



The Role of Indigenous Peoples in Protecting Biodiversity

Introduction

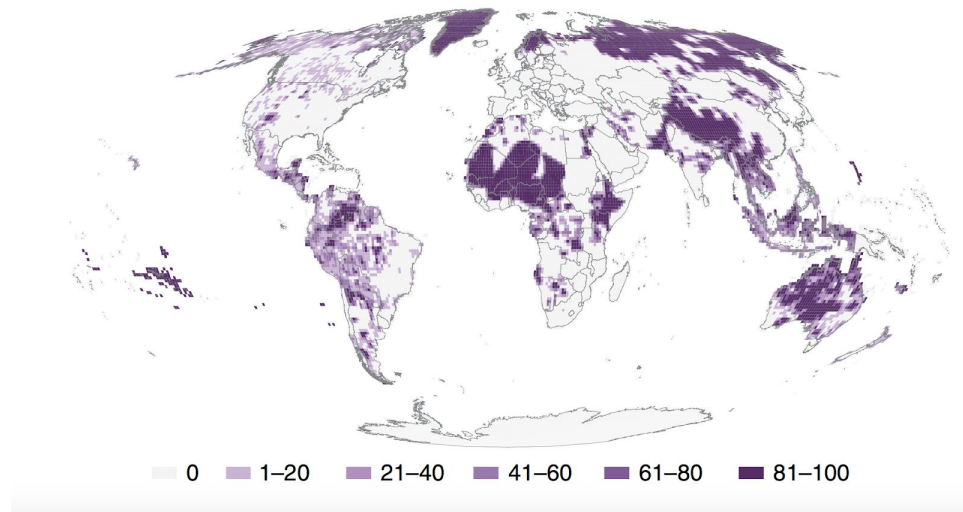
Avaaz and COICA are starting a series of conversations with actors from different sectors to make joint efforts around a common goal to protect and restore the planet's biodiversity: **protecting 50% of the planet by the year 2050**. This measure would ensure that 85% of the species are protected and restore a minimum base of biodiversity for the survival of mankind. Protecting 50% of the planet is for biodiversity what keeping temperatures under 2°C is for climate change.

Avaaz understands that Indigenous communities are paramount within this long-term goal for nature, since they are the ones who have done the conservation work for thousands of years. Community rights to manage and control territories, as well as their role in creating and implementing national and international policies are paramount to defending biodiversity.

The purpose of this short report is to present one of the essential aspects in solving the current biodiversity crisis: **the role played by Indigenous Peoples in conservation**, considering they occupy almost one quarter of Earth's land surface, and including what has been scientifically proven so far, as well as the main challenges.

I. Indigenous Peoples and Natural Areas

Presently, **370 million people define themselves as Indigenous, and occupy almost 25% of the Earth's land surface**. According to the Nature Sustainability Report ("A Spatial Overview of the Importance of Indigenous Lands for Conservation"), **Indigenous Peoples manage approximately 38 million square kilometers in 87 countries around the world**.



Global map showing the areas that are managed and / or controlled by Indigenous Peoples. Areas in white do not necessarily show an absence of Indigenous Peoples or territories but the lack of official geospatial information on the subject.¹

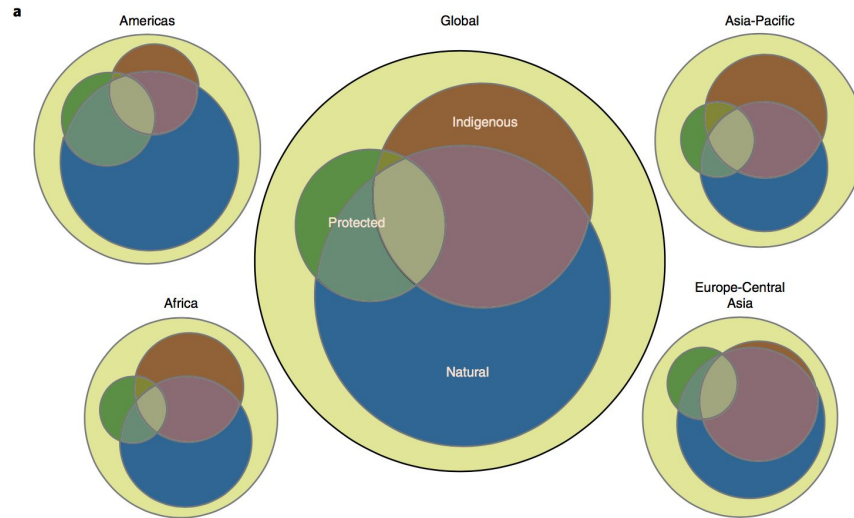
The **one fourth of the Earth's land** occupied by Indigenous Peoples coincides with **40% of the natural areas protected and territories that remain undamaged**. According to studies undertaken by the World Bank, these territories hold 80% of the planet's biodiversity².

