



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

GUARDIANS OF THE FORESTS

An issue primer for religious leaders and faith communities

A HISTORY OF FOREST STEWARDSHIP

Our connection to the Earth, to nature and to each other has been celebrated and fostered by spiritual and religious traditions for millennia. But indigenous peoples who call forests their home have an especially intimate relationship with, and profound devotion to, the rainforests that have shaped their cosmologies, cultures and spiritual lives. This intimacy creates in forest-dwelling indigenous peoples a deep investment in the protection of their forests, and a recognition that humans are but one piece of a far wider forest community.

The vision of humans as but one expression within a forest community that extends throughout terrestrial and celestial regions, and includes the human, animal, and spirit realms, is shared by many indigenous peoples. This holistic worldview, or *cosmovision*,

KEY FACTS

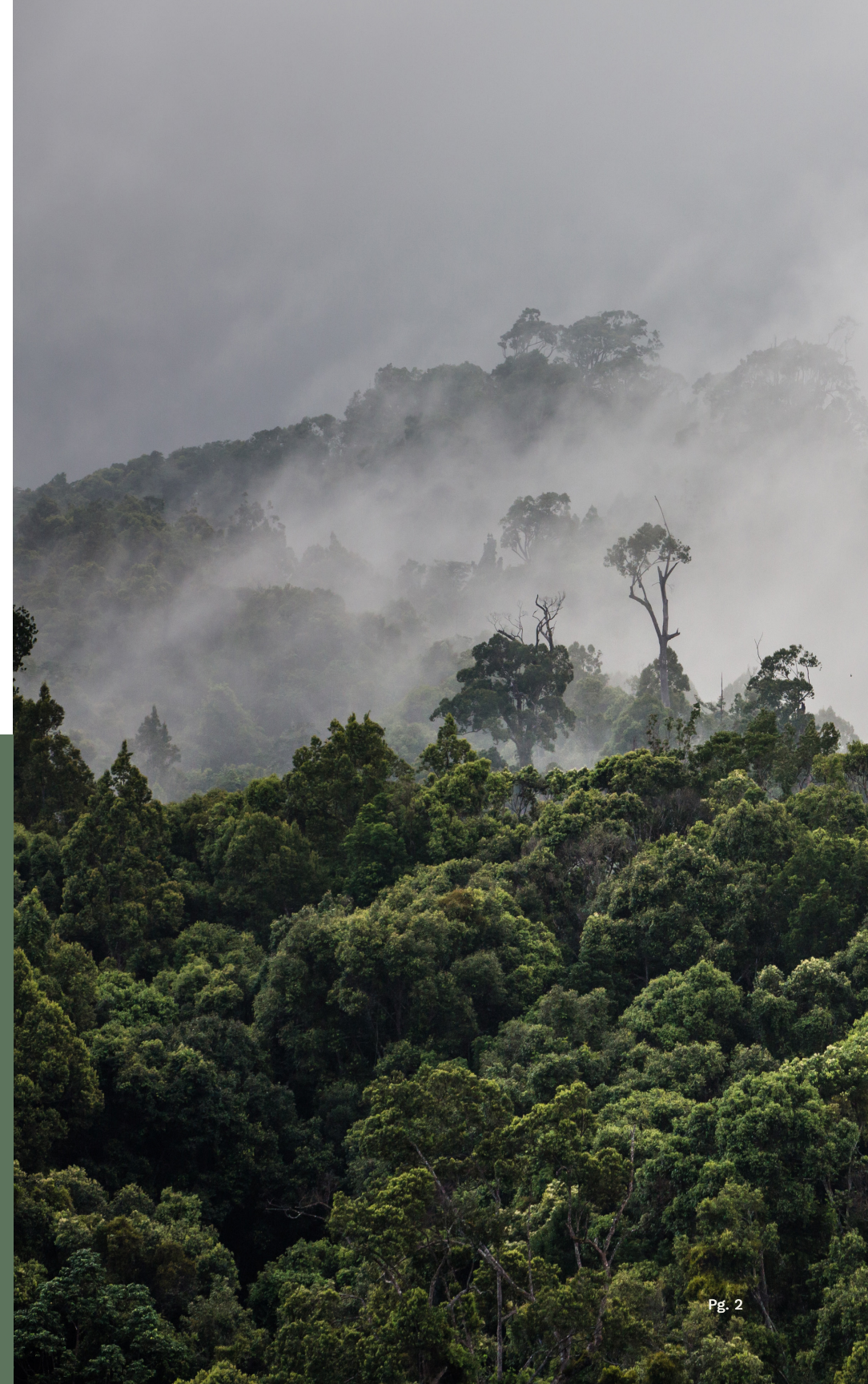
- While indigenous peoples make up less than 5 percent of the global population, they manage more than 80 percent of global biodiversity on their lands.
- Indigenous peoples' land management practices, their local and traditional knowledge, and their spiritual relationship with the forest provide the basis for effective and sustainable stewardship of tropical forests.
- Indigenous peoples have an important contribution to make to the achievement of global climate, forest restoration, biodiversity, and sustainable development goals.
- In many parts of the world, indigenous peoples face grave threats as they defend their forests from incursion by industries like oil, mining, logging and agribusiness.

