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## **COP-26: Amazonia's Indigenous peoples are vital to fighting global warming (commentary)**

Commentary by **Philip M. Fearnside** on 2 November 2021



- *The United Nations Climate Change summit, the 26th conference of the parties (COP-26), held in Glasgow Scotland through November 12, is important both for the future of the global climate and for Amazonian Indigenous peoples.*
- *Uncontrolled climate change threatens the Amazon forest on which Indigenous peoples depend, and Indigenous peoples in turn have an important role as guardians of the forest.*
- *Decisions on how international funds intended to avoid greenhouse gas emissions are used represent both opportunities and risks for the climate, for the forest, and for Indigenous peoples.*
- *Indigenous voices need to be heard at COP-26, as empowered stakeholders threatened by climate change, and for the invaluable traditional wisdom*

*these peoples can contribute to global warming solutions. This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*

*This text is updated from an earlier Portuguese language version of the author's column at [Amazônia Real](#).*

Indigenous peoples have an important role to play as guardians of the Amazon forest, in avoiding the emissions that come from deforestation and forest degradation, and in helping curb global warming.

Indigenous lands in the Brazilian Amazon see less deforestation and better conserve biodiversity (see [here](#) and [here](#)) than non-indigenous lands, including various categories of protected areas. However, this protection is [not automatic](#), and cannot simply be assumed to continue as a “free” service for society in general.

Combatting global warming is very much in the interest of Indigenous peoples because climate change threatens the very existence of the forests, together with the livelihoods and cultures of the Indigenous peoples. Uncontrolled climate change can [destroy the forest](#) through droughts and forest fires.



An Indigenous mother and son in the Brazilian Amazon near Manaus. Indigenous peoples have repeatedly been shown to be the best at conserving the forest within which they live and practice their traditional livelihoods. Image courtesy of the World Bank

In their participation in COP-26, Indigenous peoples have great moral authority to insist that the world's countries take action sufficient to limit the increase in global temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) that is the goal of the 2015 Paris Agreement — limits that are necessary to avoid a serious risk not only of crossing dangerous tipping points for global climate, but also for limiting Amazonian droughts and forest fires.

Indigenous peoples can also rightfully insist that any funds destined for Brazil to combat global warming be used for protecting the Amazon forest and not to subsidize Amazonian ranchers to replant trees (as in the strips along watercourses required under the current Brazilian “forest code”), or to subsidize the modifying of activities in already deforested areas (such as adopting no-till methods for soy plantations). Because the amount of “green” money is always limited, every dollar spent planting trees represents one dollar less for avoiding deforestation and forest degradation.

In addition to the much greater benefit for the climate, investing in maintaining the forest maintains the peoples of the forest and the forest's biodiversity and water recycling function that is vital to maintaining the transport of atmospheric water vapor by the "flying rivers" — winds that carry water from Amazonia to São Paulo and other parts of the urban southeast and southern Brazil. These functions are not provided by other options for mitigating global warming.



Indigenous peoples have proven to be staunch defenders of the Brazilian Amazon. Here, Munduruku warriors occupy the Sao Manoel Dam site. The Munduruku were incensed in 2013 by the dynamiting of the Sete Quedas rapids on the Teles Pires River (one of their most sacred sites) to make way for a dam. Drivers of deforestation in Brazil include cattle ranching and agribusiness, logging, mining, and the building of dams, roads and other infrastructure. Image courtesy of International Rivers, licensed under CC BY-NC-SA.

Finding ways to make payment for forest environmental services function as an alternative to destruction is a great challenge. This cannot be done in a "hostage" situation, effectively threatening to cut down the forest unless a ransom is paid. Indigenous peoples have not resorted to this kind of threat, unlike some of Brazil's politicians. Indigenous peoples should make clear that they don't want money, but rather the protection of their rights to their traditional lands.

In contrast to the Brazilian government's current policies, government authorities must demarcate further Indigenous lands and protect all such lands in the country. Non-indigenous invaders of Indigenous lands, a group that has greatly increased in number and in the boldness of their activities under Brazil's current presidential administration, must be removed and punished.

There are various ways that Indigenous peoples could contribute to combatting climate change. They could halt logging on their lands, an activity that, much more than outright deforestation, is increasingly present in Indigenous protected areas. Logging greatly increases the risk of a forest catching fire during severe drought and is often the beginning of a vicious circle of successive forest fires and biomass loss (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Indigenous peoples could also halt any deforestation for pasture on their land, an activity that both destroys forest directly and serves as an [ignition source](#) for forest fires on Indigenous lands.



Trees illegally harvested inside a Brazilian Amazon Indigenous reserve on their way to a sawmill, likely for export to the European Union, U.S., and other nations. Indigenous peoples can't protect the rainforest alone — they need the support of the international community and of the Brazilian government. Image by Sue Branford.



Federal authorities raid an illegal gold mine in the Kayapó Indigenous Territory in Pará state, Brazil. Such raids have seen a marked decline under the government of President Jair Bolsonaro, who took office in January 2019. Image by Felipe Werneck/IBAMA.

Indigenous people can also pledge not to allow any use of their land by companies or non-indigenous individuals, even if Brazil's National Congress approves the bill (PL 191/2020) that President Jair Bolsonaro has submitted to open Indigenous lands to these actors (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

An important challenge is to better define how money is distributed to and used by Indigenous groups so that the money, or the prospect of money, does not act to fragment the groups among competing leaders or clans, as [has happened](#) in cases where money or material benefits have been dispensed in the past. Indigenous groups themselves need to devise ways to avoid the unending spiral of increasing material ambitions.

The world's desire to help Indigenous peoples maintain their forest must not serve as an excuse for the Brazilian government simply to capture internationally provided funds as a supplement to the national budget, as implied by this [infamous Powerpoint presentation](#) given by then environment minister Ricardo Salles when he presented as Brazil's official

position a drawing of a dog (representing Brazil) looking hungrily at a row of chickens roasting on a street side rotisserie (representing carbon credits).

In spite of all of these difficult challenges, the principle of payment for environmental services is valid, and the service provided by the Amazon forest in helping to avoid a global climate change catastrophe is substantial. Finding solutions to these challenges should be a top priority both for the world's governments gathered at COP-26 and for the Amazon's Indigenous peoples.

***Banner image:*** *Young Munduruku warriors. Image by Mauricio Torres.*

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From a young age, Indigenous boys, like these young Munduruku living along the Tapajós and Teles Pires rivers, are trained as warriors. Today their main enemies are land grabbers, illegal gold miners and loggers invading their ancestral lands. Image by Mauricio Torres.