



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

FILAC



FUND FOR THE DEVELOPMENT
OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN



©LOL KOÓPTE' / Fernanda López

Mayan women of the Lol Koópte' Cooperative, Ejido Petcacab, Mexico.

POLICY BRIEF

Forest governance by indigenous and tribal peoples

An opportunity for **climate action**
in Latin America and the Caribbean



©FAO/ Mauricio Mireles

Indigenous Territory in Talamanca, Limón Province, Costa Rica.

KEY MESSAGES

The forests in Latin America and the Caribbean's indigenous and tribal territories are vital for successful local, regional, and global climate action.

The cultural, geographic, economic, and policy-related factors that have helped preserve these forests to-date are changing rapidly, with potentially disastrous environmental and social consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened those threats.

Compensating indigenous and tribal peoples for the environmental services their territories provide while facilitating community management of forests and agroforests are economically feasible and cost-effective solutions with long-term benefits for rural development and the environment.

Governments, the international community, and other stakeholders should strengthen their collaboration with indigenous and tribal peoples to improve the overall governance of their territories and secure their collective tenure rights.

Reaffirming and revitalizing indigenous and tribal cultures and ancestral knowledge, strengthening indigenous peoples and tribal organizations, and full participation of indigenous and tribal women and youth in decision-making processes are essential components of these efforts.

This brief is the summary of a more extensive technical paper of the same title which may be referred to for further details, including a full reference list.

DEFINITIONS

Indigenous peoples

The Food and Agriculture of the United Nations (FAO) considers the following criteria when using the term indigenous peoples:

- Priority in time, with respect to occupation and use of a specific territory.
- The voluntary perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness, which may include aspects of language, social organization, religion and spiritual values, modes of production, laws and institutions.
- Self-identification, as well as recognition by other groups, or by state authorities, as a distinct collectivity.
- An experience of subjugation, marginalization, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination, whether or not these conditions persist.

Tribal peoples

A tribal people is a “people that is not indigenous to the region (they inhabit) but that shares similar characteristics with indigenous peoples, such as having social, cultural, and economic traditions that are different from other groups within the country, a strong identification with its ancestral territories, and that its at least partially regulated by its own norms, customs, and traditions” (Inter-American Court of Human Rights).

Territories

An area that is owned or under the control of someone is called a territory. In an indigenous or tribal communal territory, the inhabitants self-identify as indigenous or tribal peoples and manage some of the natural resources collectively. Governments may or may not recognize their right to do so. Typically, these territories have a mixture of communal and household economic activities.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous and tribal peoples control about one third of Latin America and the Caribbean's forests. Supporting their efforts to control, sustainably manage, and benefit from these forests can greatly help to solve the problems of climate change, loss of biological and cultural diversity, rural vulnerability, and food insecurity.

This information brief explains why such support is vital and what needs to be done. These forests help stabilize the regional and global climate, contain immense biological riches, and house immemorial cultures. They were once well protected but are under increasing threat. To ensure those forests and their inhabitants survive and thrive for years to come, funders, governments, and other stakeholders must work with the indigenous and tribal peoples to bolster their territorial

Maya Q'eqchi 'woman, community midwife (attends deliveries), also goes through the forests to fulfill her tasks, Guatemala.



rights, revitalize their cultures and traditional knowledge, provide means and incentives to manage their forests well, and strengthen their organizations and governance.

In summary, this brief:

- Lays out the case for prioritizing efforts to protect the territories' forests and cultures and improve their governance and inhabitant's well-being.
- Presents three cases, from Brazil, Ecuador, and Mexico to showcase positive examples of policies and programs that favor forest governance by indigenous and tribal peoples.
- Identifies priority areas for investment and policy reforms that are needed to strengthen the indigenous and tribal peoples' governance of their territories and the forests within them.

Awajun warrior in his community in the Peruvian jungle. Loreto, Peru.



Why is supporting forest governance by indigenous and tribal peoples a priority?

