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Fact Sheet: Community-led Conservation

Topline message:

The world is facing a mass extinction event, and so far has failed to meet *any* of its targets to reverse catastrophic biodiversity loss.

As governments consider how to incorporate biodiversity and other “green recovery” concerns into COVID-19 stimulus measures and recovery plans, they must look beyond traditional “top-down” conservation strategies.

A growing body of research and experience shows that “community-led conservation” models can be more effective in the long term at protecting biodiversity and carbon stocks than traditional conservation. This model is also more equitable and sustainable development-friendly, given its focus on safeguarding rural and indigenous communities’ rights and livelihoods. Community-led conservation will be an increasingly important alternative and complement in the future to traditional conservation efforts.

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What is the status of the biodiversity crisis?

- The UN Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) recently released a report finding that the world has failed to meet a single one of the 20 Aichi biodiversity targets set in 2010 (including related Sustainable Development Goals).¹
 - While progress was made toward some goals, efforts have not been sufficient. This needs to change if the global community is to address the serious alterations humans have made to 75% of land on Earth and 66% of the ocean.²
 - This is on the heels of a 2019 IPBES report that found up to a million species are at risk of extinction in our lifetimes, many within a few decades.³
- The World Wildlife Fund's *Living Planet Report 2020* states that wildlife populations have plummeted by two thirds over the past 50 years due to human activity.⁴
- Biodiversity loss and habitat degradation is a leading cause of infectious disease outbreaks.⁵ Growing on biodiversity from land-use change and species exploitation (such as the wildlife trade) increase the risk of new pandemics.
- Biodiversity loss also creates significant economic risks for companies, their supply chains, and the global economy. These risks may include reduced agricultural productivity, high costs and increased scarcity of inputs, and greater exposure to natural hazards and disasters.⁶
- Ensuring intact habitats are connected to each other continues to be a challenge, as is environmental degradation outside of protected areas.
 - Protected areas have become increasingly isolated as surrounding lands are degraded and converted for other uses. Without natural buffer areas that connect patches of habitat, species cannot migrate freely or safely as a natural part of their life cycle, or to escape negative impacts from climate change or human activity.⁷
 - Research suggests that this will cause protected areas to lose species over time.⁸

¹ UN Convention on Biological Diversity. 2020. The Global Biodiversity Outlook 5 (GBO-5). www.unenvironment.org/resources/report/global-biodiversity-outlook-5-gbo-5.

² United Nations Summit on Biodiversity. September 30, 2020. <https://www.un.org/pga/75/united-nations-summit-on-biodiversity/>.

³ Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). 2019. IPBES Global Assessment. ipbes.net/global-assessment.

⁴ World Wildlife Fund. Sept. 2020. Living Planet Report 2020. livingplanet.panda.org/en-us/.

⁵ Loh, E. et al. (2015), "Targeting Transmission Pathways for Emerging Zoonotic Disease Surveillance and Control", *Vector-borne and Zoonotic Diseases*, Vol. 15/7, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/vbz.2013.1563>.

⁶ WEF (2020), *New Nature Economy Report II: The Future Of Nature And Business*, World Economic Forum in collaboration with AlphaBeta, Geneva, <http://www.weforum.org> (accessed on 31 August 2020).

⁷ Kremen, C. and Merenlender, A.M. 2018. Landscapes that work for biodiversity and people. *Science*. 362, 6412. doi: 10.1126/science.aau6020.

⁸ J. M. Halley, N. Monokrousos, A. D. Mazaris, W. D. Newmark, D. Vokou, Dynamics of extinction debt across five taxonomic groups. *Nat. Commun.* 7, 12283 (2016). 10.1038/ncomms12283pmid:27452815.

What are some the challenges faced by traditional, or “top-down,” conservation projects?

Conflict with local communities

In a number of cases, establishing protected areas has led to conflicts with local communities.

- The potential for conflict with or harm to local communities resulting from nature protection projects has become increasingly well-recognized in recent years in the conservation community.⁹
- A just-published study shows that 13,450 families were displaced between 1999 and 2020 in India due to wildlife conservation project for protected areas.¹⁰
- In the Democratic Republic of Congo, indigenous pygmy communities have been expelled from lands on the Kahuzi-Biega National Park. In 2018, when 200 families attempted to return to their customary lands, conflicts with the park's guards resulted in community dwellings being burned, a community leader imprisoned, and two community members killed. In one case in 2017, a father and son were shot at by guards while collecting medicinal plants in a forest on their community's ancestral lands. The son was killed and the father badly wounded.¹¹

High costs and enforcement challenges

Enforcing strict controls on human use and impacts requires resources that many conservation projects don't have.

