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Indigenous peoples warn of global delay on forest protection push

From the Amazon rainforest to Indonesia, indigenous groups see little progress on protecting forests since COP26 climate summit.

[Thomson Reuters Foundation](#)

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Praised as guardians of tropical forests, indigenous peoples have accused governments of failing to follow up billion-dollar pledges in 2021 to enlist their help to halt deforestation.

Indigenous groups say 145 governments backing a goal set at November's COP26 UN climate summit to halt forest losses by 2030 should grant them more money and control over ancestral lands threatened by logging, mining, oil production and farming.



"I really don't see support for us (since the summit)", said Tuntiak



How to halt deforestation? Trust indigenous groups, funders say

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Katan, a leader of the nine-nation Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin, and a member of Ecuador's Shuar indigenous people.

Governments are happy to recognise indigenous customs, clothing and foods - but fall short on land claims, he said.

"There's always a problem when it comes to indigenous rights, as owners and protectors of the forests," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation this week at an international meeting on tropical forests in Oslo, Norway.

Indigenous peoples are too often victims of violence, or treated as criminals, when they attempt to protect rainforests, he added.

The sad reality is that the situation of indigenous peoples and local communities in major rainforest countries has deteriorated, not improved in recent years.

Toerris Jaeger, secretary general, Rainforest Foundation Norway

British journalist Dom Phillips, working on a book about saving the Amazon rainforest, and Brazilian indigenous expert Bruno Pereira were [found shot dead in Brazil this month](#) - putting a spotlight on rising violence on native lands.

As part of the pledges at the climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland, endorsed by 145 nations, governments committed \$12 billion, and private companies \$7 billion, to safeguard forests.

In the plan, five nations and a group of charities also promised \$1.7 billion for indigenous peoples by 2025 to support their forest tenure rights.

Forest stewards

In recent years, many studies have shown that granting land rights to indigenous peoples is a particularly cost-effective approach to combat climate change and protect biodiversity.

Trees absorb carbon dioxide from the air to grow, making them natural buffers against global warming.

But [tropical primary rainforests are being lost at a rate of 10 football pitches a minute](#), according to Global Forest Watch - a platform that provides data and monitors forests.

In the Amazon basin, a 2021 report by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) showed that [deforestation rates are up to 50 per cent lower in indigenous peoples' forest](#)

lands than in other areas.

Deforestation in Brazil hit a 15-year high in 2021, despite pledges to curb illegal logging. Far-right President Jair Bolsonaro has weakened environmental protections, making way for mining and farming.

In Indonesia, the Indigenous Peoples' Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN) says indigenous rights have only been fully recognised on about 75,000 hectares (185,329 acres) of customary forests. AMAN claims a total of 40 million hectares.

"Governments don't listen enough," said AMAN's secretary general Rukka Sombolinggi, of the Torajan indigenous people from Sulawesi.

And she said AMAN was sceptical about plans by governments and companies to invest in forest carbon credits to help offset greenhouse gas emissions elsewhere, and rejects carbon markets.

"It's like cleansing the sinner, meaning you can continue digging for coal, you can continue the high carbon footprint. But money won't save us."

Sombolinggi said "carbon cowboys" from governments and companies made promises about riches from carbon credits.

"It's all fake dreams," she added.

However, many countries and companies see forest investments as an effective way to offset industrial carbon emissions.

And trades on voluntary carbon markets - mostly in forestry - topped a record \$1 billion for the first time last year, according to Ecosystem Marketplace.

More indigenous clout

Espen Barth Eide, Norway's climate and environment minister, said at the forestry meeting that governments should do far more to tap the knowledge of indigenous peoples to manage nature.

The very presence of indigenous peoples in forests "is proof that they are living sustainably for millennia", Eide said.

"They clearly have a competence about sustainable living. Part of our work is to raise the clout of their organisations."

Norway has been the top donor nation for preserving tropical forests in the past decade, spending \$300 million in 2020 alone.

Lee White, Gabon's environment minister, said his country was among the few tropical nations with extremely low deforestation rates, making it a big net absorber of carbon dioxide.

The Central African nation signed a \$150-million deal with Norway in 2019 to preserve its forests, with a floor price of \$10 a tonne of carbon dioxide, double the then-standard \$5.

White said the government would ensure a fair share of all carbon income for Bantu and Pygmy indigenous peoples and other rural communities.

"We are planning to create a mechanism whereby 10 per cent of all carbon payments are guaranteed to go to rural areas," he said, citing help for projects such as better schools and healthcare.

About 90 per cent of Gabon's population lives in urban areas.

White said sustainable management of forests - including selective felling of trees for timber used in furniture and construction - was creating jobs.

He said rural communities had a role in on-the-ground checks of forests but that ever more monitoring was done by satellites, requiring technical expertise.

"People make a lot of fuss about how indigenous people should be involved in monitoring, but it's a complex thing. They are not going to work for NASA, mostly," he added.

Toerris Jaeger, secretary general of the non-profit Rainforest Foundation Norway, said a major turnaround would be needed in forest policies in most nations to promote land tenure and forest management by indigenous peoples.

"The sad reality is that the situation of (indigenous peoples and local communities) in major rainforest countries has deteriorated, not improved (in recent years)," he said.

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