



Running Out of Time: An Urgent Call to Fast-track Forest Tenure Recognition



Over two-thirds of the world's forests remain controlled by governments or private actors despite being traditionally owned and managed by Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities, according to a new analysis by Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI).¹ The analysis, which covers 61 countries² spanning 91 percent of the world's forests,³ has found that Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities have only some recognized rights to 16 percent of forests, despite a significant portion of global forests being contested by local peoples who have depended on them for generations.

CALL TO ACTION #1

Amidst rapid forest loss and mounting global conflicts over natural resources, *strengthening community forest tenure to combat the triple planetary crisis (climate change, air pollution, and biodiversity loss) is more critical now than ever before for governments.*

Evidence continues to demonstrate that forests benefit most when Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities have secure land and resource rights.

Closing the Gender Gap in Community Forest Tenure

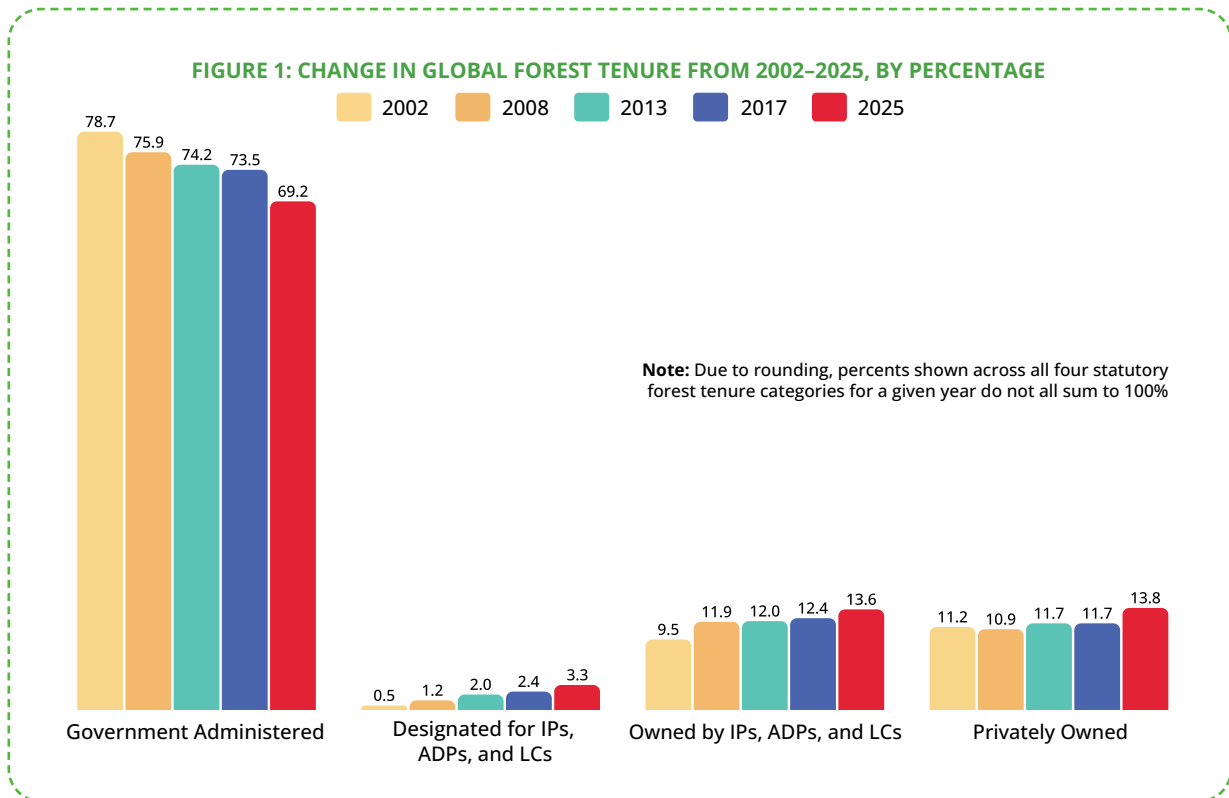
As demonstrated in RRI's *Resilience and Resistance* report,⁴ most community forest tenure reforms remain gender-blind, leaving women's rights unrecognized even where communities gain formal tenure. Any progress and implementation of forest tenure cannot abandon the individual and collective rights of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local community women.

