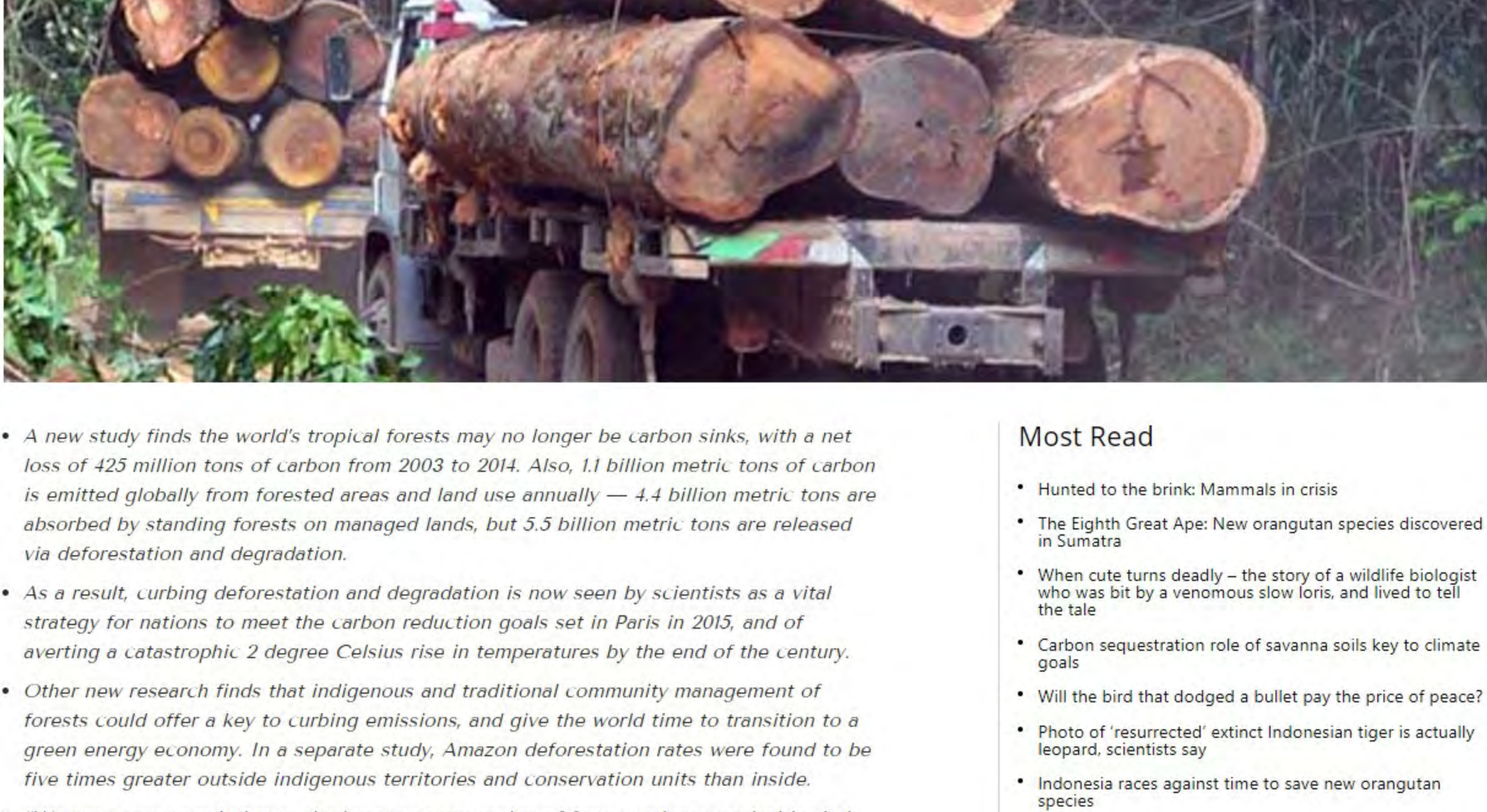


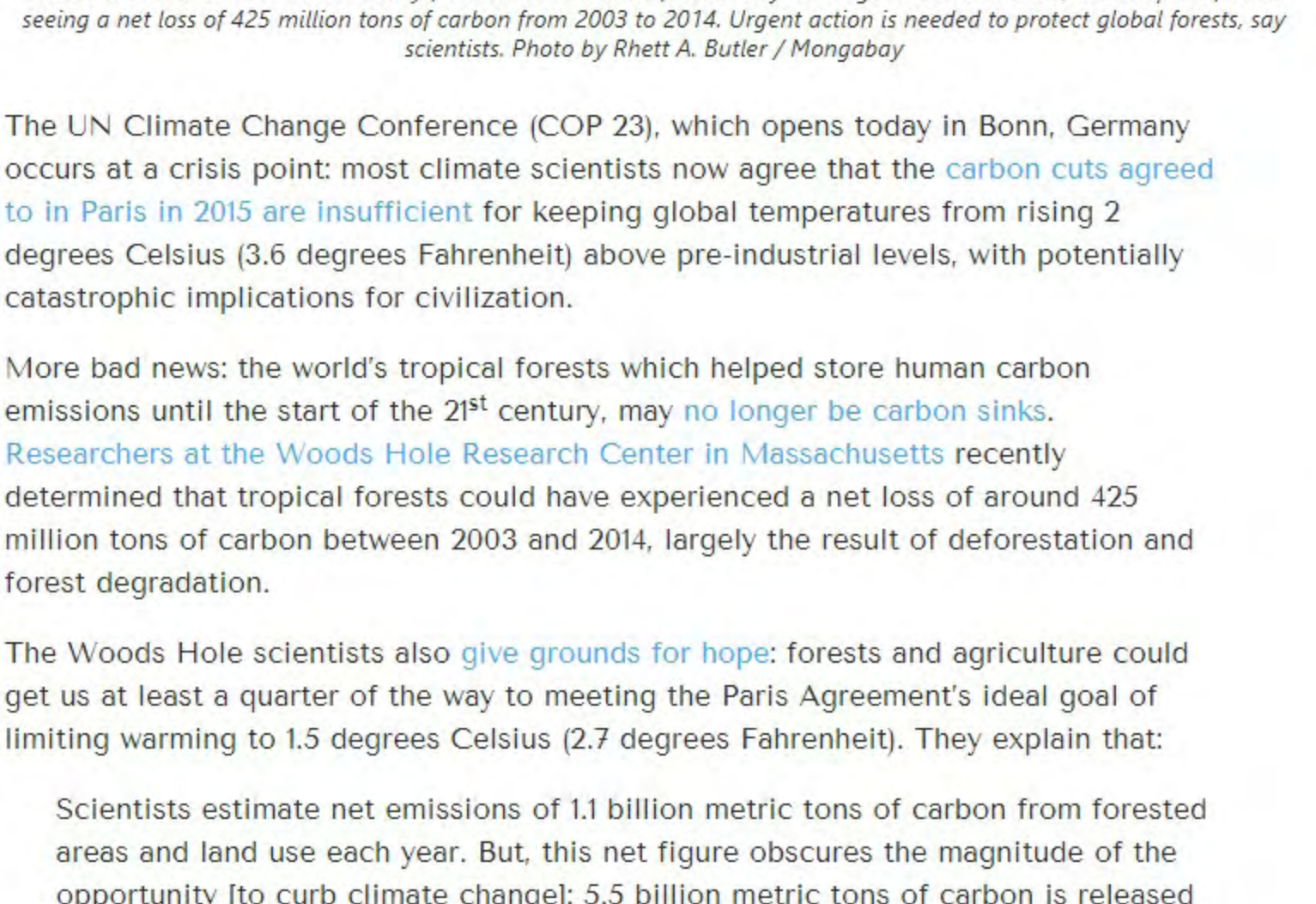
Mongabay Series: Amazon Infrastructure, Global Forests

