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### **Botswana Verdict Sends Signal to Bioconservation Community**

The victory of the Indigenous San of Botswana, who won the right to return to their homelands in the Kalahari in an unprecedented court decision on Wednesday, may signal changes in the way bioconservation is conducted throughout the world. The Botswana court ruled that the San, also known as Bushmen or Basarwa, were illegally evicted from their homelands in the Kalahari Desert to make room for the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. First Peoples Worldwide has worked tirelessly in support of the First Peoples of the Kalahari, a San community-based non-profit organization led by Roy Sesana, the prime litigant in this case. FPW has provided financial support and technical assistance to help members of the group bring their case to court.

“This landmark court case will send a signal to the world that Indigenous Peoples have ownership rights to their lands and other assets that cannot be violated even if their lands are highly desirable for conservation purposes,” said Rebecca Adamson, president and founder of First Peoples Worldwide.

The San are among the last hunter-gatherers on earth. They were forcibly removed from their homelands in the Kalahari, relocated to resettlement camps and forbidden from returning to their homelands. Cut off from their traditional food supply, medicinal plants, and economic and social systems, the San have experienced increased poverty and sickness, including many previously unknown ills such as HIV infection and alcoholism, and are in danger of losing their cultural identity as well. Their return to the Kalahari may set a precedent for Indigenous Peoples world-wide who often suffer evictions and other “unintended consequences of conservation.”

“Evictions in the name of conservation are unacceptable,” said Adamson. “In fact, Indigenous Peoples have so much to offer the bioconservation community. They have been Stewards of their lands for centuries. They should be empowered to

continue in this role and to be recognized with grants and other programs to help them conduct conservation on their own lands.”

First Peoples Worldwide, which believes Indigenous Peoples should be able to control their own assets and to leverage these assets for sustainable development, has founded the Indigenous Stewardship Program and Fund <sup>SM</sup>, which provides technical and financial assistance to Indigenous communities to help them establish and manage protected areas on their own homelands. Indigenous People total 5 percent of the world’s population, represent 90 percent of the cultural diversity and have traditional land claims for between 18 and 24 percent of the Earth’s surface. Indigenous territories span many of the last remaining biodiversity rich wilderness areas and most of the major conservation priorities for this century.

“With their return to the Kalahari, the San now face an even greater battle to control their own resources,” Adamson continued. “However, we are very grateful for this decision, which is truly a victory for Indigenous Peoples everywhere.”

FPW is the only organization led by Indigenous peoples and dedicated to the mission of promoting Indigenous economic determination and strengthening Indigenous communities through asset control and the dissemination of knowledge. Its goal is to assist Indigenous Peoples in claiming, controlling, and utilizing their own assets toward self-sufficiency in ways that fit their cultures.

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