

Naturally NOMADS

PROJECT SUMMARY



YURTA



ASSOCIATION

Naturally NOMADS project (2022-2027)
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YURTA Association

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"Today, 56% of the world's population lives in urban centers, confined in more and more dense artificial landscapes, and yet the natural realm continues to deteriorate. Data doesn't lie; climate change is its most compelling indicator. Produced by the burning of fossil fuels, the release of chemicals into the atmosphere, industrial activities, the reduction of forest cover and the rapid expansion of agriculture, climate change is telling us that we must change our attitude and put nature in the centre stage, limiting the voracity of cities and shielding eco-regions from urban predation.

At the other extreme, we find the last peoples of nomadic tradition; amongst all indigenous peoples the most attached to nature and those who have least transformed the natural ecosystems where they have lived since time immemorial, ecosystems whose good health is not only fundamental for their own existence but also for ours.

Nomads, increasingly less in number but more threatened, have managed natural resources in their respective biocultural regions in a cyclical and communal manner, without appropriating the natural system but integrating into it, thus contributing to the conservation of vast virgin areas. Scientific evidence has shown that they were never, in fact, uncivilized, and maybe at present they are the most rational human beings. And perhaps also those who can help us most to maintain a global balance necessary for a good life."

Santiago J. Carralero Benítez, director of YURTA Association

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1. PREJUDICES and EVIDENCES

The false conception of History and Civilization

Until approximately 10,000 years ago, the world was dominated by nature and humans lived at the expense of it, hunting and gathering, as they had done for 200,000 years, and about 4 million years before if we include their hominid ancestors. In the late Neolithic, the first known globalization occurred, produced by an unstoppable phenomenon: agriculture. Since then, agriculture has been identified with the emergence of the first civilizations, as if the previous period was nothing more than something preparatory, imperfect, which is not even considered History but Pre-History.

The emergence of agriculture occurred first in the region known as the Fertile Crescent and then was repeated successively on the banks of great rivers: the Nile, the Indus, the Yangtze, the Huang He, and then in many other enclaves of the world. The only continent that remained unscathed by this phenomenon was Australia, although extensive regions of Asia, Africa and America, hostile to permanent human settlement, remained without appreciable changes. However, since then, those who continued to live from and with nature, mostly nomadically, were seen as barbarians. The Bible illustrated this social schism metaphorically with the episode of the murder perpetrated by Cain (a farmer) on his brother Abel (a shepherd).

Against this triumphant vision of the agrarian, eminent researchers agree that agriculture meant a decrease in the variety of the diet, a significant increase in the birth rate and, therefore, population density, triggering a sequence of territorial concentration in opposition to the extensive model of hunters-gatherers and pastoralists. Staged by the emergence of the first city-states, of "civilization" as it has been called in its full sense, the focus shifted from nature itself to be centred on the city, creation of an artificial ecosystem governed by being human in his desire to transcend. Its most symptomatic legacy was the establishment of the right to property over fixed real estate and, therefore, the conception of planet Earth as a human property and, therefore, as a space for appropriation, exploitation and speculation.

Thus, the urban-root civilizations, with their intensive agricultural aggregates, have been subduing nature to get more and more performance from it. Still equipped with the prejudice of agricultural goodness, they now identify veganism as a civilized way of life, while carnivores are ruthless killers. But to be exact, it has been agriculture and its socioeconomic consequences that have led to the current alarming scenario of environmental deterioration, loss of biodiversity, climate change and demographic crisis on an unprecedented scale and levels.

The world history, as it continues to be studied in schools and universities, is that of those civilizations with the fixed idea of property and revenue symbolized by a plot of plowed, fenced and deeded land. The current map of the Earth appears thus split into borders, and even the airspace and the waters of the seas and oceans have been divided and appropriated, drawn by the "civilized" human being, who insists on superimposing barriers and assigning property titles over what is impossible to limit and possess.