Indigenous forests could be a key to averting climate catastrophe

by Sue Branford and Mauricio Torres on 6 November 2017



- A new study finds the world's tropical forests may no longer be carbon sinks, with a net loss of 425 million tons of carbon from 2003 to 2014. Also, 1.1 billion metric tons of carbon is emitted globally from forested areas and land use annually — 4.4 billion metric tons are absorbed by standing forests on managed lands, but 3.3 billion metric tons are released via deforestation and degradation.
- As a result, curbing deforestation and degradation is now seen by scientists as a vital strategy for nations to meet the carbon reduction goals set in Paris in 2015, and of averting a catastrophic, 2 degree Celsius rise in temperatures by the end of the century.
- Other new research finds that indigenous and traditional community management of forests could offer a key to curbing emissions, and give the world time to transition to a green energy economy. In a separate study, Amazon deforestation rates were found to be five times greater outside Indigenous territories and conservation units than inside.
- "We are a proven solution to the long-term protection of forests, whose survival is vital for reaching our [planetary] climate change goals," said an envoy of a global Indigenous delegation in attendance at COP23 in Bonn, Germany. The delegation wants the world's nations to protect indigenous forests from an invasion by global extraction industries.



Sunset over the Amazon. A new study finds that the world's forests may no longer be carbon sinks, with tropical forests seeing a net loss of 425 million tons of carbon from 2003 to 2014. Urgent action is needed to protect global forests, say scientists. Photo by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay

The UN Climate Change Conference (COP 23), which opens today in Bonn, Germany occurs at a crisis point: most climate scientists now agree that the carbon cuts agreed to in Paris in 2015 are insufficient for keeping global temperatures from rising 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels, with potentially catastrophic implications for civilization.

More bad news: the world's tropical forests which helped store human carbon emissions until the start of the 21st century, may no longer be carbon sinks. Researchers at the Woods Hole Research Center in Massachusetts recently determined that tropical forests could have experienced a net loss of around 425 million tons of carbon between 2003 and 2014, largely the result of deforestation and forest degradation.

The Woods Hole scientists also give grounds for hope: forests and agriculture could get us at least a quarter of the way to meeting the Paris Agreement's ideal goal of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit). They explain that:

Scientists estimate net emissions of 1.1 billion metric tons of carbon from forested areas and land use each year. But, this net figure obscures the magnitude of the opportunity [to curb climate change]: 3.5 billion metric tons of carbon is released through deforestation and degradation, while 4.4 billion metric tons of carbon is absorbed through standing forests on managed lands. For perspective, that 4.4 billion metric tons is 18 times the annual emissions from all cars and trucks in the United States.

There is, the researchers say, a real possibility that nations could help forests regain, and strengthen, their role as a carbon sink. If only those forests are better managed.

The Woods Hole researchers note that, while the rapid decarbonization of the global economy remains essential, effective forest management policies could elevate the importance of forests as a carbon sink, buying time for the transition to green energy sources.

But reducing deforestation and degradation will be a tall order for policymakers influenced heavily by transnational companies that are profiting from an invasion of tropical forests to cut timber, raise cattle, sow soy and oil palm, and build dams, mines, roads and railways. A new analysis of satellite data found that 29.7 million hectares (114,672 square miles) of tree cover was lost in 2016, an area the size of New Zealand, and a 31 percent jump over 2015.



A delegation of indigenous and rural leaders from Latin America and Indonesia have been travelling since mid-October on a "Green Bus" across Europe, and have just reached Bonn to take part in COP23. Their message: indigenous communities can play a key role in helping manage the world's forests to reduce carbon emissions, but only if national governments back them in the effort. Photo by Jonathan Watts