CLIMATE

Indigenous and tribal peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean manage between 330 and 380 million hectares of forest (Fa *et al.*, 2020); an area more than three times the size of Colombia. Those forests store more than one eighth of all the carbon in the world's tropical forests (Saatchi *et al.*, 2011; Frechette *et al.*, 2018). Neither Indonesia nor the Democratic Republic of Congo, the two countries with the world's largest tropical forests after Brazil, can equal that. Losing a major share of the indigenous and tribal forests would fundamentally alter the regional and global climate.

BIODIVERSITY

These forests also house a large portion of the world's endangered animal and plant species. Almost half (45 percent) of the large wilderness areas in the Amazon Basin are in indigenous territories (Fernandez-Llamazares *et al.*, 2020). Brazil's indigenous territories have more vertebrate species than its non-indigenous protected areas (Schuster *et al.*, 2019) and over 60 percent of the vertebrate and plant species in the Plurinational State of Bolivia can be found in the indigenous Tacana and Leco de Apolo territories (Salinas *et al.*, 2017).

VULNERABILITY

Hundreds of distinct indigenous and tribal peoples live in or near these forests and depend on them for their livelihoods. They have incredible cultural richness, including diverse languages, traditions, and local knowledge, but low incomes and limited access to services. Only 43 percent of those

over 15 years of age surveyed in the last round of censuses had completed primary education and only 56 percent had electricity (Thiede and Gray, 2020).

GOOD STEWARDS

Most Indigenous and tribal peoples forests are well preserved and were not under much threat until recently. In practically every Latin American country indigenous and tribal territories have lower deforestation rates. Even though the indigenous territories cover 28 percent of the Amazon Basin, they only generated 2.6 percent of the region's forest-related carbon emissions (Walker *et al.*, 2020). Indigenous and tribal peoples did not engage much in extensive cattle ranching or mechanized agriculture, two of the region's main causes of forest loss. Many of their forests were remote and inaccessible from densely populated areas. Latin America was a pioneer in the recognition of indigenous and tribal communal land rights, community forestry, and payments for environmental services, and those policies helped protect indigenous and tribal forests.

COST-EFFECTIVENESS

The lower carbon emissions from indigenous and tribal territories creates tremendous economic and environmental opportunities. Between 2000 and 2012 the indigenous territories with land titles in the Bolivian, Brazilian, and Colombian Amazon had between 42.8 and 59.7 million metric tons (MtC) lower carbon emissions than other Amazon areas with similar environmental conditions and access to markets. This is the equivalent of taking between 9 and 12.6 million vehicles out of circulation for one year. Over a twenty-year period, the Net Present Value of these lower emissions has been estimated at between 25 and 34 billion US dollars (Ding *et al.*, 2016).

NEW THREATS

Unfortunately, the threats to indigenous and tribal territories are rising rapidly. Growing demand for food, energy, minerals, and timber, and infrastructure investments, have greatly increased the incentives for outside groups to control the territories' natural resources. Some governments have decreased their support for indigenous land rights, community forestry, and payment for environmental services. In many places traditional governance mechanisms, customs, and knowledge are eroding. The COVID-19 epidemic has aggravated the problems, affecting indigenous and tribal peoples disproportionately, and limiting their access to markets and services.

Indigenous Academical School of Sepecue, in Talamanca, Limón Province, Costa Rica.



FOREST LOSS AND VIOLENCE

These threats have led to growing forest loss and conflict. Annual deforestation rates in Brazil's indigenous territories rose from 10 337 hectares in 2017 to 42 697 hectares in 2019 (ISA, Comissão Arns and Conecta, 2020). Between 2000 and 2016 the area of large undisturbed ("intact") forests in indigenous territories fell by 20 percent in the Plurinational State of Bolivia, 30 percent in Honduras, 42 percent in Nicaragua, and 59 percent in Paraguay (Fa *et al.*, 2020). Mining and petroleum concessions now overlay almost one quarter of the land in Amazon Basin indigenous and tribal territories. Between 2015 and the first half of 2019, 232 indigenous community leaders were killed in the region because of disputes over land and natural resources (ECLAC and FILAC, 2020).

GREATER ACCESS TO CLIMATE FINANCE

Greater access to climate finance and policy reforms to support forest governance in the indigenous and tribal territories are urgently needed to revert these trends. They can provide cost effective options for mitigating and adapting to climate change, conserving biological and cultural diversity, reducing poverty and food insecurity, and avoiding social conflict.

