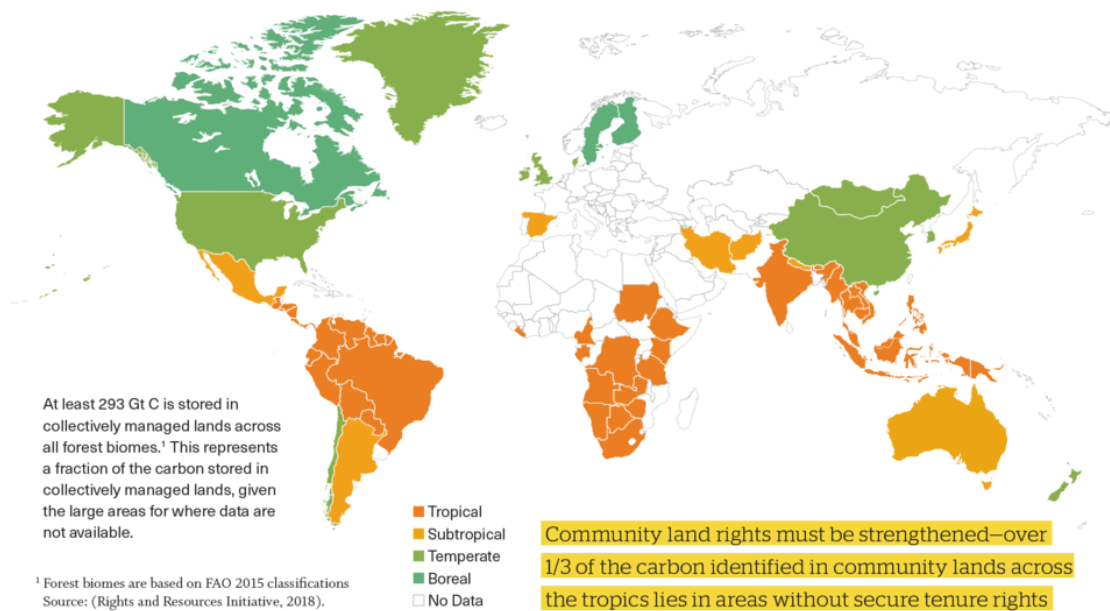




TISHMAN CENTER · MARCH 15, 2019

Indigeneity and Systemic Change

Indigenous and community lands across 64 countries store >293 gigatonnes of carbon.



Research has demonstrated that areas managed by, and held within or adjacent to indigenous and local communities retain the majority of

the world's biodiversity, house a significant portion of the world's terrestrial carbon sinks, and show slower rates of ecosystem degradation and deforestation. This correlation is due to the fact that Indigenous planning, land management and governance practices have been nurtured over thousands of years of intimate and reciprocal relations to the places and ecosystems with which Indigenous peoples have co-evolved. Such Indigenous practices have fostered long-living *non-anthropocentric communities* that embed humans within the web of life, leading not only to the sustaining of biodiversity and preservation of carbon sinks but even their enhancement. The ancestral and contemporary nurturance of integral socioecological communities by Indigenous peoples forms the basis of the inextricable link between the diversity of Indigenous cultures and biological diversity, also known as “biocultural diversity”.[1] This is evidenced by the fact that around 80% of the Earth’s remaining, yet rapidly declining biodiversity is found within the 20% of the planet’s terrestrial surface that is still under formally recognized Indigenous management, tenure or occupation—which is continuously threatened. [2] Regarding carbon sinks and the climate crisis, the Climate Land

Ambition and Rights Alliance (CLARA 2018) report, *Missing Pathways to 1.5°C: The Role of the Land Sector in Ambitious Climate Action—Climate Ambition that Safeguards Land Rights, Biodiversity and Food Sovereignty* synthesizes a growing body of interdisciplinary and international research that has consistently found “clear links between community-based tenure systems and rights, forest conservation, and climate change mitigation.”[3] The report underlines that at least a quarter of the carbon stored in the world’s tropical and sub-tropical forests is in territories collectively-managed by Indigenous and local communities, although “one-third of this is in areas where Indigenous and local communities lack formal recognition of their tenure rights.” Yet indigenous tenure has been historically and continues presently to be threatened by ongoing waves of land, water, ocean and green grabs, as well as other forms of neo/colonial dispossession by powerful entities such as governments, corporations and settler populations motivated by extractive interests. This is deeply troubling, both because of the continuing violation of indigenous rights and self-determination and because “[s]ecure tenure rights for Indigenous Peoples...results in lower rates of deforestation and soil