The key role of indigenous and traditional communities

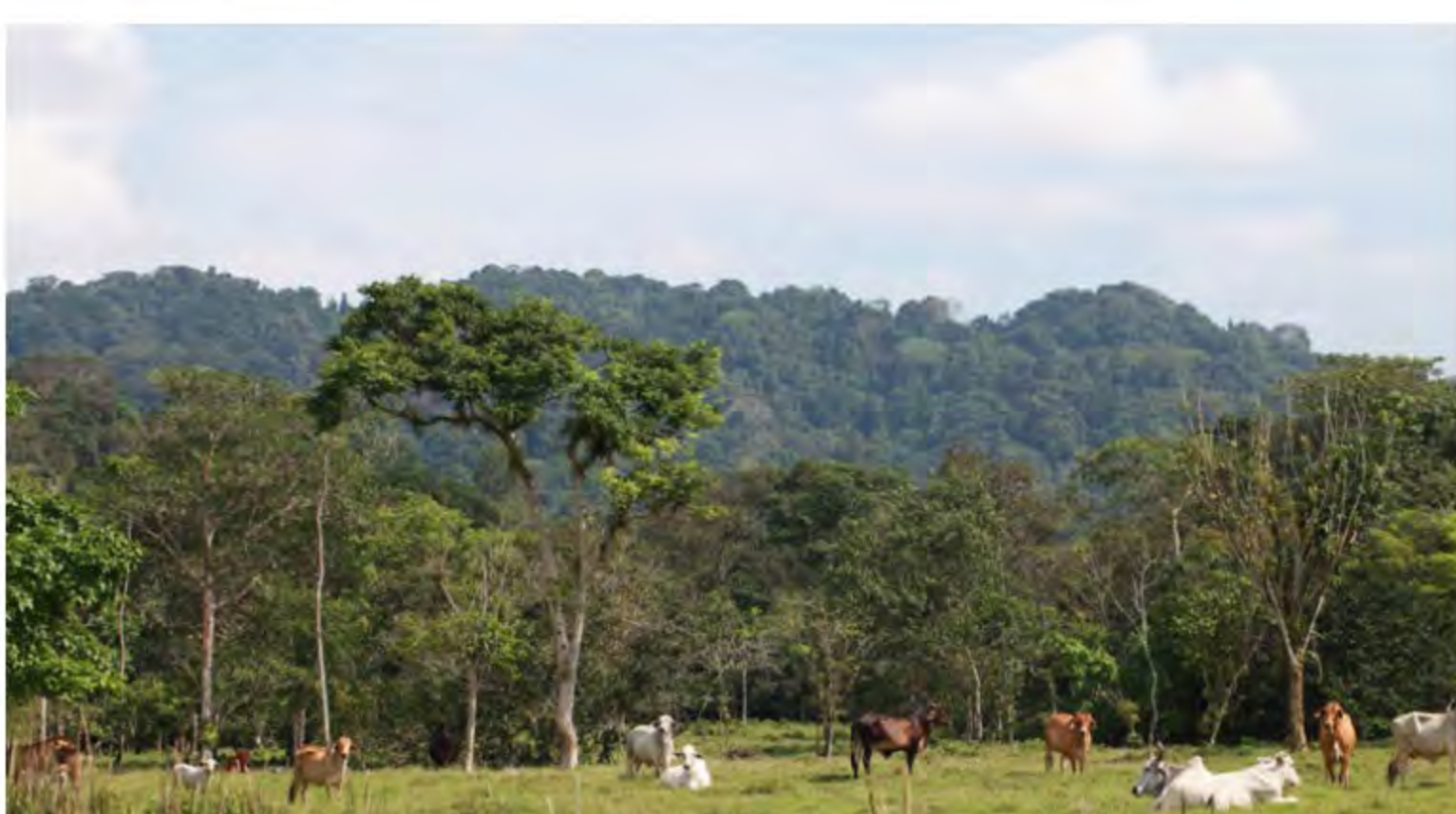
A delegation of indigenous and rural leaders from Latin America and Indonesia have plunged into this climate controversy, saying that they can play a key role in helping manage the world's forests to reduce emissions. They've been on the road promoting this view since mid-October, travelling in a "Green Bus" that started in Cologne and stopped in Brussels, London, Paris and Berlin. Now they've reached Bonn, where they will take part in COP23.