THREE POSITIVE EXAMPLES IN LATIN AMERICA

CASE 1

Community Forestry in Mexico – the Petcacab *Ejido* in Quintana Roo

In the 1980s Mexico pioneered policies supporting community enterprises that produce timber and other forest products. The government eliminated logging concessions and provided financial and technical support for communities to manage forests.

Thanks to this, the Mayan community of Petcacab in Quintana Roo has harvested timber sustainably for almost forty years. Petcacab has 51 176 hectares, of which 80 percent has forest. In 2016 the community sold USD 1.7 million in forest products.

Mexico's experience shows that policies that support indigenous community forest management can conserve forests and provide livelihoods at scale. That requires secure land and forest rights, as well as public investment, supportive regulatory environments, and business support services.

Mayan woman working with wood. Cooperativa Lol Koópte', Ejido Petcacab, Mexico.



CASE 2**Payment for Environmental Services in
Ecuador – the Socio Bosque Program**

Ecuador is among a half-dozen Latin American countries that pay indigenous communities to care for forests. In 2008 it created the Socio Bosque Program to conserve forests, reduce emissions, and improve living conditions. Socio Bosque gives communities funds for local projects. In return, the communities agree not to farm, log, or hunt in an area for twenty years. So far, 196 communities have received payments to conserve 1 450 000 hectares.

Average deforestation rates in districts where Socio Bosque works fell more than 80 percent between 2008 and 2016 compared to previous years. Meanwhile, in the country's other districts, deforestation rates rose. Most villagers recently surveyed support their communities' participation in Socio Bosque. They say Socio Bosque reduces invasions of their territories, improves transparency and accountability of local organizations, increases participation in voluntary community activities, and strengthens local value chains.

Paying indigenous territories for environmental services is different from paying individual farmers. Programa like Socio Bosque should emphasize strengthening the territories' governance and capacity for collective action, rather than compensating people for the money they lose by clearing forests for agriculture.

Aerial view of the Pirititi Indigenous Territory, Roraima, Brazil.



CASE 3**Indigenous Wildfire Management in Brazil – the *PREVFOGO* Program**

The indigenous peoples of South America's savanna regions have used fire for more than 4 000 years to recycle nutrients, hunt, fish, control pests and snakes, induce flowering, conduct ceremonies, cut trails, and keep flammable material from building up. That traditional knowledge of how to manage fires can protect forests.

In 2014, Brazil adopted a fire management policy that recognized the benefits of indigenous fire practices such as controlled burns and established a separate fires program for indigenous and quilombolos territories (*PREVFOGO*), covering more than 17 million hectares.

PREVFOGO was based partially on a collaboration in Mato Grosso between the government and indigenous elders to design a fire management plan incorporating traditional knowledge. In its first three years *PREVFOGO* reduced fires in the last part of the dry season in three large territories by over half.

Intercultural dialogues between public officials and indigenous community members can enrich government policies. It is not easy to overcome centuries of prejudice about traditional communities, cultures, and practices, but everyone benefits when it happens.

Indigenous brigades of *PREVFOGO* plan with the indigenous community of Porquinhos, Maranhão, Brazil.



RECOMMENDATIONS

STRENGTHENING COMMUNAL LAND RIGHTS

Studies of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, and Panama show that giving indigenous and tribal peoples territories communal land titles or other formal land rights reduces deforestation. Despite that Latin America has advanced more than Africa and Asia in recognizing these land rights, **governments should step up efforts to recognize communal land rights over the tens of millions of hectares that indigenous and tribal peoples occupy** without any legal document that acknowledges their rights. They must also do more to resolve competing land claims and stop illegal encroachment and attacks on indigenous and tribal leaders. In addition, almost half (47 percent) of the area occupied by indigenous peoples in Latin America has also been designated as a protected area (Garnett *et al.*, 2018). Even if titling helps reduce deforestation in those areas, in many cases the protected areas were established without the permission of indigenous or tribal peoples, **which violates their right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent**. Also, a large proportion of indigenous and tribal territories have overlapping mining and petroleum concessions, which cause substantial forest degradation in these territories and are often granted without respect for the communities' right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent.

