This post is by Sarah Kozal, UCLA School of Law Class of 2016, who participated in the Lima COP last week as part of UCLA's delegation.

One surprise of COP20 has been the large presence of indigenous peoples' issues and voices. In particular, many of the side events at the conference have focused not only on the environmental concerns of indigenous communities, but also on how indigenous communities can help monitor and mitigate environmental changes. Indigenous communities must rely on their home nations to represent their interests internationally, something Native American communities in the United States similarly experience due to their dependent sovereignty and lack of representation internationally. Peru is perhaps a fitting location for a shift toward more inclusiveness, as it supports a large number of indigenous communities living in and near the forests that are in the most danger from the effects of climate change. Warmer temperatures, more severe weather, increased flooding, changes in species' traditional habitat range, and of course deforestation threaten to eliminate these communities.

It has been a slow shift, however, with tragedies tainting the process. Indigenous peoples in the Amazon face particular threats in attempting to participate in this conference as the lands they occupy are pursued for resource exploitation, often by their national governments. As occupants living outside the standard legal systems, these groups frequently do not have recognized title to the land and thus are treated as lacking property rights. They also face more menacing obstacles. This week the body of José Isidro Tendetza Antún, former vice-president of Shuar Federation of Zamora, an indigenous group in Ecuador, was found bound, beaten, and buried. Tendetza had been an outspoken critic of the Mirador open-cast pit mine that the Ecuadorian government had approved in the homeland of the Shuar. He had been planning to take his campaign against the mine to the COP this week. Other indigenous groups have similar tragic stories.

Some good news exists, though. In the Delegation Pavilion, where parties exhibit information about their states, the Pabellón Indígena presents an exhibition of the contributions of indigenous people to curbing the effects of climate change. Members of some of these indigenous villages have been present at the pavilion, speaking often through a series of translators about their experience in the Peruvian Amazon. AIDESEP (Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana), an organization whose mission is to represent indigenous communities nationally and internationally, has pushed especially hard to give the indigenous people a voice here at COP20 and has provided this unique multi-lingual experience.

In Peru especially, but also elsewhere around the world, indigenous people often struggle to

overcome stereotypes about unsophistication and an inability to adapt. Their traditional ecological knowledge, however, is now becoming more widely recognized as an important tool for monitoring the effects of climate change and maintaining resources in a sustainable way.

For example, Kimaren Ole Riamit from ILEPA (Indigenous Livelihoods Enhancement Partners) gave a presentation on how climate adaptation strategies can and should benefit from community adaptation monitoring systems. His work focused on the Maasai pastoral bio-cultural calendar in Kenya, a system that involves all members of the society who assess, monitor, and/or report on the status of specific flora or fauna, or water and land use changes. He warned, however, of forces of globalization that put pressure on this indigenous knowledge and that risk the loss of its potential.

In another presentation, Jaime Nalvarte Armas of AIDER (Asociación para la Investigación y Desarrollo Integral), an NGO in Peru, discussed his work with indigenous communities in creating forest management plans. These systems encourage sustainable business and forest practices while encouraging the native communities to maintain their way of life, often allowing them to continue limited logging. He relayed one experience in particular that speaks to the language barrier associated with working with indigenous communities. While working in the Callería region, the AIDER workers were not initially able to find a translation for “inventory,” a concept the indigenous people did not understand but one crucial to the forest management plan. Eventually they discovered that the word “census” was more translatable, because the community affiliated an inventory of the forest resources with the health of the trees.

Several other organizations recounted similar programs and experiences. Jonah Busch, of the Center for Global Development, relayed findings that deforestation is less likely to take place where indigenous people are living, though certainly indigenous communities are still at risk from the dangers of loss of both resources and of life where it does take place. Other side events specifically addressed indigenous rights, evaluating how indigenous communities interact with programs like REDD+, a mechanism that itself is recognizing the need to safeguard indigenous human rights.

Hopefully this momentum will be paralleled within the negotiations, as parties recognize unique contributions and vulnerabilities of these communities. Michelle Maillet from McGill University gave an optimistic presentation suggesting that it will, and that progress has already been made on this front. She noted that in her critical discourse research, she found an increase in explicit references in the UNFCCC not only to indigenous people’s vulnerability, but also to their potential to aid adaptation with their unique knowledge.

Perhaps the United States can take some of these lessons home and look more closely to Indian tribes and to their traditional ecological knowledge to help address environmental issues.