These leaders are confident that the indigenous and traditional forest communities they represent have an important contribution to make: "We are a proven solution to the long-term protection of forests, whose survival is vital for reaching our climate change goals," said Mina Setra, Deputy Secretary General of the Indigenous Peoples' Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN), which represents 17 million people in Indonesia.

Latin American indigenous and rural leaders are sending a similar message. On the eve of COP23, RAISG (The Amazon Network of Georeferenced Socioenvironmental Information), a consortium of eight civil society organizations that works in six of the eight countries that share the Amazon basin, released a study analyzing 15 years of the Amazon deforestation data. According to the research, 13.3 percent of Amazonia's original forest cover had been destroyed by 2013, the last year for which complete data is available.

Significantly, the study was also the first to compare rates of deforestation inside and outside of indigenous territories and protected areas over a long period. "We discovered that, broadly speaking, deforestation rates are five times greater outside indigenous peoples' territories and conservation units than they are inside those areas," revealed Jocelyn Thérèse, from French Guiana and vice coordinator of the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA).

The study noted that, while forest in indigenous territories and conservation areas covered 52 percent of the Amazon basin, only 17 percent of deforestation occurred there over the 15 year study period. In other words, these conserved lands acted as a highly effective bulwark against deforestation. In contrast, 83 percent of deforestation happened in the 48 percent of the Amazon basin that was either privately owned or unprotected public land.



Indigenous riders of the "Green Bus" meet with the French ambassador in the lead up to COP23 where policymakers urgently need to close the gap between the insufficient carbon cut pledges of the world's nations, and what is needed to avert a 2 degree rise in temperatures over pre-industrial levels. Photo by Jonathan Watts