COMPENSATE ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

The growing threats to the forests, cultures, and physical security of the indigenous and tribal territories merit a forceful multi-pronged response. **Paying indigenous and tribal communities for the environmental services of their territories' has reduced deforestation in Ecuador, Mexico,**



©FAO/ Mauricio Mireles

Traditional clothing of the Guna Indigenous People Púculo Indigenous Territory, Darién Province, Panama.

Peru, and elsewhere. Communities use them to finance local infrastructure, services, and value chains, as well as cultural activities and forest protection. **Funders should reinforce programs to compensate indigenous and tribal communities for their contributions to climate stability and nature conservation.** These programs should be designed to strengthen communities' governance, cultural identity, social cohesion, environmentally friendly value chains, and forest management.

PROMOTING COMMUNITY FORESTRY

Community forest management has allowed hundreds of indigenous communities to earn income and maintain millions of hectares of forests. Nevertheless, community forestry could contribute much more to forest conservation and to community wellbeing than it has to date. To do so, paying communities not to clear forest is not enough, **a simple and culturally sensitive regulatory approach adapted to the needs of the groups involved** is needed, as well as promoting measures that aim to overcome financial, commercial, technical, and management obstacles.

REAFFIRMING TRADITIONAL CULTURES AND KNOWLEDGE

The success of indigenous and tribal peoples and territories, and their local institutions, community enterprises, and forest management depend heavily on having vibrant cultures, strong identities and self-esteem, and deep traditional knowledge about their local context. **Indigenous and tribal traditional knowledge can help to manage forests better, and evidence suggests that communities with greater traditional knowledge conserve forests more.** Hence, revitalizing and reaffirming indigenous and tribal cultural and traditional knowledge can protect forests, reduce emissions, and conserve biodiversity.

SUPPORT TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE

All of the above requires stronger territorial governance and indigenous and tribal organizations. The new generation of indigenous and tribal leaders and their aides must be able to engage effectively with external groups, improve their management, technical, and administrative skills, and be fully accountable to the communities they serve. **This is only possible with the full and equitable participation of women and youth.**

In summary, there is an urgent need for international and national agencies to provide hundreds of millions of dollars in additional funds annually to strengthen communal land rights, compensate for environmental services, facilitate community forest management, revitalize traditional cultures and knowledge, improve territorial governance, and strengthen indigenous and tribal organizations. These investments offer a **cost-effective opportunity** to reduce carbon emissions, conserve biological and cultural diversity, and provide rural livelihoods.



©FAO/ Mauricio Mireles

Indigenous woman from the Guna People, Púculo Indigenous Territory, Province of Darien, Panama.

CONCLUSIONS

At a time when Latin America and the Caribbean confronts one of the greatest health, economic, and humanitarian crisis of its history due to COVID-19, climate change may appear secondary and remote. But the climate crisis can be as or more dangerous than the current pandemic. If the current situation has taught us anything, it is that we cannot afford to ignore scientists' warnings about imminent threats, and that the cost of overcoming this kind of catastrophe can be much greater than avoiding or mitigating it.

