

VISION QUEST:

Who Will Control the Future of the Amazon?

A complex and high-stakes struggle over the Amazon forests and their resources heats up.

by David Dudenhoefer

At dawn last June 5, some 650 police and soldiers began clearing a two-week-old blockade set by roughly 3,000 Awajun and Wampis Indians on the main east-west highway in northern Peru, at a spot called the Devil's Curve, in Bagua Province. The blockade was part of an Amazonian indigenous mobilization coordinated by the Peruvian Rainforest Inter-Ethnic Development Association (AIDSESP, for its name in Spanish) to demand the repeal of nine legislative decrees that threatened Indian land rights and natural resources. The context of the protest, however, was a 30-year struggle by native communities to gain title to their ancestral lands and an unprecedented increase in oil exploration in Peru's Amazon region in recent years.

The police were equipped with assault rifles, armored vehicles, and helicopters. The protesters had only wooden spears, but when the police started shooting, some protesters wrested rifles from them and returned the fire. By the time the teargas cleared, at least 11 protesters and 13 police officers were dead (some investigators claim that more Indians died, but police removed their bodies from the scene) and nearly 200 protesters were injured. The tragedy continued at an oil pipeline pumping station to the north of Bagua, where a group of Awajun Indians responded to radio reports of the violence by taking 36 police officers hostage. The next morning, as government troops launched a rescue operation, the Awajun killed 10 hostages in an act of revenge.

The brutality of the government crackdown and the Indian response resulted in condemnation around the world. International pressure and continued protests led the Peruvian congress to repeal two of the nine offending decrees two weeks later, upon which AIDSESP ended the mobilization. But most of the issues that led approximately 20,000 indigenous protesters to blockade roads and rivers, occupy airstrips and oil company boats, and shut down Peru's northern pipeline

remained unresolved. Peru's 333,000 Amazonian Indians continue to struggle for recognition of communal lands and their right to prior consent as the government facilitates the exploitation of oil, gas, minerals, and hardwoods in their region, which accounts for 61 percent of the national territory and hosts 13 percent of Peru's population.

In a televised interview following the Bagua clash, Peruvian President Alan Garcia said, "These people are not first class citizens, if 400,000 [*sic*] natives can say to 28 million Peruvians 'you can't come here.' That is a very grave error, and anyone who thinks that way wants to take us on an irrational and primitive retreat into the past."

Among the injured in Bagua was Santiago Manuin, a 52-year-old Awajun leader who won the Spanish government's Reina Sofia Prize for his environmental activism. Police shot Manuin repeatedly and left him for dead, but he was later rescued by ambulance attendants. After two operations and days in intensive care, Manuin spoke to a journalist from the Peruvian magazine *Somos*. "Look at history, how indigenous people have been treated, the deforestation, the contaminated rivers," he said. "Is that development? We don't want that kind of development, and Peru shouldn't want that kind of development."

Though the scale of the confrontation was exceptional, the violence in Bagua was hardly unique. According to Jecinaldo Barbosa, a Satere-Mawe Indian who heads the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB for its name in Portuguese), 34 Indian leaders were killed in Brazil in 2008 alone. Various Indian activists were murdered in the Bolivian Amazon last year, and in Colombia, armed groups have killed hundreds of Indians during the past decade.

Indigenous leaders from across the Amazon Basin say Bagua reflects their own struggle. One of them is Diego Escobar, a Piratapuyo Indian from Colombia who oversees envi-



David Dudenhoefer

ronmental policy for the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA): “The message we get from Peru is that we need to fight for our natural resources, we need to fight for our territories, we need to fight for our culture. If we aren’t united and prepared, they’ll do what they want with us.”

E Pluribus...?