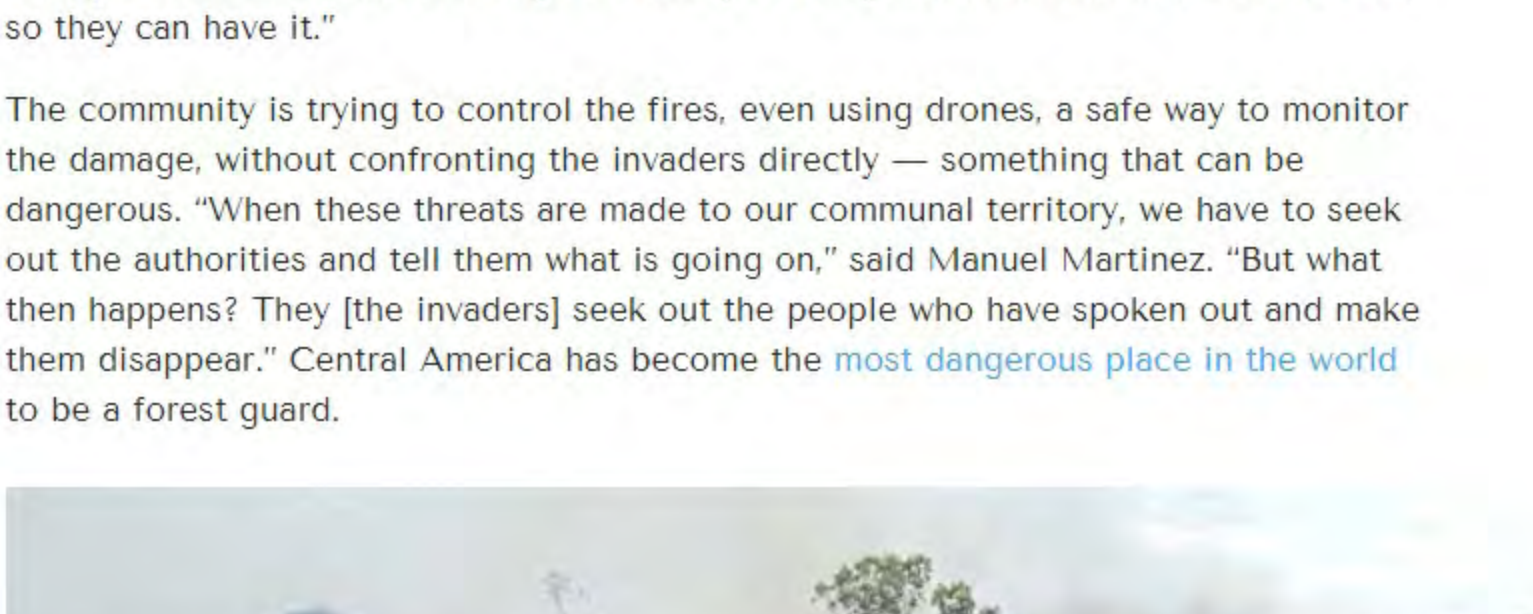
Indigenous carbon sinks at risk

However, as the study also pointed out, prospects are not good. The researchers found that 12 percent of the Amazon basin's carbon stocks are located within indigenous reserves or protected areas that are now under threat. If these vulnerable forests are destroyed, greenhouse emissions will rise enormously. According to the study, these protected areas contain nearly 80 gigatons of CO₂ emissions — more than twice global emissions in 2015.

The risk of losing indigenous forests is very real. In many tropical countries, established indigenous territories are being illegally invaded by land thieves, agribusiness and extraction industries. For example, a study just published by the Brazilian NGO Socioenvironmental Institute (ISA) found that a 32 percent increase in deforestation in Indigenous reserves occurred between August 2016 and July 2017 — based on the Brazilian government's own deforestation figures.

Indigenous territories in Brazil still only account for 1.6 percent of total deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon but even so, the sudden uptick is worrying.

According to ISA, the spike stems from the current industry-friendly climate in Brasilia: "Environmentalists and researchers insist that, together with the lack of monitoring, measures and political signs from the Temer government and Congress are encouraging the advance of land thieves, loggers and illegal forest fellers," the NGO warns: "Without adequate protection policies, the shield formed by the indigenous territories and the other protected areas will begin to crumble under the pressure of environmental crime."



Land speculators are doing a brick trade in the Amazon basin. In a process known as "speculative clearance," land thieves backed by violent militias lay claim to public lands covered in rainforest. That land is then deforested and illegally sold to cattle ranchers. This sort of corruption and deforestation is less likely to occur on well-managed indigenous lands. However, law enforcement by indigenous communities has meant more illegal logging and illegal exploitation of indigenous territories. Photo by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay

Indigenous and rural communities at risk

The indigenous and rural leaders riding the Green Bus repeatedly attested to persecution back home, often from governments that should be offering protection, as they strive to defend their lands: "We face human rights violations, violence to our communities, criminalization of our peoples and the murder of our leaders," said Mina Setra. "As recently as last year, at least 200 environmental activists were killed [worldwide], and almost half of them were indigenous leaders. Hundreds of the others are in jail because of their efforts to protect forests, while thousands have been evicted from their territories."

The pressures that face environmental activists is movingly expressed in a short documentary about the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Petén in Guatemala — a video which is being presented in Bonn. The communities in the reserve are proud of their record of forest conservation: "When you look at national maps of forest cover, the territories of the communities have untouched wooded areas, whereas those in the hands of the state are being destroyed," said Jorge Soza, a community leader.

"We have had no forest fires for ten years because our forest is well maintained," said another community leader, Ana Centeno. Key to this success is the importance of the forest to indigenous and traditional livelihoods. "We don't conserve the forest just for the sake of conservation," explained Julio Valiente Tello. "A forest must be profitable because then you can make the connection. You keep the resource to live off the resource."



However, the Guatemalan reserve is coming under intensifying pressure. "The main threats are organized crime, large-scale cattle ranching and drug-trafficking — macroeconomic interests that are invading the reserve," said another member of the community, Manuel Martínez. "They [the invaders] are creating forest fires as a way of taking over the land and of being able to say to the government that it is not forested, so they can have it."

