

# Tenure Trends

August 2012



## Human Rights, Conservation, or Both?

**For centuries,** the answer to this question has been obvious: official, state-led conservation and industrial use of forest lands has almost always trumped the rights of local populations.

Liz Alden Wily's new book, [Land Rights in Gabon: Facing up to the past - and present](#), produced by [FERN](#), tells the tragic story and the persistence of models ignoring local rights. *Land Rights in Gabon* is a comprehensive review of the history of Gabon's legal framework, which prevents community ownership of forests and prioritizes the interests of big business and widespread conservation, resulting in local communities being dispossessed of their lands and resources.

The book includes a sobering assessment of the forces maintaining the status quo and the steps necessary to change it, and follows two others by Alden Wily and FERN, on [Cameroon](#) (2011) and [Liberia](#) (2007), and a [five-brief series](#) reviewing the status of customary tenure regimes of Sub-Saharan Africa published by RRI in early 2012. While each report recommends steps to remedy past injustices linked to exclusionary conservation and industrial models and to secure communities' rights to land, the Gabon book goes further, catalyzing the creation of a new national tenure reform campaign, "*Ma terre, mon droit!*" ("My land, my right!"), at a workshop organized by [Brainforest](#) last month.

**Fortunately,** conservation is beginning to change.

Community-driven conservation is now recognized as being as good as, if not better than, efforts led by governments or NGOs, and major international environmental NGOs such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC), World Wildlife Fund, and Conservation International have recently established offices promoting human rights-based conservation within their organizations. In an [essay now rocking the conservation establishment](#), Peter Karieva, Chief Scientist at TNC said, "*By its own measures, conservation is failing,*" and that "*conservation will be controversial as long as it remains so narrowly focused on the creation of parks and protected areas, and insists, often unfairly, that local people cannot be trusted to care for their land.*"

And there are at least three side events focused on the links between human rights and conservation at the upcoming [IUCN World Conservation Conference](#) in Jeju, South Korea. One organized by the Forest Peoples Programme and IUCN's Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy (CEESP) will discuss the [Whakatane Mechanism](#), a new tool to

assess the human rights situation in and around protected areas and to support partnerships between local communities and protected areas. Another will introduce the new consortium of international conservation NGOs, the [Conservation Initiative on Human Rights](#), which aims "to improve the practice of conservation by promoting (the) integration of human rights in conservation policy and practice." And the [third](#) will build upon a January 2011 CEESP Sharing Power Conference, which acknowledged that "open and respectful dialogues are needed to transform the dominant paradigm for conservation and development." Titled, "*Promoting a New Conservation Ethic Based on Respect for Indigenous Peoples*," the session will promote greater engagement among Indigenous peoples and conservation organizations with the goal of finding common ground and new policy directions.

After Jeju, we should have a better sense of the top priority of governments and environmental NGOs: human rights or conservation. Or better yet, all will pledge to support and uphold the principles of human-rights based conservation. Experience says that it doesn't have to be one or the other.

## Resources Reviewed:

Alden Wily, Liz. 2012. "[Land Rights in Gabon, Facing Up to the Past - and Present](#)." Brussels: FERN.

Alden Wily, Liz. 2011. "[Whose land is it? The status of customary land tenure in Cameroon](#)." Brussels: FERN/Yaounde: CED/London: The Rainforest Foundation UK.

Alden Wily, Liz. 2011. "[So, Who owns the forest?](#)" Monrovia/Brussels: Sustainable Development Institute/FERN.

Alden Wily, Liz. 2011. "[Rights to Resources in Crisis: Reviewing the Fate of Customary Tenure in Africa](#)." Washington DC: Rights and Resources Initiative.

Kareiva, Peter, Robert Lalasz, and Michelle Marvier. 2011. "[Conservation in the Anthropocene](#)." *Breakthrough Journal* No.2, Fall 2011.

## About Tenure Trends

**Tenure Trends alerts the global development community to important news, events and research findings regarding tenure, rights and development in the world's forests.**

It is published by the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), a strategic coalition of community, development, research and conservation organizations and prepared by the Rights and Resources Group, the secretariat of the Coalition. The views presented are those of the secretariat and are not necessarily shared by the agencies that have generously supported RRI, nor all of the Partners of the Coalition. If you would like more information or would like to receive future editions in French or Spanish, please send a message to [Jesse.D'Orsi@rri.org](mailto:Jesse.D'Orsi@rri.org).

[jdipaolo@rightsandresources.org](mailto:jdipaolo@rightsandresources.org).

**Stay current with RRI news, events and publications**  
**Join our mailing list**

**Rights and Resources Initiative**

1238 Wisconsin Ave. NW

Suite 300

Washington, District of Columbia 20007

[www.rightsandresources.org](http://www.rightsandresources.org)