has informed indigenous peoples' longstanding stewardship of forests. Such a worldview is of enormous ecological and spiritual importance to all of humanity, and yet faces threats as serious as indigenous peoples themselves.

Indeed, the global community, including the world's faith and spiritual traditions, have a great deal to learn from indigenous peoples about living in relationship with the natural world, a skill that is crucial for the future of our planet and of humanity. Indigenous peoples' culture of intimate relation with and care for the natural world is a rich source of spiritual wisdom, a truth and obligation that many other religious traditions may point to, but do not emphasize at the same depth. Given the many gifts that indigenous peoples bring to the human family, and our urgent need to restore the integrity of our relationship with the Earth, we would be wise to listen carefully and respectfully and to learn from forest-dwelling indigenous peoples. As people of faith, we also have a duty to stand alongside them as allies in defending their rights, and their lives.

KEY FACTS

- Indigenous peoples and forest communities lack legal rights to almost three quarters of their traditional lands. Where indigenous land rights are recognized, they are often not well enforced.
- Weak legal protection for indigenous peoples and forest communities is not just a land rights problem, but a conservation and climate change problem as well.
- Securing indigenous rights is a cost-effective way to protect tropical forests and fight climate change.
- Studies show that when indigenous peoples' land rights are legally recognized and protected by governments, deforestation rates and carbon dioxide emissions can be reduced significantly.
- In 2018 alone, 164 environmental defenders were killed protecting their lands, territories and forests from destruction, a disproportionate number of them indigenous people.





INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND TROPICAL FORESTS

About 370 million people—5 percent of the world’s population—belong to one of the world’s 5,000 indigenous groups.^{1,2} Among these, about 200 million indigenous people live in or near tropical forests, which they have protected and managed for generations.³ This includes over 100 uncontacted tribes who live in isolation from mainstream society.^{2,4}

Despite making up a relatively small percentage of the human population, indigenous peoples protect nearly 80 percent of the world’s biodiversity, as their territories and lands coincide with highly biodiverse areas.⁴ This is no coincidence: study after study has shown that indigenous peoples are the world’s best protectors of biodiversity.

Yet because indigenous peoples also live on the front lines of deforestation, they often see their rights infringed and their territories encroached upon, or exploited in favor of external commercial interests or infrastructure developments.^{4,8}

Indigenous cultures, belief systems and livelihoods are often deeply intertwined with forest ecosystems, and indigenous peoples hold vast stores of local and traditional knowledge about the forests they inhabit. This traditional knowledge embodies not just a collection of place-specific facts and information, but a way of observing and relating to the world, informed by the integrated *cosmovisions* that indigenous peoples use to understand their lives and relationships in the forest environment.

These *cosmovisions* are commonly shared, deeply felt understandings of reality; indigenous elders play a central role in transmitting these spiritual realities within their communities. These indigenous ways of seeing and acting in the world are not separated out as different systems of medicine, education, governance and so on, but are understood as a seamless interactive whole, which some have referred to as a *lifeway*. This intimate and interactive approach to forest living positions indigenous peoples uniquely as leaders in the conservation of tropical forests worldwide.⁵⁻⁷ It also helps explain their resilience in the face of centuries of marginalization and oppression.