- Protecting land or marine areas on paper is only the first step. Protecting land that's been set aside requires constant presence and patrolling to deter illegal activity and is the largest cost in many protected areas.¹² Training and paying enough rangers and other officials to do so, and with enough frequency, is a challenge for those managing protected areas long term, especially if the protected area is large and/or contains wild, difficult terrain.
- Pressures and actors vary depending on regional context, but resource extraction (such as logging, mining, and illegal conversion for agriculture) and wildlife poaching are common challenges. Agriculture is responsible for an estimated 80% of tropical forest loss.¹³

⁹ See for instance Norton, Andrew, (30 September 2020), "Governments must work with local people to save the world's nature" [Press release]. International Institute for Environment and Development. <https://www.ied.org/governments-must-work-local-people-save-worlds-nature>.

¹⁰ Autonomous University of Barcelona, (5 October 2020), "Wildlife conservation undermines the rights of indigenous people and local communities in India." Phys.org. <https://phys.org/news/2020-10-wildlife-undermines-rights-indigenous-people.html>

¹¹ Land Rights Now. (10 December 2019), "Pygmy Indigenous leader imprisoned on false charges for defending land rights against 'conservation'." Land Rights Now. <https://www.landrightsnow.org/drc-indigenous-pygmy-communities/>

¹² Critchlow, R., et al. 2016. Improving Law-Enforcement Effectiveness and Efficiency in Protected Areas Using Ranger-collected Monitoring Data. Conservation Letters. 10, 5. p 572-589. doi: 10.1111/cons.12288.

¹³ Kissinger, G., M. Herold, V. De Sy. Drivers of Deforestation and Forest Degradation: A Synthesis Report for REDD+ Policymakers. Lexeme Consulting, Vancouver Canada, August 2012.

- Cartel activity and other forms of corruption are barriers in some areas. Half of all tropical forest conversion for agriculture and logging takes place illegally.¹⁴ For example, the clearing of large areas of the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala have been backed by two Mexican cartels just over the Reserve’s border. Forest loss is up to 87% in these areas. Meanwhile forest loss remains less than 1% in areas managed by community concessions.^{15,16}

What is community-led conservation, and how is it different from traditional conservation?

Community-led conservation	Traditional conservation
How is land managed, used, controlled, and owned?	
As a “working landscape,” where livelihoods and sustainable resource management are balanced. Management activities may include agroforestry and production of non-timber forest products.	Human impacts and use are minimized as much as possible
Who is in charge of planning and managing conservation?	
Local and indigenous communities who have customary rights to the land and its resources and/or are present on the land	National and state governments, NGOs, scientists, park officials/rangers

Community-led conservation allows people to live on and/or actively manage a landscape to support themselves while protecting natural resources and species.

- Community-led conservation, also known as “working lands” conservation, allows for a sustainable natural resource use. This differentiates it from many traditional conservation projects that have emphasized the establishment of protected areas with much stricter controls on human visitation, use, and impacts.
- Community-led conservation is based on the idea that sustainably managed “working lands” can maintain biodiversity, provide goods and services for humanity, *and* support the environmental conditions necessary for sustainability and resilience.¹⁷
- Community-led conservation attempts to strike a balance between protecting nature and supporting traditional communities’ self-governance, rights, and economic

¹⁴ Lawson, Sam. Consumer Goods and Deforestation: An Analysis of the Extent and Nature of Illegality in Forest Conversion for Agriculture and Timber Plantations. Forest Trends Association, 2014. <https://www.forest-trends.org/publications/consumer-goods-and-deforestation/>

¹⁵ Pearce, Fred. June 18, 2020. “Parks vs. People”: In Guatemala, Communities Take Best Care of the Forest.” Yale Environment 360, Yale School of the Environment. e360.yale.edu/features/parks-vs-people-in-guatemala-communities-take-best-care-of-the-forest

¹⁶ de Ferrer, Marta. Feb. 9, 2020. “How has 30 years of logging saved the rainforest in Guatemala?” euronews. www.euronews.com/living/2020/08/30/how-has-thirty-years-of-logging-saved-the-rainforest-in-guatemala.

¹⁷ Kremen, C. and Merenlender, A.M. 2018. Landscapes that work for biodiversity and people. Science. 362, 6412. doi: 10.1126/science.aau6020.

development.¹⁸ It also champions traditional and indigenous ecological knowledge as a guide to sustainable use and management.