Approximately half of the planet's land surfaces are classified as "under the control of mankind." Using this as a way of measuring human influence on Nature, an estimated 37% of the areas that remain in their natural state are Indigenous territories.

7.8 million square kilometers (20.7%) of Indigenous Lands are located in natural areas under protection, encompassing at least 40% of the total areas under protection in the world. The graph below shows the coincidence between natural areas, indigenous territories and areas under protection by local governments.

¹ Garnett et al, "A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation" (2018) Nature Sustainability ("Una visión espacial de la importancia global de los territorios indígenas para la conservación")

² Sobrevila, Claudia "The Role of Indigenous Peoples in Biodiversity Conservation" (2017) World Bank



The circles and intersection are proportional to the total Earth's land area; the circle representing the Global land area does not include Antarctica (total 135.2 million km²)³

The coexistence of Indigenous groups in areas having a meaningful concentration of biodiversity, including many of the land's most extensive tropical rainforests in America (including the Amazon), Africa and Asia represents an opportunity to cooperate in the protection of biodiversity. Furthermore, it is living proof that the traditional mechanisms implemented by Indigenous Peoples to manage forests and protect biodiversity are probably the most successful in history.

The Colombian Amazon is a clear example; only one of every ten hectares suffering deforestation in the country is located in Indigenous Reserves, singling out in general terms that Reservations are effective in protecting forests and controlling deforestation⁴.

II. Indigenous Territories – Lessons and Challenges in Today's World

The relationship between Indigenous Peoples and natural conservation areas varies according to local laws and policies. Some are under Indigenous governance; while others are State

³ Garnett et al, "A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation" (2018) Nature Sustainability ("Una visión espacial de la importancia global de los territorios indígenas para la conservación")

⁴ World Meteorological Organization "IDEAM presentó los datos actualizados del monitoreo a la deforestación en 2017" (2018)
<https://public.wmo.int/en/media/news-from-members/ideam-presentó-los-datos-actualizados-del-monitoreo-la-deforestación-en-2017>



controlled, respecting the presence of Indigenous Peoples, yet varying the freedom with which they make decisions concerning land use and management. These variations may range from previous and informed consultations to more authoritarian decisions that may even threaten to forcefully displace Indigenous Communities.

However, **only a small fraction of these lands are legally labeled as Indigenous Territories, thus limiting the communities' decision-making authority over these lands.**

Sarayaku is a clear example of how the presence of indigenous communities prevents big mega-projects from damaging areas of biodiversity importance. The Ecuadorian government granted an oil exploration license in territories of the Ecuadorian Amazon, but the Sarayaku community mobilized against the presence of oil companies and was able to stop the extraction plans in their territory and protect their biodiversity. The Sarayaku case is currently an international symbol and an inspiration to Indigenous Peoples not to surrender to big extraction and megaprojects.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of times, economic interests tend to prevail over the rights of Indigenous Peoples and their territories. One of the most controversial cases is the Belo Monte mega dam in Brazil's Xingu River, which was fiercely opposed by the affected Indigenous Populations. After the dam was built, the deforestation rates in the Belo Monte area were the highest in the Brazilian Amazon – illegal deforestation escalated in a 200 km radius from the project, including deforestation within indigenous reserves. Much of the timber logged was used to build the project itself.