Nomad in the full sense

Temporally contemplated, since the first evidence of life on Earth, 3.5 billion years ago, every form of existence must be seen as nomadic due to its irremediable transience, although the awareness of this transience seems exclusive to human beings.

Ours is a very short lifespan, between 70 and 73 years on average today, if we compare it with the jellyfish *Turritopsis nutricula*, the only species capable of reversing the life cycle to avoid natural death, but very long considering the insects of the ephemeroptera family, commonly known as "ephemerids", whose life horizon barely reaches 24 hours.

Death is presented to us as an unbearable but inescapable idea, counterbalanced by what Becker calls "*our mental project of immortality*" (E. Becker, 1973), or in other words, the illusion of posterity of the human soul considered as a species. In some way, the human being does not die if he evolves, and due to this belief is why we witness the contradiction of seeing how, with all the problems to be solved that the human being himself creates in this world, there is nothing better than setting out to conquer other planets.

Humans are also nomads because, like other animals and unlike plant species, we move continuously and autonomously to obtain our means of subsistence, but also to avoid genetic degeneration through exogamy, which instinctively pushes us to reproduce outside the extended kinship group.

When we answer the question "what does it mean to be a nomad?" we do not think of ourselves as ephemeral beings, but mentally and immediately we imagine an individual without a fixed home who moves through an imprecise geographical space, which is how "nomad" has been defined in modern dictionaries. But we are wrong in both cases.

In truth, there is little capricious about the regular and seasonal movements carried out by mobile communities of hunters, fishermen, gatherers, pastoralists, horticulturists and merchants, artisans and itinerant artists.

On the other hand, there are researchers who do not place in the movement what makes these communities so special, but in their communal way of managing the surrounding natural resources and truly conceiving themselves in the world, which is the key to their systematic marginalization. In this vein, and contradicting general opinion, the British anthropologist Hugh Brody grants agriculture, with its innate tendency to produce overpopulation and its propensity for colonialism and war derived from these dynamics, the "title" of the most mobile, and also unstable, of all ways of life (H. Brody, 2002). However, those typically known as nomads do not easily abandon the ecosystems that are their own and where they themselves feel recognized as part of an ancient biocultural structure. We are talking about centuries and even millennia of constant occupation of specific ecological niches.

Strictly speaking, nomadic peoples are the original and continued inhabitants of certain geographic spaces dominated by ecosystems resistant to human colonization, which have one or more of the following characteristics: they require special adaptations; are unsuitable or unfavorable for agriculture and permanent settlement; they present extreme climates, complex topography and wild fauna and flora, with scarce or very dense vegetation. Conversely, these ecosystems have great environmental importance, managed by their original colonizers in a communal, cyclical and rational way, and without essentially disturbing the natural balance, which has forced them to specialize, but also to be integrated as part of a whole where the conservation of the system prevails.

2. PRECEDENTS

About Yurta Association and its founder

Born in Spain (Málaga, 1962), Santiago J. Carralero Benítez is a historian, applied anthropologist and visual artist specialized in nomadic-tradition cultures who founded YURTA Association in 2012. Twice graduated (Geography and History - UNED, 2004; Social and Cultural Anthropology – UNED, 2013), his academic formation includes an Expert degree in Indigenous Peoples, Human Rights and International Cooperation (UC3M, 2020), as well as a Master in Anthropological Research and its Applications (UNED, 2015).

YURTA Association is a non-profit organization dedicated to researching cultures of nomadic tradition and developing specific projects as well as educational proposals inspired by the deep knowledge nomads have of their ecosystems, initiatives aimed mainly at mitigating the adverse effects of climate change and the loss of biocultural diversity, making at the same time their cultures and values known, appreciated and useful to us.

Intended to be the legal figure to providing formal coverage to the projects developed by Santiago J. Carralero, its founder and executive director, YURTA is an association without registered members that generally works in collaboration with inter-governmental and governmental institutions, international organizations, indigenous associations and individuals committed to the well-being of communities with a nomadic tradition, and to this end it works to design some projects, while implementing others in the countryside, attending events and collaborating with different organizations, but also producing artworks (paintings, films) and publishing specialized books and reports.



