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Indigenous territories – where the rainforest is best protected

The fact that indigenous peoples preserve the rainforest through their way of life and thus protect the climate is generally known in Climate Alliance circles. While most studies focus on forest loss through large-scale deforestation, bio-mass and thus carbon losses in existing forests due to degradation and natural disturbances have hardly been researched. This gap was closed by a study published in PNAS from the "who's who" of socio-ecological think tanks of Amazonian civil society and the umbrella organisation of indigenous organisations of the Amazon basin (COICA), Climate Alliance's partner organisation. The analysis provides a variety of arguments for Climate Alliance and its members to make their own contributions to rainforest protection.

As also confirmed by a recent study published in Nature (Gatti et. al, 2021), the data analysed in the PNAS study (Walker et. al, 2020) clearly show that the whole of Amazonia became a carbon net source from 2003 to 2016. Indigenous territories, however, suffered almost no carbon losses (-0.1%), meaning that biomass in these areas remained largely intact. These territories therefore also exhibit the highest carbon density, again confirming the crucial role of indigenous peoples as guardians of forests and the climate.

According to the Walker et al. study, the Brazilian Amazon rainforest alone is responsible for almost 90% of the observed net changes from 2003 to 2016. Annual deforestation increased there by 65% from 2012 to 2018 – mainly due an advancing agricultural front resulting in clearing for cattle grazing and soy cultivation in the non-protected areas, but also due to droughts and forest fires. This development has been reinforced since the beginning of 2019 by the policies of President Bolsonaro, who is systematically dismantling both indigenous rights and conservation institutions. The authors of the study, like Climate Alliance, call for the collective rights of indigenous peoples and local communities to their traditional territories and resources to be understood as a fundamental human right, for their interaction with the natural world to be recognised as a global environmental success story, and for the management of their territories to be placed more firmly in their hands. The way in which they care for their territories, referred to by some as resource management, deserves political protection as well as financial assistance, as it represents the most cost-effective of all nature-based solutions.



Responsible climate action – locally and globally

The results also confirm the Climate Alliance approach. The link between climate action, forests and the importance of indigenous peoples as key actors in a global climate strategy were the main ideas behind the founding of the network more than 30 years ago. The findings can thus be seen as a further motivation for Climate Alliance members to develop joint projects with indigenous partners in support of their rights as well as for the protection of both the Amazon rainforest and the climate. The cities and towns of Climate Alliance already support the political involvement of indigenous peoples in international processes through their membership. Many municipalities also provide additional support for indigenous peoples, for example through Climate Alliance funds or in the form of partnerships.

In addition to emissions reductions, the conservation and protection of existing carbon sinks in the form of (rain)forests and other ecosystems that store large amounts of carbon is essential. Conventional carbon offsetting instruments only represent compensation on a balance sheet – often intransparent and without independent control mechanisms. In contrast, supporting indigenous peoples and their territories is an effective alternative that contributes to the preservation of rainforests and thus significantly prevents additional rises in atmospheric CO₂. Instead of merely offsetting emissions that cannot be avoided locally, Climate Alliance members can strengthen those who ensure rainforest protection locally.

Climate Alliance is currently developing offers for members that focus on climate impact costs as an effective alternative to the classic compensation approach. In exchange with our partner COICA and the territory of the Wampís in northern Peru, which will become the first indigenous territory to be accepted as a member of the Climate Alliance, we are developing a way for cities and towns to make a targeted contribution to the conservation of the area. The assumption of a shared responsibility lies at the core of the approach, which will provide a way to weave urgently needed rainforest protection into municipal climate action strategies.

LEARN MORE

- **Nature Study “Amazonia as a carbon source linked to deforestation and climate change.” 2021**
- **PNAS Study “The role of forest conversion, degradation, and disturbance in the carbon dynamics of Amazon indigenous territories and protected areas.” 2020**

Written in cooperation with Dietmar Mirkes, former National Coordinator of Climate Alliance Luxembourg | August 2021