclusive ecological future.

14. Recommendations for Revitalisation and Integration

Revitalising Indigenous storytelling as an ethical and epistemic resource for environmental governance requires a multi-level approach. At the policy level, governments should recognise oral traditions as legitimate ecological knowledge within environmental legislation, mandating narrative-based cultural assessments in EIAs, forest clearance procedures, climate adaptation frameworks, and protected area governance. Such assessments treat stories, myths, and oral histories as repositories of ecological data and cultural values essential for decision-making.

Interdisciplinary academic collaboration is crucial to strengthening Indigenous epistemologies in law and policy. Universities and research institutions should support research at the intersection of environmental law, anthropology, folklore, ethics, and ecology, prioritising culturally sensitive methodologies, informed consent, community ownership, and ethical safeguards.

Community empowerment forms the backbone of revitalisation. Elders should have platforms to transmit ecological stories to younger generations, and community-controlled archives or eco-cultural centres can safeguard oral heritage while enabling consensual sharing. Empowered communities become active co-custodians of ecological wisdom and biodiversity.

Legal systems must accommodate oral knowledge as valid evidence, developing *sui generis* frameworks to protect traditional ecological knowledge from biopiracy, exploitation, and misappropriation. Sacred landscapes and culturally significant ecosystems should receive protection based on ecological and cultural

values articulated in oral traditions, contributing to the decolonisation of environmental law.

International cooperation is essential. States should align domestic laws with UNDRIP (2007), CBD (1992, arts. 8(j), 10(c)), and the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). Such alignment fosters legally robust and ethically grounded global recognition of Indigenous ecological knowledge, supporting its integration into contemporary environmental governance.

15. Conclusion

Indigenous storytelling is not merely folklore; it constitutes an intricate environmental jurisprudence grounded in ecological intimacy, moral responsibility, and cultural continuity. These narratives encode sustainable practices, ethical principles, and ecological observations refined through centuries of co-existence with the natural world.

Revitalising oral traditions enriches environmental law by infusing it with culturally grounded ethics, expanding its moral imagination, and strengthening community-centred governance. In an era of escalating ecological crisis, Indigenous storytelling provides moral foundations for stewardship, resilience, and ecological justice. The path forward requires recognising Indigenous narratives as legitimate environmental knowledge; embedding their ethical teachings into law, policy, and education; and fostering meaningful dialogue between traditional ecological philosophies and modern legal frameworks. Such integration can build an environmental future that is ethical, resilient, and inclusive—honouring both the Earth and the communities who have long protected it.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest to disclose related to this manuscript. If any conflicts arise in the future, the authors will promptly inform the journal.

AI Use Statement

The authors declare that Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used only for limited assistance in language editing, grammar correction, formatting, or improving clarity of expression. The intellectual content, legal analysis, arguments, conclusions, and interpretation of law remain solely the responsibility of the author.

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