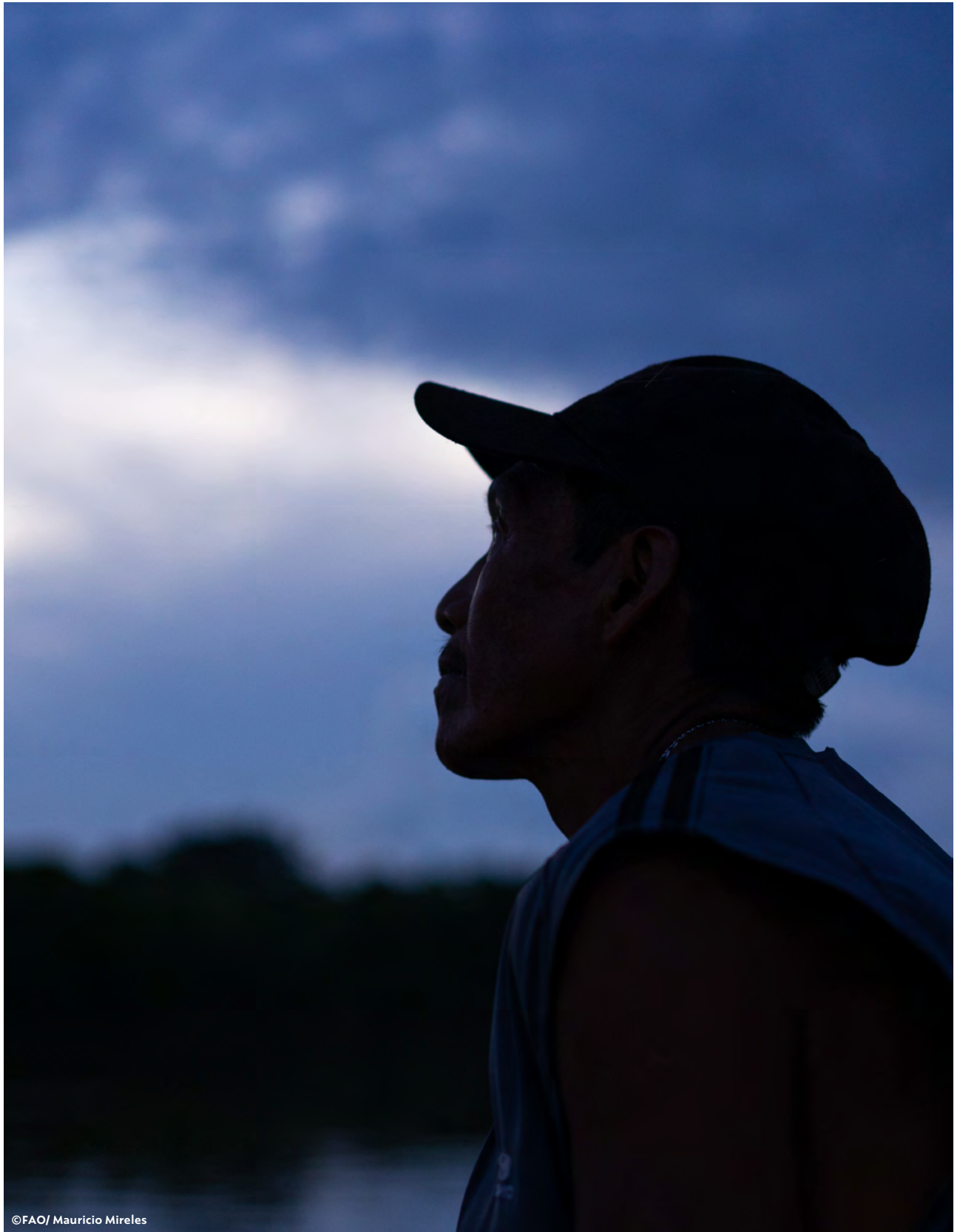
Even so, with such a strong economic crisis, no country in the region has the financial capability to redirect funds allocated to address the pandemic's devastating effects on health, welfare, and the economy, and channel them into efforts focusing exclusively on climate change. Collectively, we will have to be extremely creative and innovative to find the policies and investments that can help us to recover from the pandemic but also contribute to the inescapable tasks of mitigating and adapting to climate change.

Collaborating with the region's indigenous and tribal peoples to protect the forests in their territories fits the bill. These peoples are rich when it comes to culture, knowledge, and natural resources, but some of the poorest when it comes to incomes and access to services, and among the most affected by the pandemic, healthwise and economically. Supporting them to protect and manage their forests could help to create or recover hundreds of thousands of jobs in forestry, agroforestry, tourism, education, and cultural activities, and to avoid new pandemics, as well as providing other social, environmental, and cultural benefits. It also has the potential to attract hundreds of millions of USD per year from international sources, since there is strong evidence that taking care of these forests is one of the most cost-effective options for limiting carbon emissions, which is of vital interest to the entire planet.