YURTA presence at a meeting of Central Asian pastoralists (Mongolia, 2015)



S. J. Carralero with Kaweshkar indigenous people in Punta Arenas (Chile, 2002)

Indigenous peoples of nomadic tradition today

Out of the 476 million indigenous peoples on Earth, spread across 90 countries and grouped into 5,000 communities (World Bank, 2021), less than 10% are nomads of any type. Currently, it is estimated that the nomadic and semi-nomadic population could range between 30 and 40 million people.

Unlike other indigenous peoples, those with a nomadic tradition move and change their residence strategically in specific habitats that they consider their extensive homes, generally made up of fragile ecosystems but of high ecological value, and where they pursue food opportunities. Thus, they establish long-term cyclical life patterns that configure, in turn, a very constant material, social and spiritual universe.

Traditionally, nomadic peoples have been classified into three general categories. The first one is made up of hunters, fishermen and gatherers; The second and most numerous is made up of nomadic, semi-nomadic and transhumant pastoralist groups, while the third is that of the itinerant people: merchants, livestock dealers, artisans, artists, etc. To these three categories a fourth can be added: rotational horticulturists.

Currently, traditional nomadism has suffered a slow decline since the modern era, sharply accelerated in the contemporary era due to the expansion of intensive agricultural-livestock systems, industrial development oriented towards mass production, internal re-colonization processes, with its subsequent transfers of non-indigenous population, and state policies aimed at prioritizing urban interests.

A list of 500 surviving nomadic-tradition communities can be consulted at the following link of YURTA Association:

www.nomadicpeople.org/nomadic-people.



The Bateq of Peninsular Malaysia are one of the last hunter-gatherer communities of the Orang Asli group that still retain their nomadic habits in Southeast Asia (Taman Negara N.P., Malaysia, 2023).



The Bakarwal are transhumant pastoralists from the mountains of Kashmir, in the western Himalayan border region between India and Pakistan (Kargil district, India, 2022).



The Bhat are a group of itinerant puppeteers and musicians who also make their puppets, moving with their families through the northwestern provinces of India (Agra, Uttar Pradesh, 2000).

3. PROJECT'S FOUNDATIONS

Beyond pastoralism

At the beginning of its journey, YURTA Association began collaborating with WAMIP, the World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples, an organization promoted by the honorable and remembered Mr. Taghi Farvar, activist and researcher from the Shahsevan pastoral community (Iran), but with a vision global in its desire to protect all communities with a nomadic tradition. In 2010 WAMIP moved away from a global approach to focus on pastoralists, the largest group among nomads, under the leadership of Mr Lalji Desai, from the Maldhari community of India. But first, Mr. Farvar, faithful to his global vision, co-founded the ICCA consortium during the sessions of the IV World Conservation Congress (Barcelona, 2008).

The ICCA Consortium brings together 130 indigenous organizations, tribes and nations and 300 experts from more than 65 countries. A regular partner of the CBD (Convention for Biological Diversity), ICCA focuses its interest on the strong links that exist between some human communities and their territories.

Since 2015, YURTA began to collaborate with the Pastoralist Knowledge Hub (FAO) and then with IFAD to give visibility and offer solutions to the problems faced by pastoralists in High Asia (Himalaya, Tibet, Pamir, etc.). Consequently, YURTA proposed the creation of the World Yak Herders Association, making known the great importance of that region. Later, YURTA initiated its research in the adjacent Monsoon Asia region, equally significant, which meant resuming a holistic approach, beyond pastoralism, to promote joint but diverse management models inspired by indigenous populations in biocultural regions of great environmental relevance.