The asymmetries in the power relations between the Indigenous Peoples and the State or extracting groups are deeply painful. Poverty, lack of basic services and inequality have served to leverage consent from Indigenous Peoples to the overexploitation of natural resources located in their territories, in exchange for basic services or promises of labor opportunities.

Finally, Indigenous Peoples face an additional political challenge: the defense of their territories is constantly used as an argument that label them as anti-development, sustaining that protecting biodiversity affects the employment generation, and agriculture as well as economic development. However, agriculture per se is not harmful to biodiversity, nor is conservation



damaging to agriculture. The difference lies on the various agricultural methods and how they are implemented respecting the biodiversity in the territory. The Reserva de Cuchillas del Toa Mab in the Guantanamo Province in Cuba is an interesting example of how agriculture can combine elements from natural areas with producing food – they use wild flora to divide terrains, to provide shadow to coffee plantations, as insect repellents and to produce the necessary lumber to build. More and more countries worldwide, an increasing amount of food is actually being produced in nature reserves and protected areas, making them not only a hotspot for wild biodiversity, but agricultural biodiversity as well.

III. The Challenge of Saving Biodiversity and the Solution of Indigenous Peoples

Earth's biodiversity is under dire threat and scientists now warn that two-thirds of wild animals will have vanished by 2020. We've accelerated species extinction to 1000 times the natural rate and essentially taken a chainsaw to the web of life that sustains us. But it's not too late to stop this crisis.

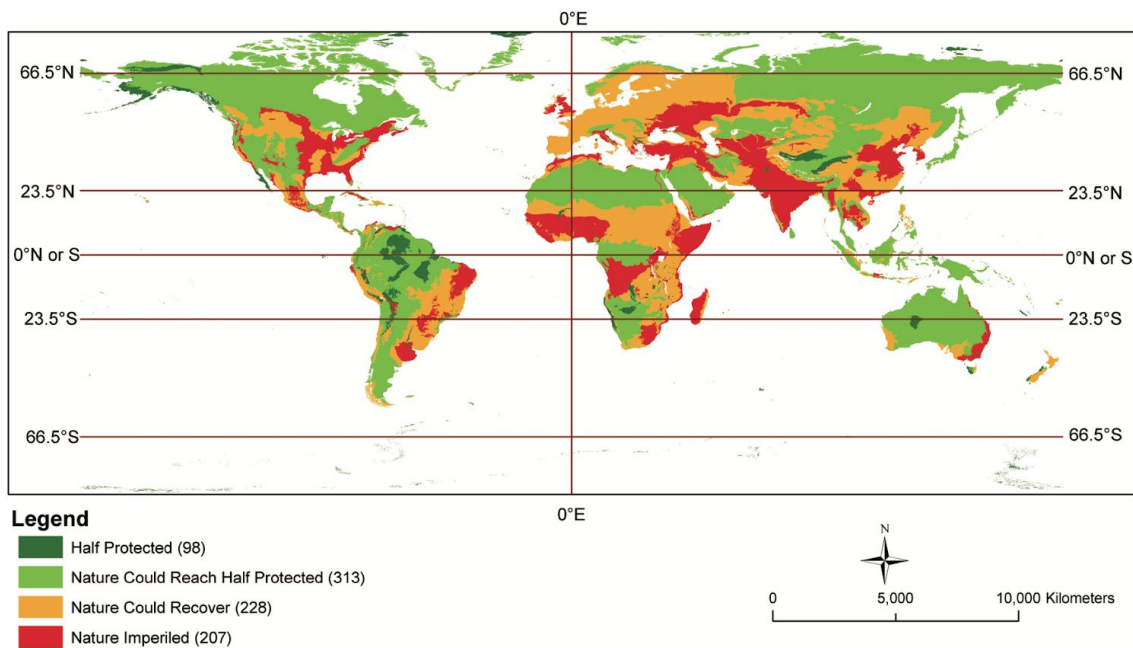
We need a North Star to guide us forward, a shared collective vision for how we stop this crisis. Many scientists are now calling for the protection of 50% of the planet as a clear, ambitious, long term goal that guides and inspires everyone – citizens, governments, and businesses – forward on the journey to stop the next mass extinction. 50% of the planet protected, and the entire world sustainably managed – that is how we achieve zero extinction and restore harmony with our home.