REFERENCES

- Ding, H., Veit, P. G., Blackman, A., Gray, E., Reytar, K., Altamirano, J. C. & Hodgdon, B. 2016. *Climate Benefits, Tenure Costs: The Economic Case for Securing Indigenous Land Rights in the Amazon*. Washington D. C., World Resources Institute (WRI).
- ECLAC & Fund for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean (FILAC). 2020. *Los pueblos indígenas de América Latina - Abya Yala y la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible: tensiones y desafíos desde una perspectiva territorial*. Santiago, ECLAC. <https://www.cepal.org/es/publicaciones/45664-pueblos-indigenas-america-latina-abya-yala-laagenda-2030-desarrollo-sostenible>.
- Fa, J. E., Watson, J. E. M., Leiper, I., Potapov, P., Evans, T. D., Burgess, N. D., Molnár, Z., Fernández-Llamazares, Á., Duncan, T., Wang, S., Austin, B. J., Jonas, H., Robinson, C. J., Malmer, P., Zander, K. K., Jackson, M. V., Ellis, E., Brondizio, E. S. & Garnett, S. T. 2020. Importance of Indigenous Peoples' Land for the Conservation of Intact Forest Landscapes. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 18(3): 135-140. http://ecotope.org/people/ellis/papers/fa_2020.pdf.
- Fernández-Llamazares, Á., Terraube, J., Gavin, M. C., Pyhälä, A., Siani, S. M. O., Cabeza, M. & Brondizio, E. S. 2020. Reframing the Wilderness Concept can Bolster Collaborative Conservation. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 35(9): 750-753. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2020.06.005>.
- Frechette, A., Ginsburg, C. & Walker, W. 2018. *A Global Baseline of Carbon Storage in Collective Lands: Indigenous and Local Community Contributions to Climate Change Mitigation*. Washington D. C., Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), Woods Hole Research Center (WHRC), World Resources Institute (WRI).
- Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), Comissão Arns & Conectas Direitos Humanos. 2020. *Ameaças e violação de direitos humanos no Brasil: povos indígenas isolados*. Brazil.
- Inter-American Court of Human Rights. 2007. *Caso del Pueblo Saramaka vs. Surinam. Sentencia del 28 de noviembre de 2007 (Excepciones Preliminares, Fondo, Reparaciones y Costas)*. Serie C. no. 172. https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_172_esp.pdf.
- Saatchi, S. S., Harris, N. L., Brown, S., Lefsky, M., Mitchard, E. T. A., Salas, W., Zutta, B. R., Buermann, W., Lewis, S. L., Hagen, S., Petrova, S., White, L., Silman, M. & Morel, A. 2011. Benchmark map of forest carbon stocks in tropical regions across three continents. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, 108(24): 9899-9904. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1019576108>

- Salinas, E., Wallace, R., Painter, L., Lehm, Z., Loayza, O., Pabón, C. & Ramírez, A. 2017.** *El valor ambiental, económico y sociocultural de la gestión territorial indígena en el Gran Paisaje Madidi. Resumen ejecutivo.* La Paz, CIPTA, CIPLA and WCS.
- Schuster, R., Germain, R. R., Bennett, J. R., Reo, N. J. & Arecese, P. 2019.** Vertebrate biodiversity on indigenous-managed lands in Australia, Brazil, and Canada equals that in protected areas. *Environmental Science and Policy*, 101: 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2019.07.002>.
- Thiede, B. C. & Gray, C. 2020.** Characterizing the indigenous forest peoples of Latin America: Results from census data. *World Development*, 125: 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.104685>.
- Walker, W. S., Gorelik, S. R., Baccini, A., Aragón-Osej, J. L., Josse, C, Meyer, C., Macedo, M. N., Augusto, C., Ríos, S., Katan Jua, T. P., Almeida, A., Cuéllar, S., Llanos, A, Zager, I., Mirabal Díaz, J. G., Solvik, K. K., Farina, M. K., Moutinho, P. & Schwartzman, S. 2020.** The role of forest conversion, degradation, and disturbance in the carbon dynamics of Amazon indigenous territories and protected areas. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, 117(6): 3015-3025. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1913321117>.



©FAO/ Mauricio Mireles

Indigenous leader of the Guna People, Púculo Indigenous Territory, Darien Province, Panama.

See full article [here](#)



Some rights reserved. This work is available under a CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO licence