S. Carralero with Mr Lalji Desai (left) and Mr Taghi Farvar (right) in India (2010)



Woman of the Khampa ethnic group, yak herders of eastern Tibet, in the Yushu Autonomous Prefecture (Qinghai, China)



Salama, patriarch of the Moken community of sea nomads of the Surin Islands (Thailand)

Thinking globally

Before the founding of YURTA, Santiago J. Carralero, was able to discover the survival of nomadism miracle in the 21st century in places as diverse as Mongolia, India, Nepal, Bolivia, Morocco, Namibia, Kenya, Scandinavia and China.

Initially he was attracted to nomadic itinerants who live providing service to the sedentary, thus dedicating some years to studying the origin of this phenomenon in research centers and among communities in northwest India. The fruit of this effort was the publication of "Espíritus Errantes" (2007).

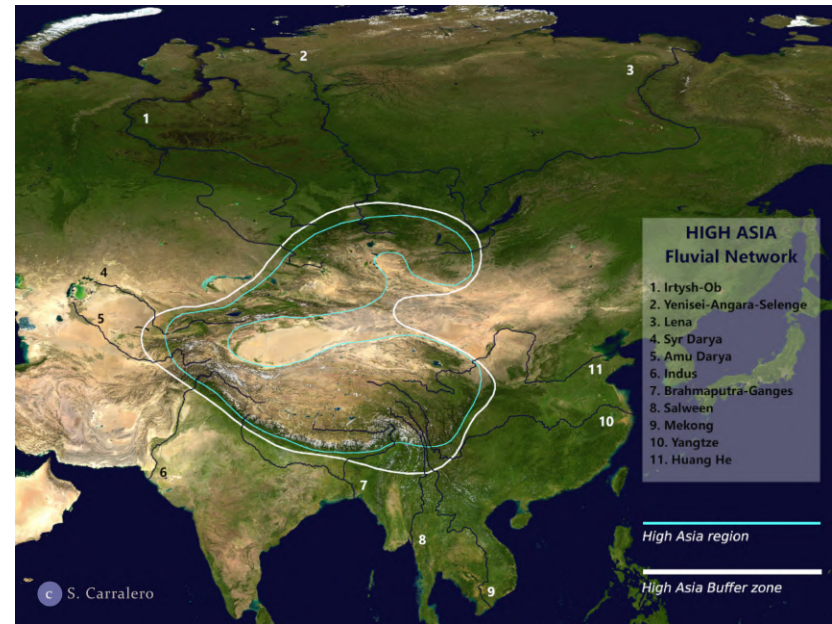
Later he felt the call of the pastoral peoples, especially those from the heights of Tibet, who were the protagonists of his Master's thesis, a study that over the years and after additional visits to Kham (Qinghai and Sichuan) he rewrote to give shape to his second book: "Paisaje tras la Catástrofe" (2021).

Between one experience and another, attendance of the V World Congress of Reindeer Herders (Aoluguya, 2013) as an observer taught him to think globally by realizing that what was essential was not the community or group of communities, whether itinerant, pastoralists or hunters-gatherers, but the conservation of the organism on which they depended, that is, of certain biocultural regions of crucial importance, on which we all depend in some way as well.

Undoubtedly, reindeer herders identify with the Arctic region. While YURTA was developing the FAO project to organize a network of yak herders, these felt linked to their own region: High Asia. Finally, the initial phase of the present project (2022-23) in Southeast Asia has served to identify the hunter-gatherers and sea nomads of that part of the world with another fundamental biocultural region: Monsoon Asia.



Inaugural session of the V World Congress of Reindeer Herders (Aoluguya, 2013)



High Asia with its immense dependent fluvial network (© S. Carralero 2017)

Pilot project (2022-23)

In May 2022, the first research trip of the Naturally NOMADS project began. Lasting 6 months, this first part of the pilot project took place among communities from Turkey (Yörük, Laz, Kurds), Georgia (Tush), Kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyz, Liuli), Uzbekistan, India (Ladakhi, Changpa), Thailand (Moken, Mlabri), Vietnam (Chut, Hmong) and Cambodia (Cham), and It mainly served to test its feasibility and reveal the challenges arisen during the implementation of the field work, especially in terms of budget and technical equipment necessary to carry it out.