Indigenous territories account for 25–30 percent of the Amazon Basin, and many of the national parks and protected areas that cover 25 percent of that region overlap native lands. Various studies have shown that native peoples do a better job of conserving forests than their non-native compatriots. A recent satellite-image study led by Woods Hole forest ecologist Daniel Nepstad, for example, showed that the creation of indigenous territories in the Amazon Basin often prevented deforestation completely, despite severe deforestation along their boundaries. A comparable study led by Manuel Ruiz-Pérez of the Autonomous University of Madrid in 2005 found that indigenous territories in the Brazilian state of Acre suffered less deforestation than a nearby national park. “We don’t want to cut down the forest,” said Celin Cushi, an Ashanika Indian from the central Peruvian Amazon, “because the forest is our pharmacy; the forest is our market; the forest is our hardware store. For us, the forest is a perfect factory made by God.”

This utilitarian approach to wilderness has sometimes put conservationists at odds with Indians. Government agencies have forced Indians to move out of national parks, or have restricted the activities of native communities in protected areas. Indians clearly have an impact on natural resources, such as by overharvesting fish, game, and certain forest plants, yet on a regional level they are defending Amazon forests from an array of threats. Because they protect vast expanses of wilderness that provide environmental services for

Above: Awajun and Wampis Indians at a highway blockade in Bagua Province one week before Peruvian police stormed the area.

Below: The violence of the police crackdown and native response in Bagua left nearly 200 injured and 24 dead.



Thomas Quinynen/www.catapa.be

the entire world, the usurpation or degradation of native lands is as much an environmental issue as it is a social and political issue.

It might thus seem odd that during the 10 weeks of protests in Peru, as Catholic bishops, unions, farmer organizations, and other groups issued statements supporting AIDSESP, the major conservation groups were conspicuously silent. This may be due to their reluctance to anger President Garcia, who claimed the protests were part of a left-wing conspiracy, or it may be a reflection of the historic neglect of indigenous people by conservationists (see, for example, “A Challenge to Conservationists,” *World Watch*, November/December 2004).

Though they are outnumbered—with about 1.6 million people, Indians represent a mere 5 percent of the Amazon Basin’s population—and monetarily poor, the region’s native peoples are better prepared to defend their natural and cultural heritage than ever before. Over the past 45 years, Amazonian indigenous peoples have created more than 300 local organizations, which are represented by regional and national umbrella groups that lobby state and national governments, cooperate with NGOs and international agencies, and coordinate protests when all else fails.

With the help of non-native allies, those organizations have obtained computers, video equipment, Internet access, and other empowering technology while their leaders have gained knowledge and skills to help them take on multi-bil-

sequent colonization brought slavery and Old World diseases, which decimated native communities. It is estimated that Brazil was home to between 2 and 6 million people and more than 1,000 ethnic groups in Orellana’s day. Today, that country has fewer than 600,000 Amazonian Indians in 170 ethnic groups.

In the second half of the twentieth century, national governments facilitated non-Indian colonization of the Amazon Basin that left its native inhabitants minorities in the lands of their ancestors. In the 1960s and 1970s, the region’s Indians began forming political organizations with the help of anthropologists, priests, and other outsiders. The national umbrella groups AIDSESEP and the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of the Ecuadorian Amazon (COFENIAE) were founded in 1980, followed by the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia (CIDOB) and the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) in 1982. In 1984, these groups founded the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA), which works with national organizations in the nine Amazonian countries. Over the years, some of those organizations have suffered crises of leadership, and their communication with communities remains limited, but on the whole they play an important role in defending indigenous interests on national and international levels.

Years of lobbying and protests have led to the inclusion of native rights in a number of national constitutions and international agreements. Brazil’s 1998 constitution and Colombia’s 1991 constitution broke ground in their recognition of indigenous rights (although Peru’s 1993 constitution limited some previous guarantees). Venezuela, where the previous constitution failed to even mention Indians, approved a constitution in 1999 with a chapter dedicated to native rights. In Ecuador and Bolivia, where more than one-third and one-half of the populations respectively are indigenous, constitutions drafted in recent years redefine those countries as “plurinational states.”