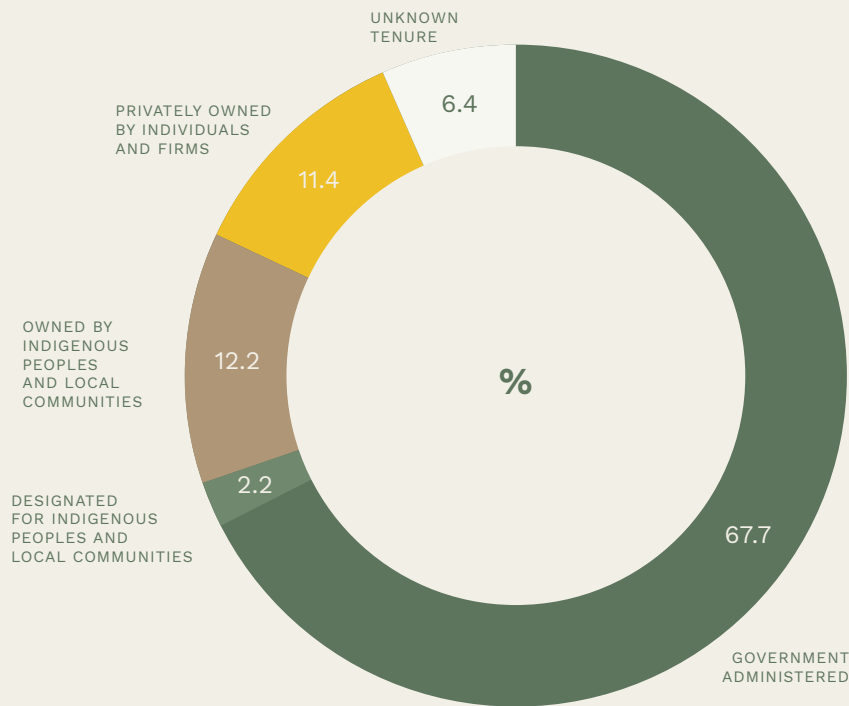
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' RIGHTS

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,⁹ the International Labour Organization Convention 169¹⁰ and various other international instruments grant indigenous peoples a range of rights. These include rights to own, use and control their land and natural resources; and the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), which allows indigenous peoples “to give or withhold consent to a project that may affect them or their territories.”^{9,10}

Indigenous peoples' rights to forest tenure—a concept that includes ownership of forests and the rights to live in and use forests—began to gain legal recognition in the late 1980s, motivated by international agreements, political pressure, and interest within the development and environmental communities.^{11,12} Since then, the trend toward recognition of indigenous peoples' forest ownership rights has ebbed and flowed, with a marked increase in recognition of forest tenure and land rights since 2013.¹² This uptick includes a 10 million hectare increase in indigenous and community land ownership in Colombia and Brazil, and the official designation of some 6 million hectares of national forest for indigenous peoples' use across four Latin American countries, including Brazil and Peru.¹²

Indigenous peoples
have an important
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**GLOBAL STATUS OF FOREST TENURE
IN 58 COUNTRIES, 2017**



Source: Rights and Resources Initiative. 2018. At a Crossroads: Consequential Trends in Recognition of Community-Based Forest Tenure from 2002-2017.

By 2017, indigenous peoples and local communities owned about 447 million hectares of forests, and had use, access and some management rights to an additional 80 million hectares.¹² The greatest concentration of forests under indigenous ownership or management is found in Latin America.¹²

Despite these gains, there is still a large gap between the extent of legally recognized indigenous lands and the areas claimed by indigenous peoples based on their historic occupancy and customary rights.¹¹⁻¹³ Customary rights are traditional entitlements that have evolved over time and become established through community consensus about how the land is used.

Governments across the world officially recognise indigenous rights over about a quarter of the land in the world.¹⁴ However, even when indigenous peoples or local communities are granted formal land rights, those rights are frequently unenforced and violated, leaving them and their land vulnerable to other interests and to environmental harm.^{12,15-17} Weak legal protection for indigenous peoples and forest communities is not just a land rights problem, but a conservation and climate change problem as well.

The existing gap in land rights for indigenous peoples is both an environmental issue and a social justice issue.

A young indigenous person with dark hair, wearing a light-colored shirt, is pointing with a stick at a map or chart on a wall. The map has blue and red lines. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green foliage.