After a few months of rest, a second trial period was undertaken in early 2023 aimed at clearly defining the project's objectives, determining how to achieve those objectives, and deciding which communities and places to study and how to do so. This second pilot period, which lasted from January to May 2023, focused on jungle and coastal areas of Monsoon Asia, especially on some of its largest islands: the Philippines (Luzon and Palawan), peninsular Malaysia, Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah), the western coast of Thailand, the interior of Sumatra and some minor islands of Indonesia (Mentawai, Batam, Bintam).

After these first two campaigns, an exhaustive review of the project has been conducted to achieve its optimal development and final design, which includes:

1. The inspiring idea of the project
2. The work map
3. The communities and landscapes of the project
4. The expected direct results
5. The planned resulting sub-projects
6. A chapter on collaborations and funding



Yörük herders in transhumance replenish their strength at sunset (Konya, 2021)



The Suku Laut are a subgroup of the sea nomads of Southeast Asia (Batam, 2023)

4. THE PROJECT itself

1. The Earth Council as an inspiration

Although productive, YURTA's collaborations with FAO and IFAD in the High Asia region also revealed the limitations of the actions promoted within the United Nations. The experience of working to create a Yak Herders Association, with High Asia as a regional space for cooperation, in a political space dominated by India and China, revealed that national policies often weigh too much when trying to develop cooperation programs in cross-border regions of great economic and environmental relevance if it challenges national strategic interests.

The UN was born in 1945 as a global project of states in search of peace and international cooperation after the terrible years of World War II. Later events, such as the Cold War, extended to several conflicts between pro and anti-communist countries and groups in Asia (Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan), or the conflict between the West and Islam, showed the limitations of this multi-state organism. Recent disputes (Russia-Ukraine, Israel-Palestine) also point out the arbitrariness of the actions taken by the United Nations according to the states involved, evident with the right of veto in its Security Council, granted to only 5 nations with great political weight.

As has been seen repeatedly in successive editions of the COP (Climate Summit), the ambitions of some governments and large business corporations tend to prevail over the general interest in a point as delicate as climate change, but also in others related to deforestation and social justice related to territorial speculation, especially if indigenous peoples with a small population and little political weight are involved.

On the other hand, the existence of the Arctic Council represents a real alternative to a different way of understanding inter-state management through the integration at the same level of governments and indigenous organizations regionally represented, with the added participation of thematic working groups that incorporate experts, as well as neutral observers.

The Arctic Council proposes an interesting model of political-environmental governance, more integrative because it goes beyond the state and the merely political. More interestingly, this model can also be replicated in other equally relevant biocultural regions of the world, such as High Asia, Monsoon Asia, Oceania, the Mediterranean Basin, the Andean region, the Amazon Basin, Sahara-Sahel, Middle East, the Congo Basin, East Africa, etc., regions that in the end may be integrated into a general assembly or Earth Council, more appropriate to face the present and future global environmental challenges.