The International Labour Organization’s Convention 169, adopted in 1989, mandates that indigenous people be consulted about initiatives that could impact them. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which the UN General Assembly adopted in 2007, requires their free, prior, and informed consent (an important improvement over “consultation”). Native organizations have pushed their governments to comply with those agreements, though with mixed results.

The Colombian and Brazilian governments have taken steps to facilitate consultation, such as the creation of *mesas de dialogo*—committees of government and native representatives—that meet periodically. Colombia’s high court declared a 1997 forestry law unconstitutional based on Convention 169 because indigenous organizations weren’t consulted about it. The Peruvian congress’s constitutional commission similarly declared a 2008 forestry law—one of the nine legislative decrees that AIDSESEP opposed—uncon-



David Dudenhoefer

Organizers and dancers at the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of the Ecuadorian Amazon (COFENIAE) inauguration ceremony last June.

lion-dollar industries, short-sighted government initiatives, and the non-indigenous people who covet their land and resources. Several decades of organizing and mobilizing have resulted in significant, though not total, legal recognition of indigenous territories and rights. Even the violence in Peru and Brazil is a reflection of those organizations’ success, since it has resulted from the fact that indigenous people are standing their ground and defending their land. “On a political level, there has been enormous progress,” noted Richard Smith, an anthropologist who has worked with Amazonian indigenous organizations for more than 40 years. “These are incredibly autonomous people, but when they are confronted by a common enemy, they have a capacity to come together.”

The current level of cooperation and political organization is remarkable considering how remote most communities are, the region’s vastness, and historic divisions. Recent decades have seen an indigenous renaissance after the four centuries of decline that followed the first European incursion into the region in 1542, when Francisco de Orellana and a few dozen conquistadores floated the length of the Amazon River. Sub-



stitutional two weeks before the Bagua clash, yet the majority parties resisted repealing the law until President Garcia asked them to, two weeks after Bagua.

Grounds of Contention

President Garcia virtually ignored the AIDSESEP mobilization during its first month. Not until the protest entered its fifth week did he declare a state of emergency in the Amazon region and mention the protest at a public event, when he reminded the audience that “the Amazonian lands belong to the entire nation, not to a small group that lives there.”

Under Peruvian law, the Amazon forests and subsoil belong to the state. Indigenous communities there have gained title to ancestral lands under a “native communities law” passed in 1974. Richard Smith heads a Peruvian NGO, the Instituto del Bien Común, which helps indigenous communities gain legal recognition of their lands. He explained that the bureaucratic obstacles to getting native lands titled in Peru are daunting, citing cases of communities that worked for more than a decade to get a title. “The state has never wanted to title the lands of indigenous communities,” Smith said. “The stalling tactics, the loss of paperwork, the inexplicable stopping of processes

Officially recognized indigenous territories in Amazonia, with the exception of Venezuela, where most native lands have yet to be titled.

results in a sense of desperation among indigenous people.”

Nevertheless, 1,235 indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon have gotten communal land titled over the past three decades, while 277 communities are still awaiting title. The result is a patchwork of native lands totaling 105,643 square kilometers that are surrounded by national forests, much of which has been leased to logging companies. Including five large reserves created for un-contacted peoples, indigenous territories cover 17 percent of the Peruvian Amazon, while Indians represent 9 percent of that region’s population.

But compared to indigenous communities in neighboring nations, Peru’s Amazonian Indians are land-poor. In the 1980s and 1990s, Ecuador created indigenous territories that cover about 65 percent of its Amazon region. Bolivia has turned almost 26 percent of its Amazon region into indigenous territories, most of which were created by the administration of Evo Morales, Bolivia’s first native (Aymara) president. Venezuela has been slow to legalize proposed native lands that would cover one-third of the national territory. Colombia has divided 51 percent of its Amazon lowlands into 186



Native leaders packed Brazil's Senate for a meeting with various senators during COIAB's annual Terra Livre gathering in Brasília.

indigenous territories that are home to approximately 120,000 people—who constitute less than 3 percent of the national population but control 21 percent of the national territory. Brazil has declared almost 22 percent of its Amazon region native territory—more than one million square kilometers for approximately 600,000 people, or almost 13 percent of the national territory for 0.3 percent of the population.