CALL TO ACTION #2

Governments must ensure that every new tenure reform and implementation explicitly *recognizes and protects women's rights, not as an afterthought but as a condition of progress.*

1. PROGRESS ON COMMITMENTS TO 2030

The pace of community forest tenure recognition has accelerated significantly since 2017, driven predominantly by stronger collective ownership rights, but it remains far below what is needed to meet 2030 targets.



Between 2002 and 2025, forest tenure recognition for Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities nearly doubled. The combined area legally designated for and owned by communities increased from approximately 517 mha (13.7 percent) in 2017 to roughly 614 mha (16.3 percent) in 2025 across 61 countries—an increase of about 96 mha over eight years, representing a rate of roughly 11.9 mha per year. This is nearly double the pace observed in the 2013–2017 period (approximately 5.4 mha per year).⁵

- ▶ Over half of these gains (56 percent) occurred in 49 Low-and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.
- ▶ Almost two-thirds (nearly 61 mha of the 96 mha) represent an increase in forest areas owned by communities.

Yet, this is not enough to meet global commitments to end deforestation by 2030.

In its 2018 analysis, *At a Crossroads*, RRI warned that the world was falling short of meeting 2030 targets to ensure that 50 percent of forests in LMICs are legally designated for and owned by communities. Since then, while an additional 53 mha have been recognized for communities in these countries, the pace of growth still falls short.

With a total of 517 mha recognized as designated for or owned by communities in LMICs (versus 463.8 mha in 2017), representing 26 percent of the total forest area in those countries, the pace of growth remains way below the estimated forest area that is customarily owned and managed by communities (50 percent):

- ▶ **To meet the 50 percent goal by 2030, at least 97 million hectares of forestland per year would need to be recognized for communities, a pace that is over 10 times larger than the current pace.**

Implementation of the recent Intergovernmental Land Tenure Commitment (ILTC) requires substantial action. The ILTC is a commitment across tropical forest countries to collectively recognize 80 mha of Indigenous Peoples', Afro-descendant Peoples', and local communities' lands by 2030. Across tropical forest countries part of the ILTC,⁶ the rate of increase since 2017 is 1.59 mha per year.

CALL TO ACTION #3

To reach the ILTC target, the rate of recognition would need to increase by 500 percent to 7.74 mha per year.

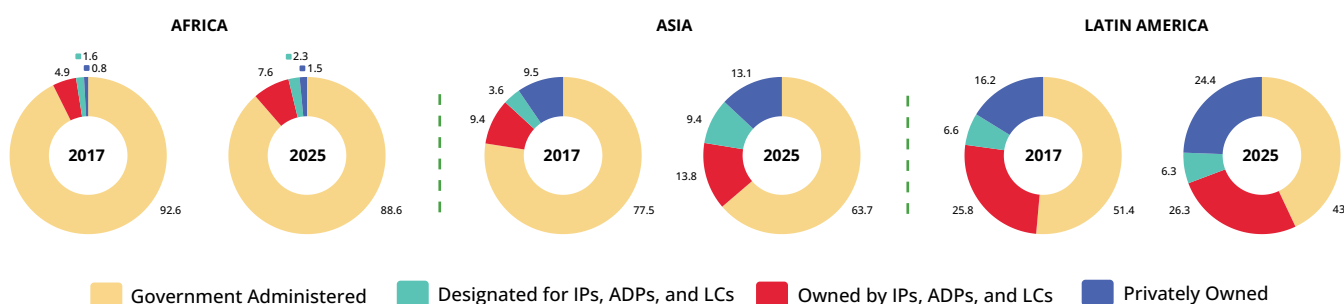
CALL TO ACTION #4

Every year of *delayed tenure recognition* deepens communities' exclusion from ecosystems and conservation finance. Closing the \$2.9 billion conservation finance gap¹² and reversing communities' exclusion from climate funding must include accelerating tenure recognition now.