INDIGENOUS PRACTICES AND THE CONSERVATION OF TROPICAL FORESTS

Indigenous peoples embody a rich and varied range of beliefs, cultural and spiritual practices, languages, kinship systems and traditional knowledge. A common trait amid this diversity is a deep and intimate relationship with the land they inhabit and with its resources.¹⁸ Forests play a central role in supporting indigenous peoples' livelihoods as well as their spiritual and cultural practices. Forests sustain fishing, food gathering, and hunting activities; provide materials for shelter, tools, crafts, ceremonial objects and traditional medicines; and serve as sources of artistic and spiritual inspiration.¹

In turn, indigenous beliefs and practices help preserve forests, their biodiversity and the ecosystem services they provide.^{19–21} Indigenous communities, for example, effectively create wildlife sanctuaries around sacred sites by restricting hunting.^{1,5,22,23} Indeed, indigenous peoples routinely

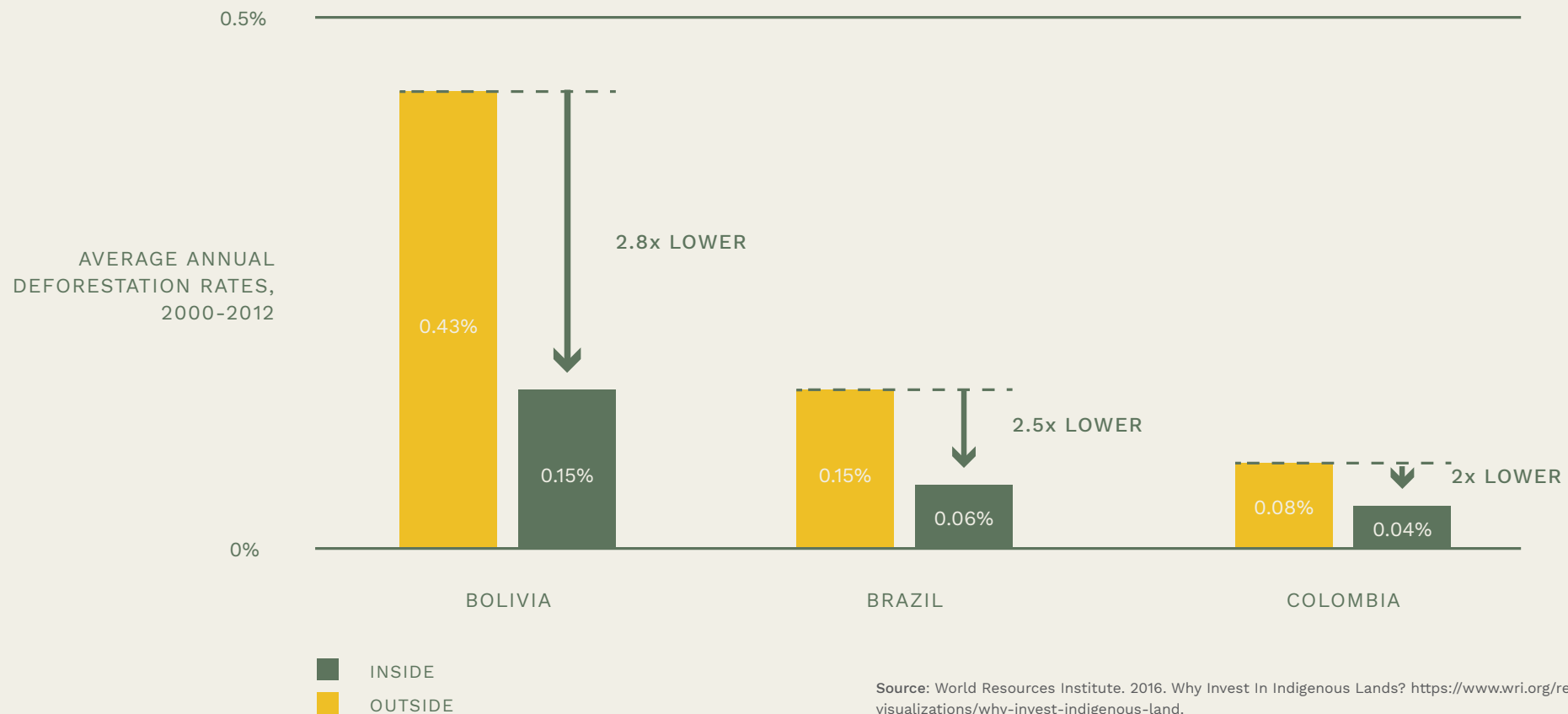
speak of the land itself as a participant in the possibilities for conservation, as well as use and sustenance. As, such, they monitor the use of life-sustaining resources out of care for the forest itself, as part of an extended kin network, thus fostering sustainable management practices, which are only strengthened when tenure is legally granted and enforced^{21,24}.