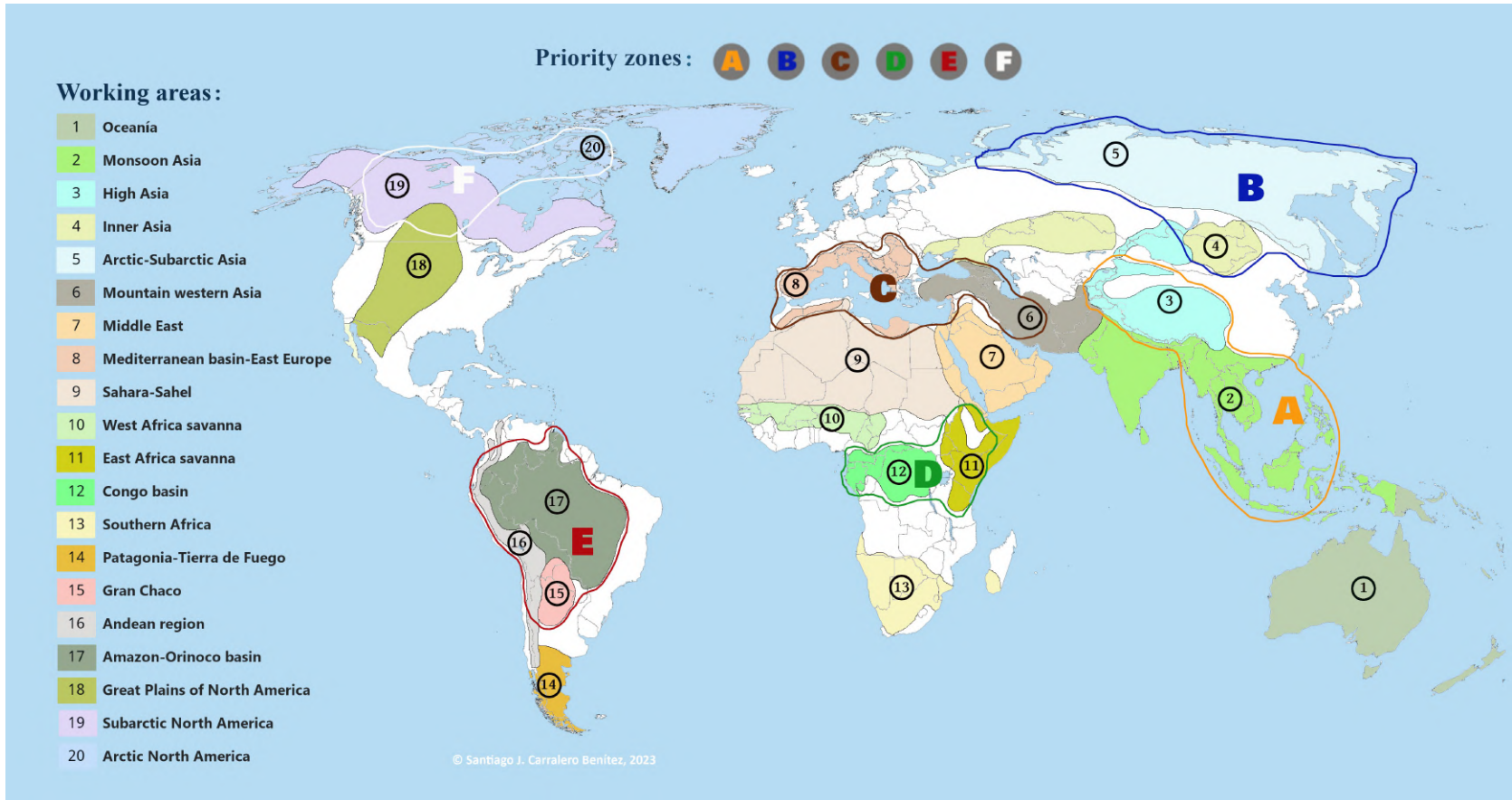
Session of the Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council (Iceland, 2021)

2. Work Map

The Naturally NOMADS project works in the field to study:

1. A wide variety of nomadic ethnic groups around the world;
2. How certain communities with a nomadic tradition interact with their natural ecosystems;
3. Their everyday landscapes and their social and economic contexts;
4. Human groups of this tradition from a same biocultural region in search of similarities and common characteristics that indicate environmental, economic and social relevance.

For this, 20 Biocultural Regions have been identified and, therefore, 20 Working Areas, which are where the current nomadic tradition populations locate, some long sedentary, others still mobile. Some of these Biocultural Regions contain great biodiversity, maintain a high concentration of communities or are vital for the conservation of environmental balance, and the combination of several of them make up Priority Research Zones.



