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## Does Conservation "Need People"?

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Nature is Speaking, a new campaign from Conservation International, uses celebrity voices to personify natural forces -- Penelope Cruz is water, Kevin Spacey is the rainforest -- with each video concluding with the phrase "nature doesn't need people." The campaign is intended as a wake-up call to a public who might not understand that human survival depends on nature, rather than the other way around. It's a stirring message, but there's something the campaign is forgetting: the assertion "nature doesn't need people" is not only inaccurate, but actively harmful. Nature does need people.

A recent report released by World Resources Institute (WRI) and RRI contradicts Conservation International's message, and reveals the stunning environmental benefits that come from recognizing and protecting Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' rights to own and manage their ancestral lands. In the Brazilian Amazon, for instance, the deforestation rate is 11 times lower in community-managed forests than outside. In the Guatemalan Petén, it is 20 times lower, and in a part of the Mexican Yucatán, it is a staggering 350 times lower.

This confirms previous research showing that local communities are not only excellent at preventing deforestation, their forests actually store more carbon and host greater biodiversity than non-community forests. One study, *Trade-offs and synergies between carbon storage and livelihood benefits from forest commons*, found a strong correlation between community forests and above-average carbon storage. It's also no accident that the areas with the highest degree of cultural and linguistic diversity tightly overlap with biodiversity hotspots -- where communities and Indigenous Peoples are able to live as they see fit, they are often far better protectors of biodiversity than governments or private enterprises.

By arguing that nature doesn't need people, Conservation International unwittingly discredits the millions of Indigenous Peoples who have acted as effective and responsible stewards of their land for centuries. This kind of thinking has had

devastating real-world ramifications, with untold millions of local communities suffering from forced relocation over the past century of "conservation" -- a pattern that continues all too often today.

The real implications of this view are being revealed in the Chure Hills of Nepal, where the government is proposing the creation of a controversial new conservation area with the backing of a number of key conservation organizations. This proposal has been issued without the approval of local communities, and has the potential to severely curtail their land rights. The Chure region, which contains over 3,000 community forests, is home to 5 million people who partly or totally depend on the area's natural resources for their lives and livelihoods. Not only is the government's decision in direct violation of international treaties on biodiversity and the rights of Indigenous Peoples, it has been the object of an impassioned, nation-wide counter-campaign.

"The failure of the government's conservation efforts gave rise to community forests," explains Ganesh Karki, the president of FECOFUN, a network of community forestry groups in Nepal. "Now, despite the success of community-based management, the government wants to exclude communities from conservation initiatives and force external governance systems. This simply makes no sense."

It's true, in a geologic sense, that nature doesn't necessarily need people -- the earth will exist with or without humans. But nature as we celebrate it now, including some of the last great wild areas on earth, is often most effectively managed and protected by the human groups that have traditionally called it home.

## References

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## About Tenure Trends

Tenure Trends reviews recent research and news regarding tenure, rights, and development in the world's forests.

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