Land rights for indigenous peoples are associated with significant reductions in deforestation when compared to forests with no registered tenure.^{20,21,25–27} In the Peruvian Amazon, legal recognition of indigenous and local community rights was linked to an 81 percent reduction in deforestation the year following titling, and a 56 percent reduction in the second year.²⁸ Deforestation rates in indigenous forests within the Brazilian Amazon were below 1 percent, compared to 7 percent outside these areas.¹⁹

The research is clear: when the land rights of indigenous peoples and forest communities are unrecognized or weakly enforced, forests are vulnerable to deforestation. Securing legal forest rights for indigenous peoples and providing strong government protection for those rights lowers rates of deforestation.

Safeguarding the rights and territories of indigenous people also represents a cost-effective strategy for conserving tropical forests. A recent study estimates that the net benefit of securing indigenous forest tenure could range between US\$ 4,800 and US\$ 10,700 per hectare for some countries in South America.²¹

DEFORESTATION RATES INSIDE LEGALLY-RECOGNIZED INDIGENOUS LANDS ARE 2-3 TIMES LOWER THAN IN SIMILAR AREAS THAT ARE NOT REGISTERED TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES





Indigenous peoples make up less than 5 percent of the global population but manage more than 80 percent of global biodiversity.

THE CLIMATE BENEFITS OF INDIGENOUS LAND



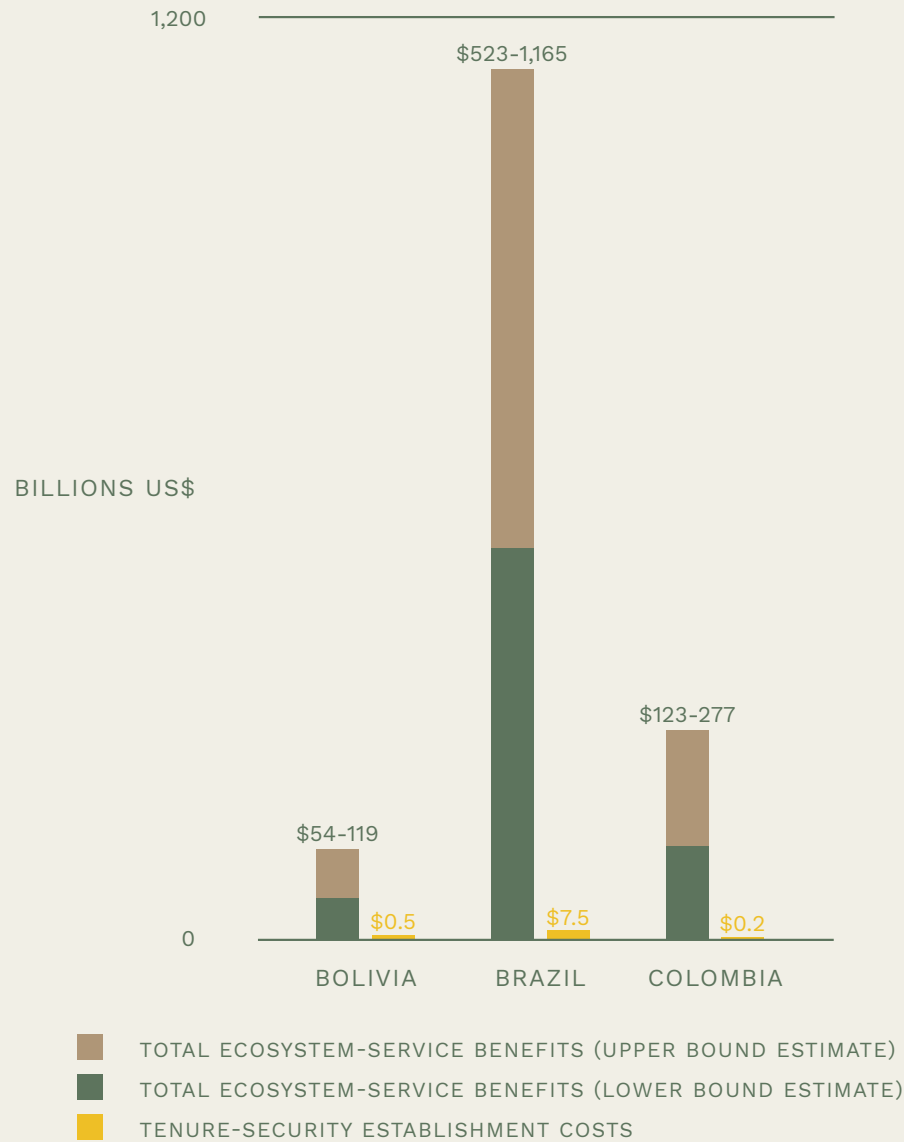
By sustainably managing a large extent of the world's tropical forests, and preventing forest loss and degradation within those lands, indigenous peoples and forests communities play an enormous, and largely unrecognized, role in mitigating global climate change. Strengthening indigenous peoples' rights to forests results in healthier forests that store more carbon, thus reducing pressure on the climate.