Avaaz and COICA believe that a global goal of protecting and restoring 50% of the planet before 2050 would ensure that habitats could be restored, leaving us with a minimum base of protected ecosystems to prevent a crisis in climate change and loss of biodiversity.

The map below shows how 50% of the territory in 98 Ecoregions⁵ is protected (*Half protected*); 313 have less than 50% of their territory under protection, but by adding the natural areas that

⁵ The term ecoregion is used to facilitated the design of representative networks of protected areas. It has also been used to depict species distributions, to model the ecological impacts of climate change, to develop landscape-scale conservation plans, and to report on progress toward international targets. There are 846 global ecoregions identified. An interactive map is available at ecoregions2017.appspot.com.

are not under protection the total is more than 50% (Nature could reach half); 228 Eco regions have between 20% and 50% under protection, which could recover (Nature could recover).



The numbers in parentheses for each category represent the entire number of Ecoregions found in each category.⁶

However, protecting only 50% of the planet is not enough. It is also essential for the remaining 50% to turn towards sustainable agriculture and sustainable land management in general. [This petition summarizes a path supported by more than 1 million people around the world:](#)



WORLD LEADERS: PROTECT HALF OUR PLANET

To world leaders:

"We global citizens are deeply concerned by scientists warning that ecosystems critical to sustaining life on Earth could collapse in our lifetimes. We call on you to meet existing targets to protect biodiversity, forge a new agreement so that at least 50% of our lands and oceans are protected and restored, and ensure our planet is completely sustainably managed. This must take into consideration the needs of human development and have the active support of indigenous peoples. This long-term goal for nature can restore harmony with our home."

By 2020, two-thirds of wild animals will be gone. Life is being extinguished as fast as when the dinosaurs disappeared -- and it's happening because humanity is taking a chainsaw to the tree of life.

Unless we stop this tragedy, the Earth's delicate biodiversity could completely collapse, leaving our planet desolate, silent and uninhabitable for humans. But there's hope - top scientists are backing an ambitious plan to put half our planet under protection and restore harmony with our home.

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SEND

By taking action you agree to receive Avaaaz emails. Our Privacy Policy will protect your data and explain how it can be used. You can unsubscribe at any time.

1,925,414

1,925,414 have signed. Let's get to 2,000,000

"We global citizens are deeply concerned by scientists warning that ecosystems critical to sustaining life on Earth could collapse in our lifetimes. We call on you to meet existing targets to protect biodiversity, forge a new agreement so that at least 50% of our lands and oceans are protected and restored, and ensure our planet is completely sustainably managed. This must take into consideration the needs of human

⁶ Dinerstein et al, "An Ecoregion-Based Approach to Protecting Half the Terrestrial Realm" (2017) BioScience • June 2017 / Vol. 67 No. 6



development and have the active support of Indigenous Peoples. This long-term goal for nature can restore harmony with our home."

As mentioned above, the extent to which Indigenous Peoples coexist in natural and protected areas makes them pivotal actors in managing the lands and protecting biodiversity. **Excluding Indigenous Peoples from decision making processes in areas under protection has proven to lead not only to internal conflicts, social inequality and forced displacement, but to an unbridled exploitation of natural resources having an environmental impact on ecosystems essential in biodiversity.**

Thus international recognition of the attributes of Indigenous Lands is paramount to nurture the drafting of international treaties and agreements, national laws and local regulations to preserve biodiversity.

Land-managing Indigenous bodies have been resilient to political and social changes, suggesting that governance of this sort could model sustainable land management and may be replicated worldwide. Conservation initiatives with a focus on the rights of Indigenous Peoples tend to acknowledge the strong connection between protecting nature and Indigenous knowledge, thus creating the path to reassess the current reference framework for conservation. Only by using this focus will it be possible to create mutual benefits for nature and Indigenous Peoples, while simultaneously creating opportunities for alliances with governments and conservationists.

