

Forests Thrive When Indigenous People Have Legal Stewardship Of Their Land



09-18-2024 ~ *The fate of intact forests is closely linked to that of Indigenous peoples.*

Forests are essential for life on Earth. Because they produce oxygen and help regulate the balance of carbon dioxide and oxygen in the atmosphere, forests are known as the “lungs of the Earth.”

For millions of local and Indigenous people, forests are also homes, hunting grounds, and traditional cultural and ceremonial spaces. These communities have been caring for forests for countless generations because doing so ensured their survival and the preservation of their societies. Yet, despite [scientific evidence](#) showing that recognizing Indigenous land rights is crucial to stopping deforestation, governments and corporations often fail to do so.

Carbon Sinks

Trees and forests are among the world’s best [carbon capture technologies](#). Excess carbon is stored in trees’ trunks, roots, and surrounding soil. On average, global forests annually absorb [7.6 billion metric tons](#) of carbon dioxide, or about [1.5 times](#) the emissions of the United States.

Deforestation removes these essential carbon sinks, increasing the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. According to the Environmental Defense Fund, tropical forest destruction contributes around [20 percent](#) of annual anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions.

Beyond functioning as carbon sinks, forests are essential to environmental health, providing invaluable [ecosystem services](#) to human and nonhuman animals. These services include preventing soil erosion, improving water quality, assisting

[watershed development](#), and creating a barrier against strong winds, heavy rain, and flooding.

Healthy forests also foster biodiversity. Although they cover only [31 percent](#) of the globe, “they are home to more than [80 percent](#) of all terrestrial species of animals, plants, and insects,” points out the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Indigenous Forest Defenders

The fate of intact forests is [closely linked](#) to that of Indigenous peoples. Many forest-dwelling communities have managed their homelands for centuries based on customary laws rooted in spiritual beliefs and conservation principles. Former UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Victoria Tauli-Corpuz [argued](#), “World leaders have a powerful solution on the table to save forests and protect the planet: recognize and support the world’s Indigenous Peoples.”

Indigenous Peoples and local communities have been managing some of the last intact rainforests for generations, and they’ve been doing so [successfully](#). About [36 percent](#) of the world’s remaining intact forests are on “land that’s either managed or owned by Indigenous peoples’ land,” states a Mongabay article referring to a 2020 study published in the *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*. “The [rate of tree cover loss](#) is less than half in community and Indigenous land than elsewhere,” [said](#) Tauli-Corpuz.

In a 2021 [article](#) in the journal *Ambio*, more than 20 researchers argued that “[b]iodiversity is declining more slowly in areas managed by [Indigenous peoples and local communities] than elsewhere.”

[Several studies](#) confirm that forests managed by Indigenous and local communities with secure land rights have lower deforestation rates, greater biodiversity, improved livelihoods, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

[Nemonte Nenquimo](#), a leader in the Waorani community in Ecuador and founding member of the [Ceibo Alliance](#), [says](#), “As go our peoples, so goes the planet... The climate depends on the survival of our cultures and our territories.

These Defenders Face Constant Threat

These communities, however, face constant threats from companies seeking to log and develop their lands. On the [front lines of deforestation](#), they frequently

suffer violence, intimidation, and criminalization when they defend their lands. The assassination of Honduran Indigenous leader [Berta Cáceres](#) in March 2016 highlights such dangers. Between 2012 and 2021, the total number of environmental defenders killed was at least 1,733. The maximum deaths took place in Brazil, where a third of the 342 activists killed were Indigenous or Afro-descendant, [according](#) to a report by the nonprofit Global Witness.

The report further stated that in 2021 alone, [200 land defenders were murdered](#) across the globe, with more than three-quarters of the attacks taking place in Latin America.

Indigenous resistance has successfully stopped pipelines, coal plants, and deforestation. From [Standing Rock](#) to [the Amazon](#), these communities have been challenging corporate power. Supporting Indigenous and front-line communities is essential. By gaining legal rights to their land, they can protect and manage it, preserving their way of life and safeguarding biodiversity.