Together, the Amazonian indigenous territories of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru cover almost 1.7 million square kilometers, about the size of Iran but home to just 1.6 million people. It is hardly surprising that ranchers, farmers, and politicians across the Amazon region claim that Indians have too much land. But as Colombian ethnologist Martin von Hildebrand, director of Fundación Gaia Amazonas, noted, “They say that indigenous people have too much land, but those communities are actually doing the country a favor by protecting all that forest.”

In fact, however, many native communities are having a hard time protecting their forests, which are threatened by loggers, ranchers, farmers, and extractive industries. The majority of South Americans would seem to support native land tenancy, as a 2000 survey of Brazilians by the Instituto Socioambiental indicates: 68 percent of respondents said that indigenous people either had adequate territories or deserved more land, whereas 22 percent said they had too much. Nevertheless, violent minorities continue to threaten native lands

and lives. Last September, mobs sacked the offices of Bolivia's Amazonian Indian groups and various NGOs in Santa Cruz in response to government policies to create native territories, among other issues. A subsequent attack on a march of natives and campesinos left 20 dead and more than 100 injured. In 2008 alone, 53 Brazilian Indians were murdered as a result of land and resource conflicts. Illegal logging and mining and an advancing agricultural frontier threaten dozens of Brazil's indigenous territories, and booms in biofuels and grain and beef exports have intensified that pressure in recent years.

Alberto Ricardo, director of the Instituto Socioambiental, cited the Guaja, a tribe of just 300 hunter-gatherers, as one of Brazil's most threatened peoples; their territory in Maranhão state has been invaded by ranchers and loggers. Ranchers and farmers are also encroaching on the lands of the Enawene-Nawe, a tribe with just 500 members in Mato Grosso state, while the Jurueña River, which they depend on for fish, is slated for hydroelectric projects. And the Yanomami—whose territory in northern Brazil was overrun by gold miners in the 1980s, when disease killed 15 percent of their population—are suffering a malaria epidemic due to a recent surge in illegal mining.

Jecinaldo Barbosa said that COIAB demands that the Brazilian government intervene in such cases, but the institution responsible for indigenous affairs, FUNAI, lacks the capacity to deal with most threats and local officials often resist federal intervention. He explained that hundreds of indigenous leaders travel to Brasília, the Brazilian capital, each year for several days of demonstrations and lobbying that has raised

awareness and resulted in several meetings with President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, popularly known as Lula.

Barbosa cited Raposa Serra do Sol, an indigenous territory in northern Brazil, as an example of progress. Indigenous leaders in that region, which is home for about 20,000 Indians from various tribes, struggled for more than a decade to get legal recognition of their ancestral lands while miners, loggers, farmers, and ranchers invaded them. In 2005, Lula signed a law creating a vast indigenous territory, but it provoked violent reprisals against native communities there. It wasn't until July of this year that the government evicted the last non-indigenous squatters from the territory, after almost 20 Indians had been killed and scores injured during a decade of conflict.

Subsoil Challenges

While the advancing agricultural frontier threatens indigenous forests throughout the Amazon Basin, its western region holds major oil, gas, and mineral reserves. A 2008 study published in the online journal *PLoS ONE* identified 180 oil and gas blocks in western Amazonia, most of which are under exploration. And while clandestine mining has long been a problem, larger mining companies are now openly active there.

Colombia's Ministry of Mines and Energy has received a surge in requests for mining concessions in the Amazon region this year. Last year Ecuador's constitutional assembly identified 12 mining concessions in Amazonian Kichwa territory and 22 concessions in Shuar territory. Two controversial gold mining concessions have been awarded by the governments of Ecuador and Peru in the Cordillera del Condor, along their common border, which holds the headwaters of rivers that Awajun and Shuar communities depend on.

