

Local Communities Seen as Key Allies in Forest Conservation

By J.R. Pegg

WASHINGTON, DC, July 23, 2004 (ENS) - The international community should provide indigenous people with financial incentives to encourage conservation of the world's tropical forests, advises a new report by Forest Trends, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC that advocates market approaches to conserving forests outside of protected areas.

Forest communities are often as effective as their national governments at conserving forests, the Forest Trends study finds, and are these communities are currently managing more forest areas than are currently conserved in parks and protected areas.

"Worldwide efforts to enlist these community residents in the work of conservation would be a cost-effective and long term solution to the problem of conservation," said study's coauthor Arvind Khare, a senior policy analyst with Forest Trends. "Why not strengthen their rights and turn these forests into assets they can use?"

But currently these local communities are seldom the focus of international conservation efforts.

Instead, the creation of protected areas is often the center of these efforts, but the Forest Trends report says this focus is shortsighted and impractical.

Nicaraguan farmers planting trees as part of a reforestation project. (Photo by L. Dematteis courtesy [Food and Agriculture Organization](#))



The current system of protected areas in the developing world is severely underfunded. Given economic and social pressures, expanding these areas is not an option for most countries.

In addition, more than one billion people live within 25 global biodiversity hotspots identified by Conservation International - and an estimated 25 percent of the world's poor, who live on less than \$1 a day, make much of their living from tropical forests.

Improving the standard of living for these individuals and encouraging sustainable development of the forests must go hand in hand for conservation efforts to succeed, the report says.

It calls on the international community to give forest communities should be given a larger role in policymaking and improved rights to produce and sell sustainable forest products.

"Support for the conservation efforts of indigenous peoples and forest dwellers can help protect ecosystems and biodiversity across biological corridors and political boundaries," said Sara Scherr, agricultural and natural resource economist and co-author of the Forest Trends report.

"The people who live on the land are committed for the long term," said Scherr, "particularly if they develop the professional capacity and enterprise skills that can help them earn a better living while continuing to protect the forests that make it possible to do so."

The nonprofit organization released the study ahead of negotiations for a successor agreement to the 1994 International Tropical Timber Agreement (ITTA), which expires at the end of 2006. Negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the ITTA governs forest conservation and development as well as timber trade.



Biological hotspots represent only 1.4 percent of the Earth's land area yet contain 44 percent of all vascular plants and 35 percent of all mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians as endemics, meaning they are found nowhere else. (Photo courtesy [Rainforest Action Network](#))

Delegates from 59 nations will gather in Geneva from July 26 to 30 for the ITTA negotiations. The ITTA is administered and supervised by the International Tropical Timber Organization, an intergovernmental association of timber producer and consumer

nations based in Yokohama, Japan.

The Forest Trends report notes that much has changed since the 1994 ITTA was negotiated. The amount of land under ownership or management of local communities has more than doubled.

Today, some 22 percent of developing country forests are community owned or administered and that percentage is expected to double again by 2020.

The report cites examples of how local communities in Brazil, Southeast Asia, Mexico and Latin America are managing and conserving forests, despite little help from the outside world or their local governments.

The authors calculate that the time, labor and money spent by forest communities on managing and conservation forests equals some \$1.2 billion to \$2.6 billion a year - more than twice as much as foreign donors and equal to the annual budget developing countries spend on protected areas.

Targeting local communities with grants to encourage conservation and trade in sustainable forest products would be a good first step in strengthening international conservation efforts, Forest Trends says.

A worker in Honduras extracts resin from a pine tree as part of an agroforestry cooperative (Photo by G. Bizzarri courtesy [Food and Agriculture Organization](#))



But grants controlled by the International Tropical Timber Organization currently go to national governments and the existing ITTA carries little more than a reference encouraging member governments to consider the interests of local communities in developing their timber industry.

Local communities need the expertise of the ITTO to gain "increased market access and the ability to capture a greater portion of the value chain of the forest products they produce," said Khare, a coauthor of the Forest Trends report.

"By including explicit provisions to support sustainable forest products from local communities, the new agreement will help the ITTO do its part in reaching the UN Millennium Goals it embraces - to ensure environmental sustainability and to reduce extreme poverty and hunger," Khare said. "We are showing that those two goals can be compatible, even in a vulnerable forest environment."

The ITTO is moving in the direction of providing financial incentives for sustainable timbering as recommended by Forest Trends.

In June, the ITTO announced that the first beneficiary of its new small-grants program is a partnership between the Tropical Forest Trust (TFT), a nongovernmental organization based in Switzerland, and PT Hutanindo, an Indonesian logging company.

The grant of US\$45,000 will be used by the TFT to train logging teams in the PT Hutanindo logging concession in reduced impact logging and improved forest management planning. PT Hutanindo employs about 150 people at its concession site in Central Kalimantan.