One example of how these alliances may operate towards attaining international agreements is [Target 11 of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets - Convention on Biological Diversity](#), which states:

*By 2020, at least 17% of terrestrial and inland water areas and 10% of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved **through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas** and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscape and seascape.*



These systems, also known as “Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECM)”, must include management systems that have been formally or informally created by Indigenous Peoples throughout the world and acknowledge that Indigenous involvement is paramount to attaining this goal. However, although Aichi Target 11 is close from being accomplished, the contributions made by Indigenous Peoples towards managing and monitoring are almost never taken into consideration in official data.

This is why the role Indigenous Leaders play in today’s world must be more active than ever, not only to fulfill the goals of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020; the Millennium Development Goals (MDG); and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem (IPBES), but to construct and develop future international agreements such as the post 2020 framework on biodiversity.

However, we cannot call on Indigenous Peoples to carry the responsibility of the global challenges in protecting biodiversity without supporting them with the resources and acknowledgement they require. It is essential to accompany conservation policies and budgets assigned for this purpose, with support to the Indigenous causes and governance as well as the strengthening of Indigenous abilities.

Consequently, Avaaz and COICA suggest that the States and the United Nations system acknowledge, support and assign the budget to the forms of conservation, management, sustainable use of biodiversity, river basins and forests that are being implemented by Indigenous Peoples in their territories.

We all share a responsibility towards Indigenous Peoples, whether as civilian organizations, State agencies, political representatives, citizens and humanity in general; we must reflect that we acknowledge their sound practices to protect our planet through public policies, budget assignment, international cooperation and global agreements. This must also be understood as the restoration by States’ and the international system of human and collective rights of the rights of Indigenous Peoples, rather than as the appropriation of knowledge and the alignment of public policies with the sole purpose of meeting a requirement.



Today's world needs to give Indigenous Leaders a voice in international negotiations on biodiversity and conservation. Indigenous Leaders must participate as experts in protection and management of natural resources in the creation of national and international policies on biodiversity

IV. Recommendations

1. Support processes toward the recognition of the rights of Indigenous Peoples to their ancestral lands and natural resources.
2. Create Indigenous-led conservation areas. This briefing shows that empowering Indigenous Peoples to manage biodiversity in their own territories has resulted in a more sustained and cost- effective way to protect biodiversity.
3. Assign Indigenous Lands Rights. Lands that have assigned to Indigenous groups experience much less degradation.
4. Promote full participation. Recognize Indigenous Peoples as key actors and experts on biodiversity protection during the craft of policy making. We need to facilitate the regular participation of Indigenous Peoples in dialogues and negotiations of biodiversity internationally, nationally and locally.
5. Ensure that any conservation or development projects or programs fully respect Indigenous Peoples and/or the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and , and ensure that prior consultation, participation, and consent procedures are implemented and designed to be acceptable to the Indigenous Peoples.
6. Dedicate funding for supporting Indigenous Peoples in biodiversity conservation and climate change. Currently, the funding has been limited or has the State as intermediary.
7. Allow, support and assign financing for Indigenous Peoples to develop and implement their own forms of holistic management of Biodiversity, Forests, River Basins and territories.

Sources:



- Dinerstein et al, "An Ecoregion-Based Approach to Protecting Half the Terrestrial Realm" (2017) BioScience • June 2017 / Vol. 67 No. 6
- Garnett et al (2018) Nature Sustainability "A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation"
- Sobrevila, Claudia (2017) World Bank "The Role of Indigenous Peoples in Biodiversity Conservation"
- World Meteorological Organization (2018) "El IDEAM presentó los datos actualizados del monitoreo a la deforestación en 2017"
<https://public.wmo.int/en/media/news-from-members/ideam-presentó-los-datos-actualizados-del-monitoreo-la-deforestación-en-2017>