Peru, a net importer of oil, has prioritized oil and gas exploitation in recent years. In 2004, there were eight oil and gas concessions covering less than 15 percent of the Peruvian Amazon. By mid-2009, 81 concessions covered 72 percent of that region and overlapped 95 percent of its indigenous territories. Though few indigenous leaders completely oppose oil exploitation there, they demand that their people be consulted, compensated, and protected from contamination.

Richard Smith noted that many companies that have won concessions in Peru are relatively small, may lack the resources or motivation to employ the technology needed to limit their environmental impacts, and have not been forced to do so by the Peruvian government. A case in point is Block 1AB in northeast Peru, where Occidental Petroleum and later Plus-petrol dumped contaminated formation waters (waters found naturally in oil and gas deposit formations) into the Corrientes River for years despite complaints by the area's Achuar, Kichwa, and Urarina Indians. It wasn't until native protesters shut down that oil field for two weeks in October 2006 that Plus-petrol officials agreed to re-inject formation waters and build potable water systems for nearby communities.

The Amazon region most affected by the oil industry is northeast Ecuador, where Texaco drilled hundreds of wells and

built access roads that non-Indians used to colonize the area in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, the Cofan, Siona, and Secoya peoples lost most of their land and were reduced to populations of less than 1,000 each; the Tetete tribe simply disappeared. According to Ecuador's Frente de Defensa de la Amazonia, Texaco poured 70 billion liters of formation waters into Amazon tributaries and left 916 pits of oil sludge scattered across the region, whereas pipeline ruptures spilled an estimated 64 mil-



David Dudenhofer

Ashanika Indians seized oil company boats and shut down the airstrip in Atalaya, Peru, last May as part of the national indigenous mobilization.

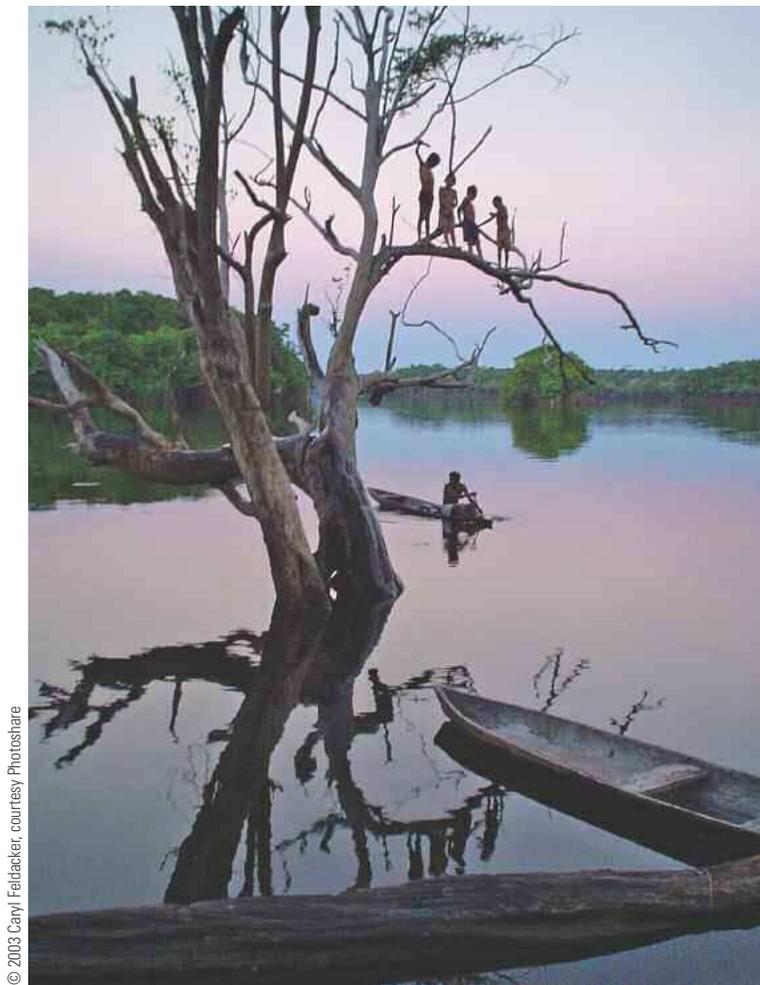
lion liters of oil. Texaco sold its Ecuador operations to the state oil company Petroecuador in 1992, but Chevron, which now owns Texaco, faces a multi-billion-dollar lawsuit for damages caused there between 1964 and 1990 (see "ChevronTexaco on Trial," January/February 2004 *World Watch*).