Land used and managed by indigenous peoples makes a measurable difference in addressing climate change. A 2015 study found that indigenous territories in the Amazon Basin, Mesoamerica, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Indonesia alone contained about a fifth of the world's above-ground carbon stored in tropical forests.²⁹

In the Brazilian Amazon, indigenous community forests contain over one-third more carbon per hectare than other forests, because of indigenous management and conservation practices.¹⁹ Between 2000 and 2012, deforestation-related emissions across the Brazilian Amazon were 27 times higher outside of indigenous lands than within them.¹⁹

But these indigenous lands that so effectively sustain healthy forests and store carbon are also extremely vulnerable and often overlap with areas at high risk of deforestation.²⁰ In spite of the crucial role they play in mitigating climate change and preserving ecosystem services that all humanity depends on, governments continue to miss an important opportunity to combat climate change by strengthening and enforcing the rights of indigenous peoples. The strong correlation between indigenous peoples' rights and climate change mitigation is ignored at our own peril.

SECURING INDIGENOUS LAND RIGHTS PROVIDES A SUBSTANTIAL ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC RETURN ON INVESTMENT



Source: World Resources Institute. 2016. Climate Benefits, Tenure Costs: The Economic Case for Securing Indigenous Land Rights in the Amazon. (p.60).

The strong correlation between indigenous peoples' rights and climate change mitigation is ignored at our own peril.

THREATS TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES



Across the world, indigenous peoples, forest communities and other environmental activists face grave risks as they protect forests from being destroyed and degraded.^{12,31,32} Many are physically threatened, attacked, imprisoned and even killed for protecting ecosystems vital to all people.¹⁶ According to Global Witness, an international NGO that draws attention to environmental and human rights abuses, almost 1,000 environmental defenders have been killed since 2010.^{16,31} Data covering the period since 2015 suggest that this phenomenon is spreading at an alarming rate.^{16,31} In 2017, at least 4 people were killed weekly across 22 countries for protecting their lands from extractive industries and agribusiness.³¹ A similar number was reported for 2016, making these two years the worst on record for the murder of environmental activists.^{16,31}

The data also suggests that a disproportionate number of these victims are indigenous people. In 2016, about 40 percent of the victims were indigenous people, a hugely disproportionate share compared to their proportion of the world's population.¹⁶ Between 2016 and 2017, almost two-thirds of the murders of environmental defenders were recorded in Latin America.³⁴ Brazil reports the highest numbers of killings, but deaths of environmental activists have also increased in Colombia following the signing of the Peace Agreement there.¹⁶ Park rangers have been targeted recently in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁶

In 2016, indigenous people comprised some 40 percent of the victims of violence against environmental activists worldwide.