3. Landscapes and ways of life

There are 5 typical landscapes, characterized by 5 natural determining elements able to model their original colonizers, both plants, animals and humans, which will guide us when comparing communities of nomadic tradition from different regions of the world in order to reach conclusions at a global level: 1. Seas and rivers, 2. Mountains, 3. Grasslands, 4. Forests and 5. Deserts.

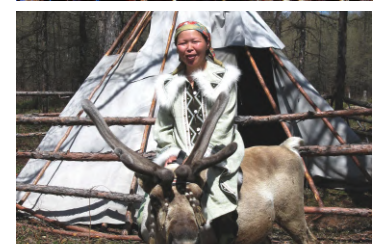
1. **Aquatic communities** depend mainly on marine and river resources, which is why they have developed specific skills (diving, fishing). Among them, the most notable are the Sea Nomads of Southeast Asia, still active, and those of the Magellanic region of the extreme south of America, settled some time ago. In river areas they are found in the Orinoco and Brahmaputra deltas, as well as in the lower course of the Mekong, among the best known.

2. **Mountain communities** are characterized by their adaptation to particular and sometimes unique conditions, more evident as altitude increases, such as less atmospheric pressure and proportion of oxygen in the air and superior insolation and profusion of microclimates. High mountain communities are found in the two most important mountain systems in the world: the Andes and its *altiplanos*, on the one hand, and High Asia, with the great Tibetan plateau in the center, on the other.

3. **Grassland communities** constitute the most striking nomadic pastoral societies due to their long historical tradition. They have large mixed herds that are an inherent part of the landscape of the Eurasian steppe and the African savannahs. Other grass landscapes, such as the American Great Prairies and the Patagonia-Pampa, gave rise to hunters of undomesticated migratory animals who used horseback riding as a key element in their economies.

4. **Forest communities** are of two types. There are those of the tropical forest, both dry and rainy, which live by hunting, fishing, gathering or rotational cultivation, and those of the boreal forest, called Taiga in Eurasia, in which they hunt and gather but also herd reindeer. Some small tropical rainforest communities live without contact with the outside world, mainly in the Amazon basin.

5. **Desert communities** endure extreme temperatures and scarcity of food and water resources. They house communities of both herders and hunter-gatherers, often mixed. Among the inhabitants of the frozen desert, the Inuit of North America and Greenland and the natives of the Siberian tundra stand out; among those of the hot desert are the San of the Kalahari and the Berber and Bedouin populations of North Africa and the Middle East.



4. Expected direct results

1. PARTIAL: produced throughout the development of the project

- **REPORTS:**
Each biocultural region or Work Area investigated will give rise to a report that can be published, with special attention to the Priority Zones.
- **DOCUMENTARIES:**
Each type of landscape-community investigated of the 5 proposed will give rise to a documentary or series of documentaries (audio-visual).
- **CRAFT ACQUISITION AND ARTISTIC PRODUCTION:**
A series of characteristic artisanal objects will be acquired directly from the visited communities. YURTA will produce, at its own expense, artistic works inspired by these communities: oil paintings, watercolors, etc.

2. FINALS: re-elaborated at the close of the project with all partial results

- **GENERAL REPORT:**
It will consist of a complete report of the entire project, from its pilot phase to its conclusion, which will be published as a summary book of the project with the same title: "Naturally NOMADS".
- **PROJECT FILM:**
It will be an audio-visual summary in the form of a full-length documentary of the entire project, from its pilot phase to its conclusion.
- **COMPILATION OF CRAFT AND ARTISTIC MATERIAL:**
Cataloging and conservation work of all the craft and artistic material related to the project.

3. GENERAL: that provide theoretical bases of an innovative nature

- In accordance with its inspiring idea, the project would provide, upon completion, the empirical basis for the theoretical formulation of the Earth Council with the study of the biocultural regions that could compose it: Arctic, High Asia, Monsoon Asia, Oceania, Amazon, Andes, Congo basin, Rift, Mediterranean, etc.