The community is trying to control the fires, even using drones, a safe way to monitor the damage, without confronting the invaders directly — something that can be dangerous. "When these threats are made to our communal territory, we have to seek out the authorities and tell them what is going on," said Manuel Martínez. "But what then happens? They [the invaders] seek out the people who have spoken out and make them disappear." Central America has become the most dangerous place in the world to be a forest guard.



Degraded forests are more likely to burn, releasing their carbon to the atmosphere. Indigenous communities have been shown to do a better job of conserving native forests than do forest managers outside indigenous reserves. Photo courtesy of IBAMA



More than three people were killed every week in 2015 defending their land, forests and rivers against destructive industries, according to Global Witness, an NGO, with murders most numerous in forest countries including Brazil (207 killings), Colombia (105), Philippines (88), Peru (50), and Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia and India (35 combined).

The indigenous and rural leaders now believe that, above all, saving their forests is a matter of political will. They feel that if they can get real support from government, they can make a real contribution to the global struggle to reduce greenhouse emissions. As a first step, Jocelyn Thérèse explained, they are making six demands at COP23 on their governments:

- that Indigenous Peoples be included in the... implementation of the countries' Nationally Determined Contributions [the carbon cuts nations pledged under the Paris Agreement];
- that they have direct access to climate finance;
- that the criminalization and violence against indigenous leaders and other environmental defenders is ended;
- that unsecured indigenous lands be titled;
- that the governments implement their commitment to provide free, prior, and informed consent to Indigenous Peoples before policies that affect the communities are implemented;
- that the traditional knowledge of Amazonian Indigenous Peoples be recognized as a climate solution.

None of this is likely to happen short term, they recognize. However, as extreme weather impacts grow, and awareness deepens as to the gravity of the climate crisis, they hope that ending the deforestation and degradation of the world's forests will be seen as the least painful of the needed global adaptations nations can make to avert catastrophe.



When new roads penetrate the Amazon rainforest, loggers, ranchers and large-scale agribusiness often soon follow. Roads built by the state through the heart of uncut forests are a major threat to indigenous territories, as they provide access to land thieves and illegal loggers. Photo courtesy of the Brazilian Forest Service



According to the 2017 Progress Assessment, published by the New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF), about US \$20 billion has been invested globally in stopping deforestation and forest emissions so far. This is a "promising development," the NYDF agrees, but "insufficient," and not reflecting "the importance of forests as part of the climate solution."

The amount, it says, is "marginal compared to the US \$777 billion in 'grey finance,'" agribusiness and extraction industry investment "in the land sector" that is not environmentally friendly, and that "is not clearly aligned with forest and climate goals."

The NYDF assessment goes on: "Our findings show that more finance is required and that the transition to zero deforestation can be achieved only with a dramatic shift away from traditional investments in the drivers of deforestation toward those in sustainable agriculture and forestry."

The indigenous and rural leaders say they will be doing all they can to get their voices heard in Bonn over the next two weeks to speed a transition to zero deforestation, but they know that they face powerful opposition.

"We've been brutally attacked by the forces of agribusiness and suffered as a result of the [industrial] model of development invented in the UK," said Sonia Guajajara of the Brazilian Association of Indigenous People in London. Mina Setra continued: "We need to declare that crimes against the environment are crimes against humanity."

For indigenous people this fight to defend the last of the world's great forests is a life-and-death struggle — it may also be a make-or-break necessity, if scientists are correct, for all of humanity.

Mina Setra, Deputy Secretary General of the Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN), representing 17 million people in Indonesia: "We are a proven solution to the long-term protection of forests, whose survival is vital for reaching our climate change goals." Photo courtesy of the School of Public Policy

Jorge Soza, indigenous community leader: "When you look at national maps of forest cover, the territories of the [indigenous] communities have untouched wooded areas, whereas those in the hands of the state are being destroyed." Photo courtesy of If Not Us, Who

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