In 2007, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa launched an innovative effort to find an economic alternative to exploiting a massive oil reserve (the ITT block) beneath the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve and Yanomami Indian territory through international donations, or carbon markets, which would compensate Ecuador for leaving the oil in the ground. Yet Correa has since awarded concessions in other parts of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Now approximately 65 percent of that region is covered by oil concessions, some of which overlap Kichwa, Shuar, and Achuar territories.

"There are plenty of reasons to say no to oil exploitation here," said Shuar leader Domingo Ankuash, though he admitted that it could be difficult to keep the industry out of Shuar territory, in southeast Ecuador. "If we do say yes, it will be because we reach an agreement on a way of exploiting oil that benefits the indigenous people here, not because it has been imposed on us from above."

Global Stakes

International law requires governments to consult native peoples about initiatives that might affect them, but most remain



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In the middle of the Brazilian Amazon, three days from the nearest town by boat, young boys play while a man returns home from an afternoon of fishing.

reluctant to do so. Given that negligence and the growing pressure on Amazonian land and resources, the region's Indians need international support. Numerous organizations, foundations, and government agencies provide them with vital assistance, and groups such as Amazon Watch, Cultural Survival, and Survival International publicize major threats they face, yet most indigenous communities confront those threats with little or no outside help. Unfortunately, the government agencies and conservation groups that should be helping native peoples to defend their land often ignore their plight, or exclude them from major projects that could help them. Indigenous organizations have also lost important support over the years due to poor leadership, administrative deficiencies, and infighting. After each internal crisis, however, new leaders have rebuilt those organizations, and despite the errors of individuals, the indigenous movement has played a vital role in helping native communities to conserve more than 1.5 million square kilometers of tropical forest.

Funding for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), a new program likely to be

adopted by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen this December, could help Amazonian Indians protect their forests and adapt their traditional natural resource use to sustain growing populations. Yet REDD is fraught with uncertainty for indigenous peoples (see sidebar, opposite). Some organizations oppose REDD schemes for fear that they could result in the government or investors taking control of indigenous lands, or because the organizations have been excluded from REDD negotiations. The recognition of all native territories and respect for native peoples' right to free, prior, and informed consent should be essential prerequisites for REDD initiatives in the Amazon Basin.

However, even if indigenous communities secure payment through REDD schemes, Martin von Hildebrand of Fundación Gaia Amazonas warns that such funds could be detrimental unless administered with cultural sensitivity and close monitoring. REDD systems designed for non-Indians could create divisions in indigenous communities, which are based on reciprocity and equality. An example of that danger is the impact of Venezuela's "missions"—government programs that provide scholarships and other payments as catalysts for social improvement—on indigenous communities, where they have corrupted traditional hierarchies. REDD funds might best be invested in helping indigenous communities improve their capacities to protect their territories or develop community enterprises—handicraft production, sustainable logging, forest product harvesting, ecotourism, etc.—that could fund development and conservation in the future.

