

# Panama and Its Indigenous Peoples

## A Model of Respect and Diversity

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Group portrait of Embera Quera people in traditional attire at their village.

Walking through Panama City as a tourist, it is common to encounter Indigenous people wearing their characteristic clothes and keeping their traditions alive. Indigenous peoples represent one of the most important elements of identity and pride in Panamanian culture, not only due to the existence of comarcas, semi-autonomous territories where they exercise their own authority and administration, but also because of the vital role they play in the country.

Panama has achieved a delicate balance between the modernity of its capital, with its skyscrapers and large commercial centers, and the preservation of its ties to its native communities. This model of coexistence offers valuable lessons for other nations, as it shows how Panamanian Indigenous peoples are key actors in the protection of cultural and natural diversity. Thanks to their vision and customs, Indigenous communities have contributed to the conservation of a large part of the country's biodiversity.

## **Legal Framework: Comarcas and Their Representation in Panamanian Law**

In Panamanian schools, students learn that the country is composed of ten provinces and six Indigenous comarcas, which remain part of Panamanian territory while exercising a significant degree of self-governance. The constitution recognizes comarcas as autonomous Indigenous territories, guaranteeing rights over their lands, resources, and internal governance. This allows Indigenous peoples to manage their territories, protect their resources, and preserve their traditions.

Each community has its own traditional leadership, such as caciques or community councils, who manage local administration, resolve conflicts, and safeguard customs. These communities work collectively to manage natural resources, protect forests, rivers, and soils, and maintain their cultural and agricultural practices. Among the most representative comarcas are Guna Yala, Ngäbe-Buglé, Emberá-Wounaan, Naso Tjër Di, Madungandí, and Wargandí, each with communities deeply connected to their natural surroundings and ancestral identity.

## **Guardians of Biodiversity**

Indigenous peoples in Panama have traditionally preserved their environment through ancestral knowledge of biodiversity, plants, water, and climate, while also protecting their territorial rights. Indigenous peoples apply traditional sustainable practices to manage their lands without degrading ecosystems. The Emberá-Wounaan comarca, located in the Darién province, publicly advocates for sustainable forest management, following responsible timber use plans certified by the Panamanian Ministry of Environment. Another example is Ngäbe-Buglé, dedicated to traditional agriculture and reforestation with native species to restore degraded soils. Finally, the Guna Yala comarca sees communities protecting reefs and marine ecosystems through fishing regulations and community conservation measures. These examples highlight the strong commitment of Panama's Indigenous peoples to the country's biodiversity.

## **Tourism and Respect Go Hand in Hand**

It is no surprise that Indigenous tourism in Panama has become a tool for sustainability and cultural respect. In general, Panamanian Indigenous peoples take pride in their customs and enjoy sharing them with visitors, whether through traditional foods, celebrations, dances, or cultural rituals. This also represents a key way these communities sustain themselves economically.

## **Ecotourism**

The Panama Tourism Authority, together with the National Indigenous Tourism Chamber, promotes the sustainable "Panamá Indígena" circuit, which combines Indigenous culture with ecotourism, highlighting destinations such as La Chunga (Darién), San Cristóbal (Bocas del Toro), and Tusinopo and Puru Blakirú (Chagres). This type of tourism allows visitors to learn about and connect with Indigenous traditions respectfully, while communities manage and control the activity, generating local income. Other organizations, such as RedTuri, the Indigenous Tourism Network, bring together communities to offer immersive experiences that educate visitors about life in Indigenous communities.

## **International Stage**

Panama has positioned itself as a key player in the international agenda on Indigenous peoples and biodiversity by hosting several globally significant events, including regional workshops on innovative financing and Indigenous women's participation in conservation.

Opening the inaugural Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j), the CBD's forum dedicated to Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, hosted in Panama City in October 2025, Panama's Minister of Environment, Juan Carlos Navarro, said "Nature does not recognize institutional divisions," calling for the meeting to become a space for real synergy between modern science, traditional knowledge, and local communities (Convention on Biological Diversity, press release, 27 October 2025).

## **Lessons from the State-Comarca Organization**

The establishment of comarcas as autonomous territories capable of making their own decisions can be seen as a determining factor in the representation and protection of Indigenous peoples and their traditions. Panama's legal framework respects and involves Indigenous communities in political decisions, through conventions and agreements. A balance can be observed that allows both parties to coexist and collaborate in safeguarding the country's biodiversity.

The promotion of Indigenous tourism with conscious and respectful communication reinforces the appreciation and preservation of their customs, demonstrating how openness to the world can coexist with the protection of cultural identity. Panama's approach reaffirms the country's commitment to biodiversity conservation and the respect of Indigenous rights, while offering lessons for other nations on inclusion, intercultural dialogue, and environmental sustainability.

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