2. REGIONAL PROGRESS

FIGURE 2: FOREST AREA DISTRIBUTION BY CATEGORIES 2017-2025 (PERCENTAGE)



Africa: While the overall recognition of communities' forest rights in Africa continues to lag behind⁷ Asia and Latin America, where at least 25 percent of the total forest area is designated for or owned by communities respectively (versus about 8 percent in Africa), significant progress has been made, with an increase of 18.17 mha designated for or owned by communities since 2017 across 21 countries in Africa (at a rate of 2.27 mha per year). The majority of these gains are found in five countries (Cameroon, the DRC, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Zambia), which account for 98 percent of the increase in area recognition.

Asia:⁸ Statutory forest tenure recognition for Indigenous Peoples and local communities in Asia has progressed modestly since 2017. Over the past eight years (2017–2025), only 10 mha have been recognized as designated for or owned by communities when excluding forest areas in China, compared to an increase of 12 mha across the previous 15 years (2002–2017). While the rate of growth improved (1.24 mha per year since 2017, versus 0.81 mha per year for 2002–2017), there is still a substantial gap for the full recognition of forest tenure. Gains in two countries (India and Indonesia) account for 78 percent of these gains.

Latin America: Gains in the forest area designated for and owned by Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities in Latin America have significantly decreased over the past eight years. While there was a total increase of 15.25 mha of forests recognized for communities across the 17 countries in the region, the rate of growth has substantially decreased. Whereas between 2002 and 2017 (15 years), the regional rate of increase was 6.6 mha per year, between 2017 and 2025 (eight years), the rate of increase was 1.91 mha per year. Concerningly, Latin America also saw an increase of 77.3 mha in forest areas privately owned by individuals and firms, with most of that increase in privatization happening in Brazil. Eighty-three percent of gains in Latin America occurred in two countries (Bolivia and Peru).

