

Indigenous Stewardship of Forests

A number of recent studies add to the growing body of evidence that Indigenous peoples are better protectors of their forests than governments or industry. Researchers at Universities of Illinois and Michigan found through a [review of 80 forests](#) in 10 tropical countries that when Indigenous and local communities own their forests, they effectively conserve their forest resources over the long term.

Reflecting the growing momentum behind viewing rainforests as carbon sinks that can either exacerbate or reduce climate change, the researchers measured the carbon emissions from forests under community and government control. The New Scientist recently ran [an interview with the authors](#) of this research, who said “our findings show that we can increase carbon sequestration simply by transferring ownership of forests from governments to communities.” This is a bold assertion, but one that is supported by their research.

However, the idea that Indigenous peoples are the best protectors of rainforests is considered controversial by some, who usually argue that forests should be protected by governments, following the National Parks model of conservation pioneered by the United States. In this model, forests are enclosed in conservation areas and put off-limits, supposedly to be protected from loggers, commercial agribusiness and other extractive industries by government agencies.

Unfortunately, this is not a one-size-fits-all solution. For example, in an article cited by hundreds, [researchers highlighted the problems](#) with this approach in Indonesian Borneo, where conservation areas lost over half of their forest cover in the period from 1985 to 2001. These areas set aside for protection have become increasingly fragmented, degraded, and isolated, greatly decreasing ecosystem functions. What also cannot be ignored is the terrible legacy of [Indigenous communities forcibly removed](#) from their traditional homelands by conservation projects, which are estimated to have displaced close to 20 million people over the past century.

Regarding carbon offsets, a model which also often [fails to address the rights of communities](#), a recent [investigative report](#) by The Christian Science Monitor and the New England Center for Investigative Reporting estimates that of the \$700 million dollars invested in carbon offsets around the world, offset buyers:

“... are often buying vague promises instead of the reductions in greenhouse gases they expect. They are buying into projects that are never completed, or paying for ones that would have been done anyhow, the investigation found. Their purchases are feeding middlemen and promoters seeking profits from green schemes that range from selling protection for existing trees to the promise of planting new ones that never thrive. In some cases, the offsets have consequences that their purchasers never foresaw, such as erecting windmills that force poor people off their farms. Carbon offsets are the environmental equivalent of financial derivatives: complex, unregulated, unchecked and – in many cases – not worth their price.”

In a separate study, [Stanford University researchers](#) found that up to 2/3 of offsets in international markets are not delivering any additional reduction in emissions compared to business as usual, which means that buyers are getting ripped off and the offsets are doing nothing to slow climate change. The attempt to ‘buy’ our way out of climate change has created a corrupt system with little accountability that fails to reduce emissions.

Alternatively, more compelling evidence supporting Indigenous peoples’ effectiveness protecting forests comes from Brazilian Amazonia. In a [study published in Conservation Biology](#), researchers showed through an analysis of satellite data that many Indigenous lands prevent deforestation almost completely even though there are high rates of forest destruction directly outside their borders. The researchers conclude that Indigenous lands are the most important barrier to deforestation in the Amazon.

Finally, a [recent study by Forest Trends](#) found that forest communities and Indigenous peoples do a better job of conserving woodlands than national governments or international donors. According to study co-author Augusta Molnar, “local communities, including the Indigenous residents of tropical forests, are managing at least 900 million acres of forest so that biodiversity is protected. These documented forests cover more forest areas than are currently conserved in parks and protected areas.”