How can community-led conservation help efforts to reverse biodiversity loss and protect nature?

Community-led conservation has been shown, in some cases, to be more effective in the long-term for conserving carbon, biodiversity, and natural resources than projects that don't allow active landscape management.

- New studies show that community-led conservation can be more effective than government measures over the long-term and tends to be less expensive.¹⁹
- Indigenous lands have higher global biodiversity values²⁰ and carbon stocks²¹ than anywhere else on earth. This is powerful evidence that traditional ecological knowledge and management practices are successful at delivering conservation outcomes.²²
- But indigenous and traditional communities are under tremendous pressure.^{23,24} Safeguarding this biodiversity and carbon is most likely to be accomplished through a community-led conservation approach that strengthens communities' capacity to secure their land rights, defend against illegal incursions, and manage natural resources sustainably.²⁵ Research has shown that deforestation and forest degradation is lower in forests where communities have secure tenure rights.^{26,27,28,29}

¹⁸ Borges, B. and Olander, J. April 26, 2020. "The "Amazon Strategy" – How to Build Resilient Supply Chains and Food Systems post-Pandemic." Forest Trends. www.forest-trends.org/blog/the-amazon-strategy/.

¹⁹ Sources: footnotes 4-7 above

²⁰ Richard Schuster, Ryan R. Germain, Joseph R. Bennett, Nicholas J. Reo, Peter Arcese. Vertebrate biodiversity on indigenous-managed lands in Australia, Brazil, and Canada equals that in protected areas. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 2019; 101: 1 DOI: 10.1016/j.envsci.2019.07.002

²¹ Rights and Resources Institute, et al. 2018. *A Global Baseline of Carbon Storage in Collective Lands*. Washington, D.C.: Rights and Resources Institute. www.rightsandresources.org/en/publication/globalcarbonbaseline2018/#.X1JZAZNKhBx

²² Rundle, Hannah. 12 October 2019. "Indigenous Knowledge Can Help Solve the Biodiversity Crisis." *Scientific American Observations*. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/indigenous-knowledge-can-help-solve-the-biodiversity-crisis/>

²³ Steve Zwick, Genevieve Bennett and Marcio Halla. 26 June 2020. "Indigenous Communities are the Last Defenders of the Amazon. They're Being Devastated by COVID-19." *Forest Trends*. <https://www.forest-trends.org/blog/indigenous-communities-are-the-last-defenders-of-the-amazon-theyre-being-devastated-by-covid-19/>

²⁴ Steve Zwick. 25 March 2019. "The Story of the Surui Forest Carbon Project." *Forest Trends*. <https://www.forest-trends.org/blog/the-story-of-the-surui-forest-carbon-project/>

²⁵ Forest Trends Association. *Indigenous Territorial Governance in Latin America*. Washington DC: Forest Trends Association, 2019. <https://www.forest-trends.org/publications/gobernanza-territorial-indigena-en-america-latina/> [In Spanish. Please contact Forest Trends at communications@forest-trends.org for additional information.]

²⁶ Walker, W.S., et al. 2020. The role of forest conversion, degradation, and disturbance in the carbon dynamics of Amazon indigenous territories and protected areas. *PNAS*. 6, 3015-3025. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1913321117.

²⁷ Baragwanath, K. and Bayi, E. 2020. Collective property rights reduce deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon. *PNAS*. 34, 20495-20502. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1917874117.

²⁸ Rights and Resources Institute, et al. 2018. *A Global Baseline of Carbon Storage in Collective Lands*. Washington, D.C.: Rights and Resources Institute. [rightsandresources.org/en/publication/globalcarbonbaseline2018/#.X1JZAZNKhBx](http://www.rightsandresources.org/en/publication/globalcarbonbaseline2018/#.X1JZAZNKhBx).

²⁹ Seymour, F., La Vina, T., and Hite, K. 2014. *Evidence linking community-level tenure and forest condition: An annotated bibliography*. San Francisco: Climate and Land Use Alliance. www.climateandlandusealliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Community_level_tenure_and_forest_condition_bibliography.pdf.

Community-led conservation complements and expands upon existing traditional conservation efforts necessary to reverse biodiversity loss.

