



Press backgrounder

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Indigenous Peoples and Ancient Forests

Forest peoples

The number of indigenous people living in or near forests world-wide may total as many as one hundred and fifty million. Forest dependent indigenous peoples represent as much as one half of the world's linguistic diversity. Many of these indigenous peoples live in ancient forests and often regulate the use of the forests through customary legal and political systems. Many ancient forests remain today due to the active management and defense of the forests by indigenous peoples.

Dependence on forests

Indigenous peoples in ancient forests are often characterized as hunters and gatherers, fisherfolk, pastoralists, swidden farmers and settled cultivators. The great majority of these peoples practice mixed economies, and, while they may retain a subsistence base, most are also actively engaged in the cash economy and in markets in crafts, forest products, agricultural surpluses, land, labour, services and even intellectual property.

In many cases, the range of native plant and animal species found in ancient and frontier forests provides the basis for survival of forest dwelling peoples, and remains fundamental to the survival of indigenous and traditional cultures worldwide. Indeed forest plants provide local communities with food and medicine, materials for construction and for making tools and utensils. They also form the basis of many traditional arts and crafts activities. For example, the Waimiri Atroari of Amazonian Brazil use some 32 plant species in the construction of hunting equipment alone - each plant having a specific role according to its physical and chemical properties. Similarly, the 'mestizo' forest dwellers of Tambopata, Peru, use between 200 and 300 tree species in the construction of their dwellings.

Elsewhere, forest plants provide fibres for weaving textiles and making rope; they provide glues and resins used in construction and waterproofing; they are used in the protection of crops, catching fish and preserving food; they form the source of pigments and tanning materials used in arts and crafts; and they provide soaps, fragrances and cosmetics. Finally, forest plants form the basis of primary healthcare for all forest-dwelling peoples. Moreover, dozens of species used by traditional medical practitioners now form the basis of pharmaceuticals used within orthodox Western medicine.

Threats to indigenous cultures

As industrial logging and other developments such as mining and road building move further and further into remaining forests, many of these indigenous peoples' cultures and livelihoods are becoming threatened. Indeed, many cultures have already been lost.

Land tenure and forestry law

One contributory factor to cultural erosion, lies in longstanding insecurity of indigenous peoples' land rights - which tend to be especially insecure in forest areas. A large proportion of the world's remaining ancient forests are classified as State or Crown lands and are subject to the jurisdiction of forestry departments. Forestry laws often expressly deny the tenure rights of indigenous peoples in forests, deny or limit their tree rights and deny or curtail their rights to non-timber forest products. Even access and residence rights may be denied.

Logging activities

The effects of irresponsible logging activities on indigenous cultures are well documented and are widespread. For example, in Guyana, logging concessions have been handed out without due regard for the rights of the Amerindian communities and large-scale logging is proceeding. In the case of the Kwebanna community in NW Guyana, villagers have been forced to flee their ancestral village and take refuge in neighbouring Venezuela. Elsewhere complaints launched against logging companies have included their destruction of cultural and spiritual sites such as graves, the devastation of trees species vital to local communities and the illegal removal of logs from indigenous lands.

Greenpeace's position on ancient forest

Greenpeace's position on ancient forest specifically refers to the rights of indigenous and other forest-dependent communities:

Greenpeace recognises that ancient forests are the customary lands of indigenous peoples and that these peoples play essential roles in maintaining and defending these ecosystems. Greenpeace affirms the rights of these forest peoples over their traditional territories, and calls on all parties to recognise these rights and ensure the participation and informed consent of indigenous peoples in all land-use planning activities. Greenpeace supports forest uses by indigenous peoples and by other forest-dependent communities that sustain the natural dynamics and biodiversity of the ancient forest ecosystems through time and at both landscape and stand levels.

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