A Case Study: The Dayak Bahau Community's Resistance to Deforestation

In Indonesia, the Dayak Bahau community of Long Isun on Borneo Island is fighting to protect some of the country's last intact forests. However, [two-thirds](#) of these forests are at risk from industrial development.

Dayak, roughly translated as "interior people," refers to about [200](#) riverine and hill-dwelling ethnic groups in Borneo. The Dayak Bahau people mainly live in the east of Borneo. During the late 19th century, a large group [settled](#) in Long Isun on the banks of the Meraseh River, a tributary of the Upper Mahakam River in East Kalimantan.

Long Isun's forests cover more than [80,000 hectares](#) of rich forests, larger than all five boroughs of New York City combined, and the Dayak Bahau has managed most of this area. They manage this area through 11 forest functions and land use categories, including settlement areas, production forests, hunting grounds, medicinal plant areas, and grave sites. They also have a forest reserve area, *Tana Peraaq*, protected to [sustain](#) future generations.

They sustainably grow crops like rice, cacao, and durian, rotating their farms so that the forest can regenerate. While modern forms of mechanized agriculture can lead to desertification, the Dayak Bahau use [swidden agriculture](#) (letting a field fallow for some time to regenerate), foraging, and other [traditional farming](#)

[techniques](#) designed to conserve the forest and biodiversity instead of eradicating it.

Land-use decisions are made through community processes led by Indigenous leaders or *Hipui*. The community's connection to its land is also spiritual, as reflected in its continued practice of customary rituals passed down for generations to honor its deities and ancestors. Because each element of nature is considered imbued with a spirit, the Dayak people strive to be in harmony with the natural world.

There are many customary regulations and rituals around rice farming. For example, many Dayak Bahau villages celebrate [Hudoq](#), where masked dancers pay homage to "[Hunyang Tenangan](#)," a rice-keeping divinity, and ask him to protect their rice paddies and bring a bountiful harvest.

The community also customarily respects the Ulin tree, an ironwood tree native to Borneo. If a community needs to cut down an Ulin tree, a ritual must be performed as requested by the original ancestral parents. The Long Isun believe that their ancestors' spirits flow through the food they consume and the land, rivers, and forests they depend on. In the words of spiritual leader [Inui Yek](#), "Though we humans can give birth, the land cannot. If we chop down the forest, what hope is there for our grandchildren? Dayaks can't be separated from the forest; our lives are spent in the forest. Without her, we lose our identity."

Despite the Long Isun community's sustainable practices, the Indonesian government has allocated their land for logging and palm oil plantations. From 2009 to 2019, more than [487,631 hectares](#) of forests were destroyed in East Kalimantan. The Harita Group now controls the community's land.

Harita Group timber concessions now occupy more than [one-quarter](#) of Long Isun's territory. Borneo's rainforests, home to many unique species, are rapidly disappearing, with only 50 percent of the forest remaining due to "decades of logging, land clearing, and agricultural conversion," according to a [March 2023 article on Earth.org](#).

Global brands (including Mondelēz and Procter & Gamble) that source palm oil from mills operated by Harita can help protect these forests by respecting Indigenous rights. The Long Isun community is demanding legal recognition of their land as a customary forest, which would grant them ownership and

management rights. Without this recognition, their forests and way of life remain at risk.

Indigenous Land Stewardship Keeps Forests Standing

Having Indigenous communities be stewards of our forests is integral to combating the climate crisis. According to scientists, intact forests can [reduce emissions](#) by more than 30 percent by 2050, which is essential to keeping temperatures below the agreed-upon 2 degrees Celsius required to avoid a climate catastrophe.

“Climate change poses threats and dangers to the survival of Indigenous communities worldwide, even though Indigenous peoples contribute the least to greenhouse emissions,” the United Nations [points out](#).

Highlighting how their knowledge and understanding of the natural world are pertinent to shaping a more sustainable world and combating the threat faced due to extreme temperatures, the UN further [adds](#), “[I]ndigenous peoples interpret and react to the impacts of climate change in creative ways, drawing on traditional knowledge and other technologies to find solutions which may help society at large to cope with impending changes.”

By Fitri Arianti

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