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Forests thrive under control of indigenous people

by Vanessa Houlder

Developing countries are increasingly relinquishing control of tropical forests to their inhabitants in a trend that is helping to preserve endangered forests, a new report says.

The study was published just before delegates from 59 countries meet in Geneva on Monday to renegotiate the International Tropical Timber Agreement, a United Nations treaty first agreed in 1984 in response to concern about the destruction of tropical forests.

Forest Trends, a Washington-based non-profit group which published the report, criticised the new draft agreement for not mentioning local communities' efforts to protect tropical forests. It called on negotiators to give indigenous people a larger role in policy-making as well as strengthened rights to produce and sell forest products.

"Ownership rights seem to be one of the big factors explaining why national parks created by governments are not faring as well as community-policed areas," said Arvind Khare of Forest Trends.

The proportion of the world's forests that are community-managed has risen from 7 to 11 per cent in the past 15 years, reaching as high as 22 per cent in developing countries. Sustained pressure from community groups is likely to maintain the trend, resulting in a doubling of the forest area under such tenure over the next decade, the report says.

The study says the time and labour spent by local people on forest management and conservation could be valued at a minimum of \$1.2bn (Euro980m, British Pund652m) a year. This is the same as the annual budget that developing countries spend on protected areas and at least twice the overseas development assistance for conservation of protected areas.

An estimated 350m poor people rely on forests for part of their income. Much of the world's biodiversity is found in areas that are relatively densely populated.

The Forest Trends report calls for a move away from a model of "wilderness" preservation borrowed from the US to one in which communities have increased control over their resources.

The destruction of tropical forests slowed marginally from the 1980s to about 8.6m hectares a year in the 1990s, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation.