



South America Conservation Region

# INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND CONSERVATION

*Reinforcing traditional uses of natural resources*



Karipuna children at the river, Uaçá Indigenous Reserve, Amazon, Brazil. © Francivane Fernandes da Silva

The leaders of Jorge Terena's indigenous village won't let him come home. "I'd like to," Jorge says, "but right now, my community won't let me." Jorge's work for The Nature Conservancy in communities across Amazonia—providing them with tools for conservation planning and action—is too important to them so they insist he continue his work.

At age 15, Jorge left his village—the first person in his family to do so—to study in São Paulo and then on to the University of Maryland to become the first Brazilian indigenous person to earn a graduate degree abroad. After working with the United Nations and Brazilian agencies in various countries of the Amazon, Jorge joined the Conservancy as the Indigenous Liaison Coordinator.

Jorge brings practical tools and knowledge from his background to translate indigenous traditions into real, long-term protection for the natural resources necessary for indigenous groups. "Indigenous people have a system of conservation" he says, "it's part of their lives, it's part of their day-to-day living, and it's a day-to-day commitment for them to conserve."

## Holding the line against deforestation

Indigenous reserves are the best hope for conservation in the Amazon. Satellite images and aerial photography of Amazonia show clear-cut pastures running right up against old-growth forests, often closely following the borders of indigenous reserves. While the increasing rate of destruction (an estimated 7.4 million acres lost last year across the entire Amazon basin) is alarming, indigenous lands—covering an area more than four times the size of Montana—are one of the best opportunities for saving Amazonia.

Yet, these borders are not a protective shield. Chemicals from upstream agricultural run-off flow into the reserves, and illegal loggers trespass into large swaths of indigenous land. On the eastern slopes of the Peruvian Andes, the Conservancy and local partner Pro Naturaleza are working with the Yanesha indigenous people to address stresses coming from migration, slash and burn farming, hunting and logging. The Yanesha are one of the first indigenous communities in Peru to apply for the legal authority to manage their own communal reserve. The Yanesha will manage the reserve's non-timber natural



The Pemón indigenous village of Kavac in the foothills of the western sector of Canaima National Park, Venezuela. © Hugo Arnal/TNC

resources to improve the well-being of their communities while ensuring a protected buffer zone adjacent to the 271,815-acre Yanachaga-Chemillén National Park.

### It's a living

From the Amazon to the Yungas, many high priority conservation targets are home to indigenous communities whose traditions favor conservation. But the native peoples must earn a living or the short-term payoffs of deforestation—and their immediate needs for sustenance—will outweigh the long-term value of protecting the land. The Conservancy is working with these communities to generate local income while conserving natural resources. For instance, in Venezuela's 25-million-acre Canaima National Park, the Conservancy is collaborating with the Pemón community and local partners to create tourism opportunities, which generate income across the community while protecting the park's incredible natural landscapes.

The Conservancy's goal is to create economies that will maintain indigenous communities' livelihoods in ways that are compatible with conservation. For instance, in and around Ecuador's Cofán-Bermejo Reserve and Cayambe-Coca Reserve, the Conservancy and local partners are working with Cofán communities to sustain their traditional diet and supplement their incomes through organic farming, which reduces the impact of commercial insecticides that are polluting the local soil and waters. The flora and fauna in the reserves also benefit from the project, including jaguars, ocelots, giant armadillos, Spix's guans (similar to wild turkeys), Brazilian tapirs and toucans.

### Sacred lands

Colombia's Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta towers 18,942 feet over the Caribbean coast. Its range of altitude provides habitat for 628 species of birds, more than are found in the United States and Canada combined. The Sierra Nevada is sacred to four indigenous groups that live on its slopes – the

Kogi, Arhuaco, Arsario and Kankuamo. The Conservancy and its local partner, Fundación Pro-Sierra Nevada, have been helping these native residents identify, reacquire and restore sacred sites where they have performed ancient rituals for centuries. Conserving these lands also protects the Sierra Nevada's watersheds, which provide freshwater to 30,000 indigenous people, 200,000 farmers, and 1.5 million residents of the city of Santa Marta.

### Planning and policy

It was the 1990s before most Brazilian indigenous communities received title to their ancestral lands. With 20% of the Amazon held in these new reserves, the imperative for planning and resources management is enormous. In response, the Conservancy works in collaboration with indigenous communities to create "ethnomaps" that combine satellite imagery of landscapes with indigenous knowledge of areas of ecological importance used for hunting and fishing, as well as areas of cultural significance. The communities use the ethnomaps to develop plans for the sustainable use of natural resources within their reserves. The indigenous leaders also use these maps when they meet with policymakers to discuss their lands.

### Looking to the future

The Conservancy is at the forefront of working with indigenous communities in South America and helping empower them with tools to manage and protect their lands themselves. "This will take years," says Jorge Terena, "we're just beginning to build capacity – we don't want indigenous groups to be dependent upon us. Five years ago, indigenous leaders did not understand environmental issues, such as land degradation and climate change. They didn't understand what the world is trying to learn of their knowledge. But now the leaders are beginning to become more alert ... We want them to be able to discuss environmental issues on their own."

Jorge and other Conservancy staff continue to work closely with indigenous communities to jointly protect large expanses of South America's ecological wonders. Jorge's native village leaders tell him to stay where he is for now; his work is too important to the indigenous peoples of the Amazon. There is still a lot of work to do, Jorge admits, but when he does go back home, he will most assuredly receive a hero's welcome.

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