

FOREST CONSERVATION THROUGH INDIGENOUS ENTREPRENEURSHIP

**The Rainforest Alliance's work with Indigenous Peoples
in Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru**



Photo: Sergio Izquierdo

Indigenous Peoples have an unsurpassed connection to the Earth's forests. They successfully manage at least one quarter of the world's lands, home to approximately 80 percent of our planet's biodiversity. While this work is crucial to fighting global biodiversity loss and curbing carbon emissions, Indigenous Peoples often face hurdles—from limited financial resources to a lack of legal support—to developing more sustainable, local economies while safeguarding forests and ecosystems.

The Rainforest Alliance has a long history working alongside Indigenous Peoples, partnering with Indigenous organizations and communities in some of the world's most ecologically and culturally significant landscapes, including the Amazon basin. Our teams of field professionals have built enduring relationships and co-design sustainable development programs that center Indigenous Peoples as the foremost guardians of the world's natural resources.

OUR APPROACH

We partner with community leaders and Indigenous Peoples' representative organizations to develop and implement programs that are grounded in Indigenous Peoples' needs, desires, and worldviews. In the Amazon, the Rainforest Alliance has deep and long-lasting ties with the Federation of Indigenous Kechwa Peoples of San Martín, the Interethnic Association of the Peruvian Jungle (AIDSESP), and the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA). Over the last 10 years, we have partnered with these organizations to establish and consolidate their development goals, engage with governments on policy strengthening processes, and provide high quality technical, financial, and capacity building support to member groups. This includes supporting the design and implementation of COICA and AIDSESP's "Indigenous Economy" concept, which guides their

strategic development activities in favor of Indigenous forest- and natural resource-based economies, rooted in Indigenous principles and practices.

We support Indigenous Peoples to develop culturally relevant sustainable businesses, negotiate higher premiums within niche markets, and access financing tailored to their needs. In Peru, the Rainforest Alliance partners with native communities in the San Martín region to develop Indigenous-led businesses for products harvested for generations by Indigenous families. Supporting Indigenous entrepreneurs with technical and legal capacity strengthening to secure permits from Peru's National Forest and Wildlife Service, communities can now extract and sell traditional products such as sangre de grado (a salve-like tree resin). The Yurilamas community in San Martín manages an area of more than 33,000 hectares, 26,000 of which are dedicated to the conservation and sustainable management of forest products like sangre de grado. With the Rainforest Alliance's support, native producers in this area have positioned their product in national markets and established commercial agreements with buyers, negotiating a 75 percent increase in the price paid per liter of sangre de grado.

GREEN FINANCE FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Over more than a decade, the Rainforest Alliance has facilitated millions of dollars in financing and incentives to local communities and Indigenous peoples. Through this work, we have partnered with financial institutions to develop products designed specifically for producers in the timber and non-timber forest products sectors, including non-traditional products, such as medicinal plants, Amazonian fruits, and textiles. For example, in 2022, the Rainforest Alliance co-designed a green loan product in San Martín with the local savings and credit cooperative Norandino. In exchange for implementing more sustainable practices—including ensuring net-zero or deforestation-free production—producers are granted lower interest rates and extended loan periods based on harvesting and production cycles unique to their product offering. These loans provide a much-needed alternative to traditional financing, with US\$1.5 million to be lent to Indigenous-led businesses and local communities throughout the San Martín region over the next three years. To evaluate the impact of this financing on local forests and ecosystems,

the Rainforest Alliance also supported Norandino to link its financial management software to Peru's [GEOBOSQUES portal](#), which monitors changes in forest cover country wide.

In Guatemala, the Rainforest Alliance has supported Indigenous communities to incorporate more than 20,000 hectares of responsibly managed forestland into various government forest incentive programs. Access to these programs is benefiting more than 8,000 people in the Western Highlands and Alta and Baja Verapaz who, from 2020–2023, have received US\$6.2 million in compensation for their sustainable forest management and production activities.

>> [Learn more about the Rainforest Alliance's work with Indigenous Peoples](#)

CLIMATE RESILIENCE THROUGH ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE

We recognize the adverse impacts of biodiversity loss and climate change on Indigenous communities and work to improve sustainable production capacities and climate resilience, while uplifting Indigenous ancestral practices.

In Guatemala, the Rainforest Alliance works throughout Alta and Baja Verapaz and the Western Highlands with Mam, K'iche', Q'eqchi', and other Indigenous communities who have a profound knowledge of the land and forests, to ensure this knowledge is preserved and carried on. In partnership with USAID, the University of Mariano Galvez, and Guatemala's National Forest Institute (INAB), the Rainforest Alliance developed a local forestry calendar, which highlights sustainable forest management practices throughout the year according to ancestral knowledge systems. The calendar can be downloaded from INAB's website and guides the implementation of activities like seed collection and planting, soil preparation, tree pruning, and sustainable extraction of wood, based on the lunar and the feminine and masculine tree cycles, as these were observed by Indigenous communities and used to determine productive activities in forests.

INDIGENOUS, WOMEN-OWNED BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

We recognize Indigenous women's contributions to and immense knowledge of natural resource management and work to minimize the unique barriers they face while nurturing their strengths. Indigenous women play a critical role in passing down ancestral practices and knowledge as well as contributing immensely to natural resource-based economies. They are vital to the production of coffee, cocoa, cardamom, and many other products that global markets demand. In Mexico, the Rainforest Alliance works within communities and ejidos—legally owned communal territories managed by rural, and often Indigenous, communities—to break down entrenched barriers to social and economic opportunity for women and youth. In partnership with the World Bank's Dedicated Grant Mechanism for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (DGM), the Rainforest Alliance supported women- and youth-led groups to develop sustainable business ideas and negotiate agreements with ejido community assemblies on the right to conduct their business operations within the territory.

Through this program, 50 majority Indigenous women- and youth-led groups formally established productive enterprises and received business-related financing. In the Indigenous Nahua community of Chacala in Jalisco, the women's group Jamaica de Chacala is now successfully producing and selling hibiscus while restoring six hectares of degraded land in their community. The group developed their brand name and seal and increased the price paid per kilogram of their hibiscus by more than 50 percent as a result of quality improvements in production and processing.

INDIGENOUS-LED SOLUTIONS ARE THE FUTURE

The role and contributions of Indigenous Peoples in global sustainable development is undeniable. As the climate crisis challenges us to find innovative solutions to the world's most pressing problems, championing Indigenous voices and needs is crucial to driving large scale impact. We urge you to join us in this mission.