Documentary frame of "Nomads under the monsoon"



Craft items of Moken (Surin, Thailand)



Painting from the project artwork collection

5. Planned resulting sub-projects

The Naturally NOMADS project is basically an on-the-ground knowledge project that upon completion will also be useful in the fields of cultural dissemination and environmental education. In principle, it is expected to provide the argumentative foundation, with background visual support, for a series of international talks and conferences aimed at a wide variety of audiences: general, academic, specialized, etc., organized by the YURTA Association in coming years.

More specifically and significantly, the project will have two sub-projects or subsequent developments aimed at the aforementioned fields, one with a shorter scope focused on cultural dissemination and another with a longer scope with a clear educational and environmental vocation.

1. The Art of Being Nomadic is the name given to the sub-project derived from Naturally NOMADS that promotes the cultural dissemination of nomadic peoples by two means: an exhibition and an informative publication. For more information: www.nomadicpeople.org/art-of-being-nomadic
 - The exhibition called “The Art of Being Nomadic” has been conceived as a traveling exhibition, organized at the request of any interested institution. which combines photography, crafts, pictorial and audio-visual work, enriched with explanatory panels, maps, etc.
 - The publication “The Art of Being Nomadic” (written in English) hopes to become a reference book for students and scholars of native art, prepared in the style of a Universal Art manual but dedicated to cultures of nomadic tradition.
2. EDUNOMAD is the name given to the most ambitious sub-project derived from Naturally NOMADS, dedicated entirely to environmental education. Conceived as a permanent physical space, in the form of a cultural center or museum, its ideal formulation would be “Center for Nomadic Studies for Environmental Education” (CENSEE), but its formal design would require the precondition of a certain institutional and financial commitment by the party or parties interested in developing and/or hosting it.

For more information go to: www.nomadicpeople.org/edunomad



Cover designed for the future publication “The Art of Being Nomadic”, which hopes to fill the editorial void that exists in the field of the art produced by peoples with a nomadic tradition.

6. Collaborations and funding

- **Collaboration in the field:**

A project of this scope obviously requires the collaboration of a multitude of institutional actors in the field, both public and private, especially those closest to nomadic groups, such as staff from national parks and other protected areas, as well as that of the municipalities and regionalities that host them, but mainly and above all of those non-institutional actors that make up the heart of the native communities, that is, their own members and representatives (international, national and local leaders and mediators).

- **Additional collaborations :**

YURTA does not have funds to hire assistants. However, the project is open to external collaborations from people who are interested in participating in its normal development, such as anthropology or ecology students specialized in indigenous communities, naturalists or scientists, as long as they have their own source of financing, but It will not allow the participation of adventurers, freelancers or journalists.

- **Self-funding sources:**

The Naturally NOMADS project does not have its own financing at the moment. It is carried out thanks to the personal efforts of the director of YURTA Association and with his own funds. However, YURTA promotes collaborative micro-financing on an individual or private institutional basis with the production and sale of a series of artistic works within the sub-project called *The Art of Being Nomadic*. These works, made throughout the project, will one day be exhibited at events scheduled to disseminate the project, including those that have already been sold, donated provisionally and punctually for the exhibition, to later be returned to their owners.

- **External funding sources:**

In the future, YURTA will seek external financing from institutions with a proven commitment to indigenous peoples and the protection of their ecosystems to ensure the completion of the project but without compromising its design or its objectives.



Naturally NOMADS

Learning from nomadic-tradition indigenous communities

The world has changed drastically with the revolution in transportation and communications and the dizzying demographic growth of the last 70 years. Climate change and territorial and economic speculation threaten the health of humanity. However, globalization also means that we know much more than before about many more issues anywhere in the world and therefore we have more capacity to find solutions. Thus, we must be humble enough to learn from those who still live in direct contact and harmony with the natural ecosystems that support life on our planet, and at the same time smart enough for not contributing to their destruction.



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