

Forest Tenure Shifts to Communities as Governments Stay Dominant

By Rudy Ruitenberg
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Forest tenure has shifted toward local communities and indigenous people over the past decade, led by Brazil, even as most of the world's forests remain under government control, a coalition of advocacy groups said.

Locally and indigenously owned land rose to 12.6 percent of global forest area in 2013 from 9.8 percent in 2002, the Washington-based Rights & Resources Initiative wrote in an annual review. Forest land designated for indigenous people and local groups climbed to 2.9 percent from 1.5 percent.

Land right disputes and land acquisitions were key factors to triggering civil wars in Sudan, Liberia and Sierra Leone, according to the non-profit coalition. Investor interest in land was sparked by the 2007-08 food crisis and rising commodity prices, according to the Land Matrix research group.

“Governments still overwhelmingly claim control over forest lands,” the group wrote. “The global forest tenure transition to legal community control and ownership is most pronounced in low and middle-income countries.”

Global forests were 73 percent in government hands last year compared with 77.9 percent in 2002, according to the Rights & Resources Initiative. Companies and individuals held 11.5 percent, down from 10.9 percent over the same period.

In Brazil, the country with the most forest after Russia, the government-administered area fell to 150.1 million hectares (371 million acres) in 2013 from 294.5 million in 2002, the review showed. The area designated for indigenous people and local communities rose to 35.6 million hectares from 11.7 million hectares, while the forest owned by those groups rose to 110.8 million hectares from 75.3 million hectares.

Brazilian Holdings

Brazilian forest owned by individuals and companies increased to 99.9 million hectares in the period from 94.3 million hectares.

Forest in China under indigenous or community ownership rose to 119.5 million hectares from 103.1 million hectares, while the government-administered area advanced to 77 million hectares from 76.1 million hectares.

Russia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have all their forest under government administration, while Indonesia controls 96 percent of its forest and Canada 92 percent, according to the Rights & Resources Initiative.

“These four countries contain over a third of the world’s forest and nearly 57 percent of the area under government administration,” the group wrote. “The absence of significant tenure reforms in these countries presents major impediments to global progress in the recognition of local rights to forest lands.”

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