Considering that they have title or ancestral claims to more than a quarter of the Amazon Basin, it is in the world's best interest to help Amazonian native peoples to defend and manage their forests. They have proven themselves to be better stewards of the region's natural resources than their non-native compatriots, and their historic and spiritual connections to their territories make them unparalleled advocates for their protection. While government officials and conservationists are busy with reports and logic frames, Indians are often defending their forests against imminent threats, sometimes with their lives. Ultimately, the outcome of their struggle will affect the entire world, which is why they deserve the solidarity and support of concerned citizens everywhere.

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For more information about issues raised in this story, visit www.worldwatch.org/ww/indigenous.

Seeing REDD

A useful climate-change policy tool, or a license to deny forest dwellers' rights?

by Zachary Wells and Kelly Moore Brands

Deforestation causes about 20 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, but tackling the problem has proved as difficult as reducing fossil fuel-based emissions. The most promising current approach is a proposal called Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), which will be a centerpiece of the December 2009 international meetings on climate change in Copenhagen. REDD is meant to help poor countries reduce deforestation by enabling aid organizations, NGOs, corporations, and governments to buy carbon credits generated from activities that keep forests standing. The buyers could then apply the credits toward their own quotas or trade them in carbon markets.

REDD is a critical policy tool because slowing deforestation can simultaneously help to put the brakes on catastrophic climate change, slow species loss by protecting habitat, and promote sustainable development. And while the technical challenges are immense, some experts believe that REDD may be the one coalition-building facet of a hotly debated post-Kyoto climate agreement.

But some key affected parties have serious doubts. Forests provide homes and livelihoods for millions of the world's poorest people. Many traditional forest dwellers and indigenous groups do not own the forests they live in and have voiced substantial opposition to REDD. In 2008, indigenous leaders railed against their own representative body, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, for what they saw as a failure to represent them in the climate change debate. The Indigenous People's Global Summit on Climate Change last April produced a declaration that REDD must "secure the recognition and implementation of the human rights of Indigenous Peoples, including security of land tenure, ownership, recognition of land title according to traditional ways, uses, and customary laws, and the multiple benefits of forests for climate, ecosystems, and Peoples before taking any action."

According to the Washington, D.C.-based Rights and Resources Initiative, 80 percent of forests in the world's 30 most forested countries are state-owned. While most of the developing world's forests are owned by governments, the people living in far-flung forests and dense jungles are the de facto managers because governments, especially in Africa, cannot control what happens in their vast hinterlands. Legally, these forest dwellers are squatters.

Yet forest ownership is going largely unnoticed by REDD's principal negotiators. If REDD makes forests more valuable, some locals will benefit from having strong partners in conservation groups and dedicated governments, but a great many others may be overrun in the scramble to secure REDD benefits.

From a government perspective it may make more sense to further centralize forests and make decisions about who gets what from the national capital. If REDD dollars accumulate nationally under existing tenure regimes, locals will have to depend on the benevolence of their governments to keep their forest homes and to realize any profit from leaving the trees standing. The responsibility to ensure that the rights of traditional forest dwellers are respected then falls to the donor countries and organizations that are behind REDD. The best way to do this would be by making REDD participation conditional on a thorough examination of existing tenure legislation and a rewriting of unjust laws. Yet such a polarizing stance could leave the Copenhagen negotiations in a stalemate.



The Tulepan Indians of Pico Bonito National Park, Honduras, have a forest management plan that allows them to sustainably harvest timber inside the park.

The second-best option might be to work for traditional rights bilaterally, as donors partner with REDD governments. Norway, for instance, has made a US\$12 million commitment to Tanzania's REDD activities, and could hinge its support on specific land tenure goals while assisting Tanzania in carrying them out. This is also a way to guarantee the best return on an important investment, because many developing country governments will never be able to control what happens in their remote forests without local support. Making partnerships conditional on activities like comprehensive mapping of forest ownership, forest uses, and even the locations of forest dwelling groups can help lay the groundwork for drafting empowering land legislation. Real, legal tenure may be the cornerstone of forest conservation and what dictates if REDD will function or fail.

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