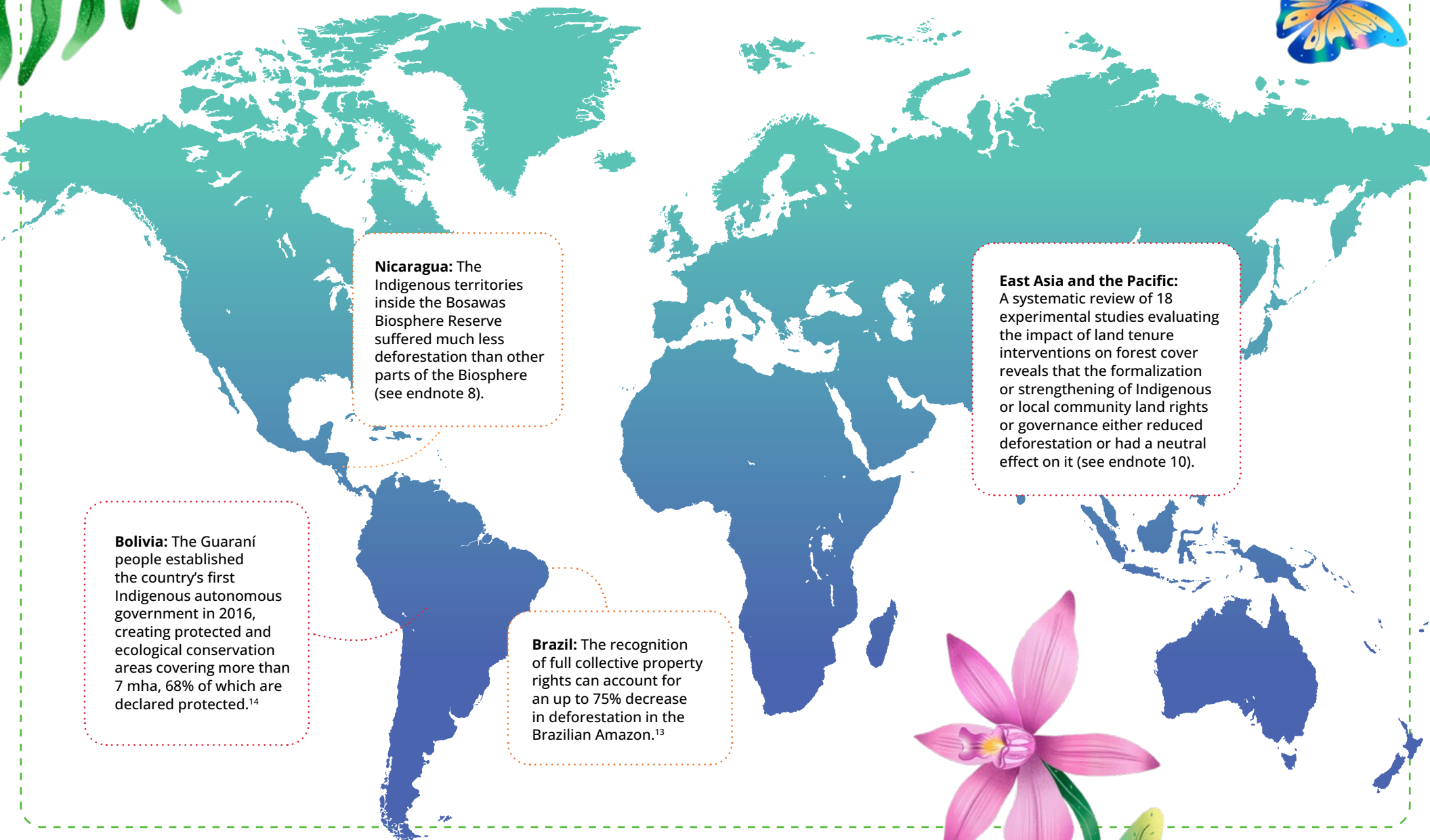
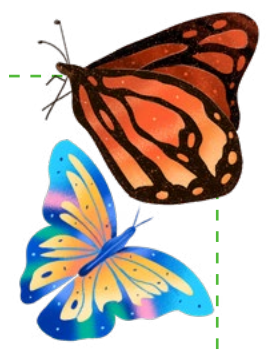
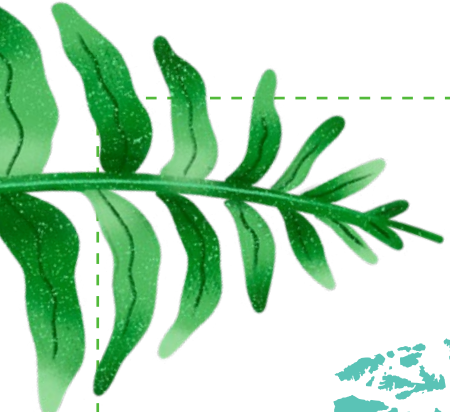
3. INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, AFRO-DESCENDANT PEOPLES, AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES MUST BE RECOGNIZED AS STEWARDS OF FORESTS

- ▶ Across **Latin America**, the territories of Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendant Peoples consistently demonstrate lower deforestation rates than those in forests outside their territories, including, in many cases, protected areas.⁹
- ▶ Research shows that 83 percent of lands titled to Afro-descendant Peoples are characterized by a high degree of forest and tree vegetation conservation.¹⁰
- ▶ Strengthening Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' forest tenure rights in **East Asia and the Pacific** has also been shown to decrease deforestation.¹¹

Evidence continues to demonstrate that *forests benefit* when Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities have *secure land and resource rights*.



