Music is essential for the transmission of ethnobiological knowledge

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Music has been a long-standing focus of scientific inquiry. For instance, since the 1850s, the evolutionary function of music was a subject of keen debate. More recently, ground-breaking work from multiple scientific disciplines has been unveiling the universal power of music. It is central in supporting expressions of emotion that transcend cultural divides, and it has the ability to foster communication with non-human life forms.

Scientific research shows that ethnobiological knowledge is transmitted through song, and how music has the power to express and enforce the intricate relationships among humans, other beings, and their ecosystems.

"For many Indigenous communities, the land and the songs associated with it are intimately connected. Music can trace indigenous peoples' experiences and relationships to the lands in which they have historically lived," says Dr. Álvaro Fernández-Llamazares, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki.

Dr. Fernández-Llamazares has been co-editing a special issue in the *Journal of Ethnobiology* that celebrates the place of song in maintaining, sharing and enhancing ethnobiological knowledge. "This special issue is a heartfelt compilation of nine articles from different corners of the world and features rich accounts of indigenous peoples' time-honoured music-making traditions, ranging from women's totemic songs relating to wild seeds in Central Australia, improvisational singing traditions in north-eastern Siberia to the use of turtle shell rattles in the United

States."

Besides writing the introduction to the special issue, Álvaro Fernández-Llamazares has also co-authored one of the papers, which looks at hunting songs from the Tsimane' hunter-gatherers of Bolivian Amazonia. "Since 2012 I have been working among the Tsimane' people in the depths of the Amazon rainforest and I have always been fascinated by the breadth and depth of their ancient songs. During these years, I have been able to compile much information on the social and ecological contexts in which songs are performed and transmitted," he explains. "Our research shows that music is a timeless prism for looking at human-wildlife relations in all their complexities and magnificence."

The special issue shows that music is an essential constituent of the diversity of life on Earth, which is genuinely enshrined in the concept of biocultural diversity. The idea of biocultural diversity emerges from the observation that biological and cultural diversity are deeply intertwined, possibly co-evolved, and are threatened by the same driving forces. "Just as the biosphere is being degraded, so too is the ethnosphere, most probably at a far greater rate," adds Fernández-Llamazares.

The papers compiled highlight that many traditional music-making systems are being eroded primarily due to changes associated with globalization. "While traditional music is certainly under risk of attrition in many corners of the world, the extent to which traditional songs continue to be honoured and celebrated attests to their incredible resilience. We hope that we can help to support revitalization efforts for simultaneously safeguarding musical heritage, ethnobiological knowledge and biocultural diversity at large," he reflects.

More information: Álvaro Fernández-Llamazares et al, Ethnobiology through Song, *Journal of Ethnobiology* (2019). DOI: 10.2993/0278-0771-39.3.337

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