

#GLFBiodiversity



Indigenous-led solutions to the biodiversity crisis and forest protection

Supporting and empowering community-led initiatives that address local needs is an essential component of conservation

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White paper

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Photo by Fiona McAlpine/The Borneo Project

Why are Indigenous communities the best guardians of tropical rainforests?

As much as 80% of the world's remaining terrestrial biodiversity lies within indigenous peoples' territories, and Indigenous and community lands store at least 24% of the above-ground carbon in the world's tropical forests. While the lion's share of the world's remaining biodiversity is on Indigenous lands, Indigenous communities are seldom properly consulted about how to best protect that biodiversity.

Indigenous communities must be intimately involved in solving problems and finding solutions for their specific contexts, as they are the experts in their landscapes. Community-generated initiatives that include all local voices are more likely to succeed than 'fences and guns' approaches to protecting forests and biodiversity, as top-down and heavy handed approaches create conflict, disregard local needs, and often prevent communities from accessing what they need to survive. Community-generated approaches incorporate local knowledge and needs, while empowering communities who have been stewarding the land for decades – if not centuries.

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What are the threats to biodiversity and Indigenous rights in Sarawak?

The extinction crisis is all too evident in Sarawak, where widespread logging and oil palm cultivation has had a large impact on wildlife populations in recent decades. Protected areas are small and fragmented, with plantations separating wildlife corridors for many wide range species. The emergence of logging roads gives easy access to hunting for people from cities for sport or to sell in town, rather than for subsistence. Wildlife trafficking is also an issue, with pangolins and helmeted hornbills under serious threat.

Loss of habitat is the primary threat to biodiversity in Sarawak. Apart from oil palm and logging, infrastructure projects such as mega hydroelectric dams have had the dual negative effects of displacing Indigenous communities and flooding vast areas of tropical forest. In 2017, local communities managed to stop the Baram Dam, which would have been the second largest dam of its kind in the world. This was a huge win for grassroots activism and Indigenous rights in Malaysia.

Photo by Fiona McAlpine/The Borneo Project



What do Indigenous solutions look like on the ground?

Solutions vary by context and location. In the Kayan community of Long Pilah, people have started a *tagang* fishery system in which community members collectively manage and sell fish, and agree on fishing limits. The Kenyah community of Long Tungan has designated its own protected forest area, in which no one is allowed to hunt or cut down trees, and which strengthens campaigns against logging. The Penan community of Long Kerong built a tree nursery to help reforest degraded areas, and is selling seedlings to neighboring villages.

While some initiatives are village-specific, in the upper Baram River Basin communities are working together to create the Baram Peace Park, an Indigenous-managed protected area that would be the first of its kind in Malaysia. The idea for the Peace Park emerged from communities that want to protect their forests, maintain their ways of living, and stop the rampant logging that has plagued Sarawak for decades. Communities are working together with a small coalition of grassroots organizations on forest management, socio-ecological surveys of the area, and establishing regenerative livelihoods.

Photo by Fiona McAlpine/ The Borneo Project



How can the global community support community-led solutions?

Exclusionary political practices, legal barriers to obtaining land rights, and a lack of capacity and resources are key challenges to implementing Indigenous-led forest management and protection in Sarawak. The international community can support Indigenous rights and community-led solutions by contributing towards the implementation of these solutions, supporting community-generated ideas over top-down initiatives, and understanding how over-consumption is linked to extractive practices around the world.

As a global consumer, it's important to pay attention to what you buy and where your products come from. Raising awareness of destructive industries and over-consumption of resources in your own community can create real change, such as the EU's efforts to ban palm oil from the production of biofuels. This is having a visible impact in the oil palm industry in Malaysia.

Protecting the natural world is important, wherever you live, as all of Earth's life systems are intimately connected. Join an initiative that is already supporting community-led initiatives, or get a few neighbors to help you organize community meetings to discuss a particular challenge and its potential solutions.

Essential components of community-led initiatives

- Ask the community about their challenges, solutions, and ideas, and what they need to achieve their goals. What stands in their way when it comes to implementing forest and biodiversity protection?
- Incorporate all voices from the community, including women, children, disabled, and the elderly.
- Let local organizations who have established trust guide the process.
- Do not promise more than you can provide.
- Regularly allow communities to give feedback. Be flexible and expect adjustments to happen.



Photo by Fiona McAlpine/The Borneo Project

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