Indigenous peoples living deep in the forest with limited or no contact with outsiders may be at particular risk. When contacted by loggers, miners, or other groups infringing on their lands, these normally isolated tribes can be prone to outside illnesses to which they have no natural immunity, such as flu, measles, or even the common cold, causing sometimes serious epidemics and mass deaths. Given their isolation, these groups are also extremely vulnerable to persecution at the hands of those who wish to exploit their lands illegally, and have no recourse when their forests are degraded or destroyed³³.

Despite the threats they face in defending their lands and rights, indigenous peoples and local communities have recently made progress in securing land tenure and in gaining recognition of their rights.³⁴ The issue is gaining traction as these communities organize and draw the world's attention to the valuable services they provide and the threats they face. In 2016, the International Criminal Court announced that environmental destruction and land seizures could be charged as crimes against humanity, although no cases have yet been heard.^{34,35} The International Land and Forest Tenure Facility supported the Indigenous Peoples' Alliance of the Archipelago in its efforts to gain title to 1.5 million hectares of land in Indonesia.³⁶

In Peru, a multi-stakeholder initiative secured titling of more than 560,000 hectares and increased protection for areas inhabited by indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation.³⁶ In a landmark effort, the Guanoche Afro-Colombian community received titles to their lands in Colombia, and both indigenous and Afro-Colombian land rights were explicitly recognized under the country's Peace Agreement.³⁷ In 2016, the Mundurucu people in Brazil prevented the construction of one of seven projected dams within the Amazon Basin that was set to inundate their traditional lands³⁷. These advances suggest that indigenous people are increasingly demanding recognition for their inherent dignity, and for their contributions to the health of our planet.



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS, AND GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITMENTS

A confluence of international environment and development agreements have generated renewed interest in securing tenure for indigenous peoples.^{12,38} The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 goals adopted in 2015 by all United Nations member states aiming to end poverty and hunger, and to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment.³⁸ SDG 1 makes explicit mention of the need to secure tenure rights.³⁹ Meanwhile, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change calls for nations to commit to reducing their carbon emissions in order to limit global temperature rise this century to well below 2° Celsius. Governments will need to rely on the contribution from indigenous lands to carbon storage in order to meet their national pledges for reducing carbon emissions.¹²

Additional commitments to halt deforestation by 2030 (the New York Declaration on forests), restore 150 million hectares of degraded forest by 2020 (the Bonn Challenge), and halt biodiversity loss by 2020 (the Aichi Biodiversity Targets) have helped highlight the urgency of ensuring tenure rights for indigenous peoples.^{12,40,41} Progress towards meeting these global goals currently falls far short of what is needed, and urgent and decisive action is necessary from national governments if these ambitions are to be met.¹² For forests to achieve their fullest potential as a climate and sustainable development solution and biodiversity refuge, indigenous peoples need to be recognized and engaged as true partners and active agents of forest stewardship and climate mitigation.

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ABOUT THIS PRIMER

This primer is part of a series of briefs meant to inform and inspire faith communities to action to help safeguard tropical forests and their inhabitants. Through facts, graphics, analysis, and photos, these primers present the moral case for conserving and restoring rainforest ecosystems, supported by the latest science and policy insights. They bring together the research and practical tools that faith communities and religious leaders need to better understand the importance of tropical forests, to advocate for their protection, and to raise awareness about the ethical responsibility that exists across faiths to take action to end tropical deforestation.

PARTNERS

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative welcomes engagement by all organizations, institutions and individuals of good faith and conscience that are committed to the protection, restoration and sustainable management of rainforests.

INTERFAITH RAINFOREST INITIATIVE

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is an international, multi-faith alliance working to bring moral urgency and faith-based leadership to global efforts to end tropical deforestation. It is a platform for religious leaders and faith communities to work hand-in-hand with indigenous peoples, governments, NGOs and businesses on actions that protect rainforest and the rights of those that serve as their guardians. The Initiative believes the time has come for a worldwide movement for the care of tropical forests, one that is grounded in the inherent value of forests, and inspired by the values, ethics, and moral guidance of indigenous peoples and faith communities.

QUESTIONS?

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is eager to work with you to protect tropical forests and the rights of indigenous peoples. Contact us at info@interfaithrainforest.org.



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of Climate and Environment



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