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# Voices of the Landscape: Land transitions towards securing legal and customary land tenure of Indigenous Peoples and decolonizing conservation



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OCTOBER  
2020

**White paper**

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Leaders at the recent United Nations Biodiversity Summit (2020) acknowledged that the planet is in a state of emergency that requires urgent and immediate global action. They echoed the findings of Global Biodiversity Outlook 5 (GBO 5), noting that none of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets have been fully met and that humanity is at a crossroads with regard to the legacy left for future generations.

Meanwhile, the first global assessment carried out by an intergovernmental scientific body and released last month has concluded that biodiversity – the diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems – is

declining faster than at any time in human history.

While the global picture is bleak, these studies, reports and other evidence reveal examples of progress which, if scaled up, could support the transformative changes necessary to achieve the 2050 Vision of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) of living in harmony with nature. The CBD's Local Biodiversity Outlooks 2, in particular, offers solutions and key transitions that must occur to achieve more balanced relationships within societies and with nature. These solutions would build on scientific findings that suggest the decline of natural systems is slower in the lands, waters and territories of Indigenous Peoples than elsewhere, as a result of their governance, values and practices.

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Biological diversity is declining worldwide at an unprecedented pace, yet Indigenous Peoples have always known that the key to halting and reversing that trend is to ensure that cultural diversity continues to flourish. Indigenous Peoples are the guardians since time immemorial of much of the remaining biodiversity-rich landscape across the world, and the spirituality, values and world views embedded in these physical spaces. At least 50 percent of the world's land is collectively managed by Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLC) under customary tenure systems, and these lands and waters contain up to 80 percent of the world's biodiversity. These areas include approximately 35 to 40 percent of the global area that is formally protected, and approximately 35 percent of all remaining terrestrial areas with very low human intervention.

Indigenous Peoples protect their territories, whether or not these areas are declared as protected areas or conserved areas. However, legal recognition of tenure results in better biodiversity outcomes. A recent study in the Brazilian Amazon concluded that granting full property rights significantly reduces the levels of deforestation inside

Indigenous territories, and the results are of significant orders of magnitude. In this context, full property rights refers to land that has completed a process called homologation, where a territory becomes the permanent possession of its Indigenous Peoples, no third party can contest its existence, and extractive activities carried out by external actors can only occur after consulting the communities and the National Congress.

Protected areas are and will remain the cornerstone of biodiversity conservation, as shown by studies documenting the fact that well-managed reserves are far more effective in safeguarding biodiversity than are other forms of land use. However, there also needs to be recognition and support for the contributions that IPLC make to the conservation of biodiversity in the most appropriate way, not necessarily through protected areas. Indigenous territories may be designated as protected areas with the free, prior and informed consent, and full and effective participation, of Indigenous Peoples. Additionally, these areas could also be recognized as 'other effective area-based conservation measures' (OECMs), or simply by working to support ongoing practices of Indigenous Peoples outside of any formal recognition or reporting requirements.

As human transformations threaten the way of life of Indigenous Peoples and their connection to their land, the world urgently needs to find ways to support and ensure that Indigenous Peoples are key partners in ensuring the health of the planet and the diversity of species. Recent analytical studies and assessments clearly establish the fact that effective inclusion of Indigenous Peoples and full respect for their rights is crucial to halting the biodiversity crisis. Therefore, a radical shift in thinking needs to take place, a decolonization of previously accepted notions of conservation, natural ecosystems, and wilderness. Policy-makers need to recognize and accept that culture-based interventions and management of Indigenous Peoples is an important practice that allows nature to thrive. The Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework must take these findings into account by supporting full legal recognition of Indigenous territories and providing adequate and appropriate resources for Indigenous guardianship.

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The **Global Landscapes Forum** (GLF) is the world's largest knowledge-led platform on integrated land use, dedicated to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and Paris Climate Agreement. The Forum takes a holistic approach to create sustainable landscapes that are productive, prosperous, equitable and resilient and considers five cohesive themes of food and livelihood, landscape restoration, rights, finance and measuring progress. It is led by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), in collaboration with its co-founders UN Environment Programme and the World Bank and Charter Members.

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