The indigenous struggle to survive and to adapt to continually changing worlds continues across the globe, but the battleground has shifted. From an over-heated and crowded office on the outskirts of Moscow, the staff of Riapon (the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples) struggle with the complexities of developing economic development training courses, seek ways to ensure indigenous participation in the expanding Russian electoral process, support political and legislative reforms necessary to protect traditional cultures, and network with aboriginal organizations from around the world. Modern administrative offices in the Nass Valley of northern British Columbia, supported by a multi-million-dollar land-claims settlement signed by the Nisga’a people, provide visual evidence of the pride and professionalism of First Nations negotiators and government officials. Penan forest dwellers show up in traditional dress on university campuses, trying to generate outrage about commercial logging practices in Southeast Asia. United Nations gatherings – from South Africa and Geneva to the Canadian North – regularly devote a considerable amount of time to grappling with indigenous issues, with indigenous politicians sharing podiums with the sophisticated diplomats of one of the world’s most important organizations. Scholars who previously studied indigenous peoples with academic detachment and paternalism now work closely and cooperatively with elders and spiritual leaders to understand the complexities of indigenous world view.

At no time in the past two centuries have indigenous peoples had as many non-aboriginal people and organizations committed to their
survival. Indigenous “support” groups a century ago sought assimilation, not cultural survival. And most non-indigenous observers saw aboriginal societies as impediments to economic growth and societal development. It is ironic, then, that at few times in human history have indigenous peoples faced such dire threats. Language use declines, mass culture works like a cancer on centuries-old traditions. Elders struggle for the attentions of youth, and degradations of traditional territories and life-giving resources appear to suck the vitality out of harvesting communities. Governments respond with cautious and unimpressive attention. They recognize selected and limited legal rights, typically involving land and access to resources and the dominant societies in even the richest nations move only reluctantly beyond limited measures aimed at alleviating poverty.

These are, it seems, the worst of times. A review of the global history of indigenous peoples demonstrates that clouds of human sadness have often spread across the aboriginal world. In the first decades after initial contact with Europeans, deadly epidemics swept through indigenous communities, killing high proportions of the local population. Those not killed by disease saw their territories transformed by the introduction of new plants and animals. They were attacked by armies, dislocated by settlements and rapacious resource development, or controlled and herded onto marginal lands by government officials. Other challenges followed: the complex intrusions of Christian missionaries and western schoolteachers, incorporation and marginalization within a surplus-based economic order, and the subtle changes associated with intermarriage and social contact with the newcomer population. Seen in the context of hundreds of years of contact, challenge, and change, the contemporary situation takes on a different hue.

There are many, among both supporters and the unconcerned, who forecast the imminent demise of the world’s remaining indigenous societies. Organizations struggle to preserve, with some degree of ecological and cultural integrity, tracts of land for indigenous occupation. Others work to preserve and record dying indigenous languages. Still others contend that the future lies in more culturally sensitive incorporation into mainstream societies. Expectations of cultural death, spoken countless times over the centuries, remain premature, exaggerated, and unconvincing. Indigenous societies will do as they have for centuries. They will struggle, often against seemingly insurmountable odds, and they will survive. But determination remains. As the Taos of New Mexico say, “We have lived upon this land from days beyond history’s records,