FIGURE 3: EXAMPLES WHERE DEFORESTATION AND DEGRADATION ARE LOWER IN COMMUNITY LANDS

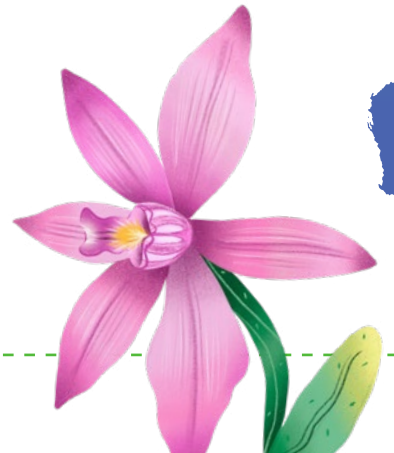


Nicaragua: The Indigenous territories inside the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve suffered much less deforestation than other parts of the Biosphere (see endnote 8).

East Asia and the Pacific: A systematic review of 18 experimental studies evaluating the impact of land tenure interventions on forest cover reveals that the formalization or strengthening of Indigenous or local community land rights or governance either reduced deforestation or had a neutral effect on it (see endnote 10).

Bolivia: The Guaraní people established the country's first Indigenous autonomous government in 2016, creating protected and ecological conservation areas covering more than 7 mha, 68% of which are declared protected.¹⁴

Brazil: The recognition of full collective property rights can account for an up to 75% decrease in deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon.¹³



4. FINDINGS OF PROGRESS RELY ON INCREASED RECOGNITION OF TENURE RIGHTS AND BETTER REPORTING ON FOREST AREAS

The 2025 data update reveals a nuanced picture of change across the countries analyzed: **While the overall trend points to increased recognition of community forest tenure, the drivers of change vary considerably across countries and regions.**

- ▶ In 10 countries, increases in forest area recognized for Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities reflect genuine new recognition driven by expanded area titling and/or legal reforms.
- ▶ In 15 countries, increases are attributable to improved data availability and quality—a positive development in its own right, as it brings greater visibility to rights.
- ▶ In four countries, increases reflect a combination of both expanded rights recognition and improved data.
- ▶ In nine countries, recognized forest area has decreased due to factors such as legal reforms that have created additional administrative burdens for communities (Thailand), land encroachment (Viet Nam and Costa Rica), and reductions in a country's total forest area (Papua New Guinea).
- ▶ In a further three countries, reductions reflect revisions or updates to previously reported figures, made possible by the availability of newly disaggregated forest data.



Key Country Findings

The following countries illustrate key instances of progress and setbacks regarding community forest tenure since 2017, as well as the diverse pathways through which forest tenure recognition has advanced—from legal reforms and new titling to improved data.

DRC: There was a significant increase in the recognition of Local Community Forest Concessions (LCFCs) between 2017 and 2025. The number of originally allocated LCFCs went from seven to 249, covering a total of 5.26 mha.

Liberia: Since 2017, 21 new Community Forest Management Agreements have added 679,909 hectares for communities. However, Community Forests still cover only 19 percent of Liberia’s total forest area, and recognition remains challenging following 2017 regulations that rolled back broad community ownership rights established in 2009.

Zambia: Thanks to the implementation of Community Forests under Zambia’s 2015 Forest Act, 138 new Community Forests have been recognized since 2017, for a total of 3.51 mha (an increase of 3.49 mha) as owned by communities.

Nepal: Areas previously classified as designated under Community Forests are now recognized as community-owned due to legal reforms that have expanded community rights—shifting forest area from “designated for communities” to community-owned. Nepal also noted an actual increase in Community Forest area of 0.69 mha.

Indonesia: Following the 2013 Supreme Court case recognizing Adat forest rights, Adat territories are steadily being recognized at the sub-national and national levels. A total of 358,190.68 hectares were designated as Adat forests, with a further 1.06 mha reserved for future designation.

An additional 1.24 mha have been recognized as Kemasyarakatan (Rural or Community) Forests since 2017.

Between 2019 and 2024, Indonesia adopted several new regulations, including Regulation No. 14/2024, which enables on-the-ground recognition of Customary Land Rights through a new customary land administration process. However, no data has been officially reported on the recognition of forests under this new legal framework.