- There will always be a need and important role for protected areas that minimize human use and impacts. However, greater investment in community-led conservation should be an increasingly important complement to traditional conservation projects.
- Places suitable for establishing new protected areas are becoming scarce, leaving options that are remote and/or not as beneficial to biodiversity or people.³⁰
- Community-led conservation can complement new and existing strict protected areas. For example, a patchwork of protected areas and sustainable working landscapes together enhance habitat connectivity to promote the free movement of species, natural processes, and ecosystem services.³¹
- The broad coalitions necessary to make community-led conservation work have greater potential to create a collective impact. Collaboration between communities, grassroots movements, NGOs, and sometimes public-private partners are more adaptable and better equipped to demand changes and drive lasting transformations, especially at government levels.³²

How can community-led conservation help support sustainable development?

Community-led conservation allows benefits to be harvested by communities and countries.

- Self-directed enterprises like agroforestry, sustainable timber, artisanal handcrafts, and producing non-timber forest products, like acai, Brazil nuts, or cocoa, allow communities to sustain themselves and their land long-term. The planning, management, and monitoring required for these activities also leads to more frequent land patrols, which ultimately increases territorial protection.³³
- Forest Trends has supported communities with such efforts for over two decades and has observed the power and wide-ranging benefits of small investments in community-led forest enterprises first-hand.³⁴ These benefits are incentive for continued long-term stewardship. Demonstrated successes help make a strong case for government support and recognition.
- Community-led conservation is also an investment in human rights and a solution that aligns the priorities of human well-being, sustainable development, and preventing forest loss.³⁵

³⁰ Erbaugh, J.T., et al. 2020. Global forest restoration and the importance of prioritizing local communities. *Nature Ecology & Evolution*. Brief Communication. doi: 10.1038/s41559-020-01282-2.

³¹ Kremen, C. and Merenlender, A.M. 2018. Landscapes that work for biodiversity and people. *Science*. 362, 6412. doi: 10.1126/science.aau6020.

³² *ibid*

³³ Borges, B. and Olander, J. April 26, 2020. "The "Amazon Strategy" – How to Build Resilient Supply Chains and Food Systems post-Pandemic." *Forest Trends*. www.forest-trends.org/blog/the-amazon-strategy/.

³⁴ *Forest Trends*. July 30, 2020. Two Decades Partnering with Indigenous Communities. Washington, D.C.: *Forest Trends*. www.forest-trends.org/publications/two-decades-partnering-with-indigenous-communities/.

³⁵ Erbaugh, J.T., et al. 2020. Global forest restoration and the importance of prioritizing local communities. *Nature Ecology & Evolution*. Brief Communication. doi: 10.1038/s41559-020-01282-2.

- Consulting indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLC) during a conservation project as stakeholders is not enough. The world needs to recognize their land rights to and right to engage in decisions that affect their forest homes. This is a critical step towards fulfilling the respect, recognition, and reciprocity IPLC are owed for the benefits they provide by occupying traditional lands.³⁶

Story ideas: What are some examples of community-led conservation projects?

Forest Trends can provide additional information and introductions with project proponents upon request. Please contact Genevieve Bennett at gbennett@forest-trends.org.

Apiwtxa, Brazilian Amazon

In 2016, the Apiwtxa Asháninka indigenous people of Brazil have finalized community guidelines for decision-making on ecological values in their 87,200 hectare territory in the Kampa region of the Amônia River Indigenous Reserve. Conservation activities include training agroforestry agents to support sustainable cultivation of banana, acai, buriti, and increased territorial monitoring. New outposts and patrols have led to the expulsion of illegal loggers, hunters, and farmers. As a result, wildlife, including capibaras and river turtles, have been returning.

Salween Peace Park, Myanmar

The Karen people, displaced by Myanmar's decades-long armed conflict, have recently been able to return to a portion of their ancestral lands, declaring it a "Peace Park." They have revived traditional governance systems, introduced new agroforestry and seed banking projects, and established a committee to monitor their boundaries. The Peace Park helps protect a global biodiversity hotspot, one of the last remaining in Southeast Asia.

Living Pharmacies in Yawanawa & Suruí territories, Brazilian Amazon

Through the "Living Pharmacy" Project, indigenous Yawanawa and Suruí communities transfer ancient knowledge to new generations. Medicine men and women travel deep into the forest with young apprentices to teach medicinal plant identification and harvesting. Important plant species are catalogued and collected for cultivation in strategic locations – safeguarding both the communities' cultural traditions and local biodiversity.

³⁶ Rights and Resources Institute, et al. 2018. A Global Baseline of Carbon Storage in Collective Lands. Washington, D.C.: Rights and Resources Institute. rightsandresources.org/en/publication/globalcarbonbaseline2018/#.X1JZAZNKhBx.