degradation and better protection of the biodiversity and ecosystem functions upon which these communities depend.” Hence, securing community land rights for indigenous peoples and communities creates “more resilient landscapes that directly contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation” because “the maintenance of the conservation values of a significant share of the planet depend on the institutions and actions of Indigenous Peoples”. The inextricable links between the diversity of cultures, particularly Indigenous cultures and biodiversity as well as terrestrial carbon sinks, has led to the increasing recognition in scholarly, activist and some scientific and policy spaces that biodiversity protection and climate change mitigation *indispensably* depends on the defense and revitalization of Indigenous land governance and knowledges (IKs). Across the world, Indigenous peoples and allies are therefore organizing to challenge and change policies at different levels (from local to global), confront powerful interests, defend and reinstate community lands, restore Indigenous self-determination and revitalize IKs. Indigenous knowledges include a culturally diverse array of locally adapted practices of Indigenous planning, land management and governance. Such

practices endeavor to (re)build viable and convivial communities that embody justice, autonomy, self-determination and sustainability through the incorporation and articulation of IKs. Different components are integrated into community-based Indigenous governance, management and planning; among them we find the following:

- Indigenous cosmologies/cosmovisions and worldviews
- Indigenous spiritualities and value systems
- Indigenous stewardship through commons-based land tenure and management systems, including community land and forest management,
- Indigenous food systems (including integrated landscape management that incorporates agroecology and agroforestry)
- Indigenous communal and reciprocal labor practices
- Indigenous calendar planning (in sync with ecological, biological and social cycles)
- Place-based governance of Indigenous settlement and movement patterns in symbiosis with the land
- Indigenous assemblies and consensual decision-making

systems

- Participatory and intergenerational Indigenous place-based education and knowledge transmission
- Indigenous architecture and design
- Indigenous languages and health practices which embody epistemic/semiotic codes of biocultural adaptation to and interaction with delicate environments.

Indigenous governance, management, and planning seeks to integrate these and other components into the design of viable and convivial communities dedicated to the nurturance and cyclical regeneration of life as a whole, in its full richness, vitality and diversity, for indefinite generations to come. As key actors in the frontlines of environmental and climate injustices, Indigenous peoples, organizations, activist and scholars are thus creatively resisting by nurturing sustainable alternatives and socially just transitions guided by indigenous knowledges, practices and strategies aimed at fostering systemic change. Their aim is not just to uproot the continuing coloniality of power and restore indigenous rights and self-determination, which is a centerpiece of indigenous resistance and emancipatory struggles; they am

also to work in solidarity with other movements that combine ecology with intersectionality to develop transformative innovations which advance decolonial and biocultural alternatives beyond Anthropocene crises, such as climate change, biodiversity loss (“the sixth mass extinction”), food injustice and forced migration, among other global challenges. This critical academic, environmental and social justice approach to policy and global transformation, known to some as the “indigenous paradigm” as to others as the “biocultural axiom”, works to advance pathways for systemic change grounded in the acknowledgement that the defense of Mother Earth goes hand in hand with the advancement of indigenous rights, land governance, self-determination, and knowledge revitalization. Our work focuses on collaboratively researching the diverse, locally placed yet globally engaged ways in which Indigenous and allied organizations and communities across the planet are confronting extractivist and neo/colonial agendas, while also embodying alternatives and pathways for just sustainabilities. We focus, moreover, on how Indigenous and allied organizations are revitalizing and recirculating Indigenous knowledges and practices to develop and design community-

grounded yet globally vital decolonial alternatives and integral solutions that nurture biocultural diversity and just transitions, through, for instance, self-determined forms of community governance combined with regional and global commons management. We also focus on how these Indigenous methodologies are key to regenerating biodiversity, mitigating climate change, fostering food sovereignty (e.g., via agroecology and agroforestry to enhance agrobiodiversity), and eliminating the root causes of varied social injustices, including forced migration (e.g., by restoring community land management and self-determination). At a broader, global level, we focus on how Indigenous and allied coalitions are transforming policy debates and offering alternative pathways beyond Anthropocene crises at local national and international levels, including in intergovernmental fora like the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, among others. Through these and other pathways, indigenous peoples, movements and knowledges are offering living blueprints for actually existing systemic alternatives that deserve attention and support.

Sources

[1] Maffi, L. and E. Woodley, 2010. *Biocultural Diversity Conservation: A Global Sourcebook*. New York: Earthscan.

[2] See, e.g., Parotta, J. A. and R. L. Trosper, 2012. *Traditional Forest-Related Knowledge: Sustaining Communities, Ecosystems and Biocultural Diversity*. New York: Springer. See also Loh, J. & D. Harmon. 2014. "Biocultural Diversity: threatened species, endangered languages." WWF Netherlands, Zeist, The Netherlands; Gorenflo, L. J. et al. 2012. "Co-occurrence of linguistic and biological diversity in biodiversity hotspots and high biodiversity wilderness areas." PNAS May 22, 2012 109 (21) 8032-803.

[3] Dooley, K et al., 2018. *Missing Pathways to 1.5°C: The Role of the Land Sector in Ambitious Climate Action—Climate ambition that Safeguards Land Rights, Biodiversity and Food Sovereignty*. Available from: <http://climatelandambitionrightsalliance.org/report>



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