Colombia: New titles were recognized for Afro-descendent and Indigenous communities (*Tierras de Comunidades Negras* and *Resguardos Indigenas*), totaling 1.09 mha since 2017.

Panama: Indigenous Territories increased by 494,858 hectares since 2017, mainly due to the 2020 recognition of a comarca Naso Tjer Di following a Supreme Court decision.

Peru: There was an increase in forest areas recognized as designated for or owned by communities totaling 5.25 mha since 2017.

479,276.16 new hectares were recognized as Indigenous Reserves, namely due to the recognition in 2024 of the Indigenous Reserve Sierra del Divisor Occidental, within the Yavari-Tapiche rainforest area.

A total of 6.14 mha was recognized for Native Communities Suitable for Forestry between 2017 and 2023, while Campesino Communities’ lands show a loss of 1.37 mha due to unreliability of the data and state encroachment, even where legal protections exist.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For more information on RRI's forest area methodology, see [RRI's Tenure Tool](#).
- 2 Angola, Argentina, Australia, Belize, Bhutan, Bolivia, Brazil, Cambodia, Cameroon, Canada, Central African Republic, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Finland, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Republic of Korea, Lao PDR, Liberia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mali, Mexico, Mongolia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Philippines, Republic of the Congo, Russia, Senegal, South Sudan, Sudan, Suriname, Sweden, Tanzania, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Togo, United States, Venezuela, Viet Nam, and Zambia.
- 3 Global forest area comprises 4,140 mha as of 2025. See: FAO. 2025. Global Forest Resources Assessment 2025. Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, Rome. doi:10.4060/cd6709en.
- 4 RRI. 2025. Resilience and Resistance: Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and Local Community Women's Statutory Rights to Community Forests. Rights and Resources Initiative, Washington, DC. doi:10.53892/QSTZ6441.
- 5 RRI. 2018. At a Crossroads: Consequential Trends in Recognition of Community-Based Forest Tenure from 2002–2017. Rights and Resources Initiative, Washington, DC. doi.org:10.53892/UCYL3747.
- 6 Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, the DRC, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Ghana, Indonesia, Peru, and Tanzania.
- 7 This lag is likely due to Africa starting law reform and legal recognition of Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' rights much later (Africa only began to more widely adopt laws recognizing customary and community-based forest tenure in the late 1990s) and subsequent difficulties in implementation and mapping tools.
- 8 Excludes Australia and China.
- 9 FAO and FILAC. 2021. Forest Governance by Indigenous and Tribal Peoples: An Opportunity for Climate Action in Latin America and the Caribbean. Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, Rome, 28–29.
- 10 RRI, Proceso de Comunidades Negras, Coordenação Nacional de Articulação das Comunidades Negras Rurais Quilombolas, and Observatorio de Territorios Étnicos y Campesinos (OTEC) at Universidad Javeriana. 2024. Afro-descendant Atlas: Ancestral Territories and Afro-descendant Peoples' Collective Lands in Latin America and the Caribbean. Rights and Resources Initiative, Washington, DC, 19. doi:10.53892/KKSL2510.
- 11 World Bank. 2025. Strengthening Forest Land Rights in East Asia and Pacific. World Bank, Washington, DC.
- 12 RRI and Rainforest Foundation Norway. 2025. State of Funding for Tenure Rights: Donor Funding for Indigenous Peoples, Local Communities, and Afro-descendant Peoples (2011–2024). doi:10.53892/JLMJ6325.
- 13 Baragwanath, K, and E. Bayi. 2020. Collective Property Rights Reduce Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon. PNAS 117(34): 20495–20502. doi:10.1073/pnas.1917874117.
- 14 IWGIA. 2023. "Indigenous Governance and Conservation Commons in Bolivia." International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Copenhagen. Available at: <https://iwgia.org/en/news/5276-indigenous-governance-and-conservation-of-the-commons-in-bolivia.html>.