



# COLOMBIA

## A PRIMER ON DEFORESTATION FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND FAITH COMMUNITIES

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Over half of Colombia is covered by forests. Despite its modest land area, Colombia has the world's eighth-largest forest cover and is the second most biodiverse country on Earth. At least 10 percent of the Colombian Amazon has already been deforested and 2016 and 2017 saw sharp increases in tree cover loss – as the aftermath of a historic peace deal saw logging, mining and cattle ranching spread into areas of forest previously controlled by rebels.





# COLOMBIA'S FORESTS ARE A SACRED TRUST

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Colombia's forests are a majestic and awe-inspiring gift. They cover more than half of the country,<sup>2</sup> making Colombia home to the third largest area of forest in South America,<sup>4</sup> and the thirteenth largest area of forest in the world.<sup>5</sup> Forests are found across all regions of Colombia. About two-thirds of the country's forests lie within the Amazon and nearly a fifth is found in the Andes mountain range.<sup>6,7</sup> Nearly half of Colombia's forests are designated as indigenous territories, while 7 percent are in territories owned communally by Afro-Colombian communities,<sup>7</sup> and as such they serve as an important harbour of the traditional knowledge and cultures of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. For people and nature alike, these forests are rich and indispensable national jewels.

Colombia is also one of the world's most biodiverse countries, home to 10 percent of the world's species of flora and fauna,<sup>8</sup> including one fifth of the world's bird species.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, it is one of only 17 countries considered to be "megadiverse," a term used to refer to the world's top biodiversity-rich countries, particularly those with many species that are not found anywhere else (endemic species).<sup>9</sup>

Most of this biodiversity is found in Colombia's tropical forests, especially in the Andes, the Chocó,<sup>10</sup> and the Amazon.<sup>11</sup> But the latter two, while rich in diversity, are also degraded enough to rank among the 25 global biodiversity hotspots—places where exceptional concentrations of endemic species are undergoing exceptional loss of habitat.<sup>12,13</sup> Colombia is host to more than 54,000 recognized species, many unique to the country.<sup>13</sup> New discoveries continually expand their ranks,<sup>14</sup> offering new insights into nature's abundance and providing new knowledge that contributes to human well-being. Deforestation and other land use changes continually erode this biodiversity,<sup>15</sup> threatening ecosystem stability and, as a consequence, human livelihoods and well-being.

Forests in Colombia provide immeasurable and irreplaceable benefits. They contribute to a safe and secure climate. They protect the country's soils and its water supply, and help generate hydropower—an important source of energy.<sup>6</sup> They are indispensable for a healthy environment, a stable economy, and a sustainable future for the country. Forests are a sacred gift to be treated with respect and care.





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# COLOMBIA'S FORESTS FACE GRAVE DANGERS

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Colombia's forests face severe threats. Land grabs,<sup>6</sup> illegal cultivation of coca,<sup>6,11,16</sup> cattle ranching and expansion of the agricultural frontier,<sup>6,16</sup> illegal mining,<sup>6,16</sup> forest fires<sup>6,17</sup> and infrastructure development<sup>6,16</sup> all represent assaults on the country's forest endowment.<sup>18</sup> The severity of these threats varies by region, and one activity often spurs another, multiplying the toll on forests, indigenous peoples and surrounding communities.<sup>19</sup> Construction of access roads, for example, makes deforestation by other threats more likely,<sup>20</sup> and illicit crops have historically led to long-term colonization processes, including the expansion of legal crops, settlements and roads, resulting in an

additional indirect deforestation process. Between 1980 and the 2000s, and again in 2015,<sup>21</sup> internal migration and resettlement, driven by conflict, drove deforestation in the Colombian Amazon.<sup>22</sup> The region suffered a double blow, as people and forests alike were subjected to destructive human actions.

From 1990 to 2015, Colombia lost almost 6 million hectares of tree cover, the tenth largest loss globally during this period.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, tree cover loss accelerated dramatically, increasing by 46 percent over 2016 and doubling the rate of loss reported between 2001 and 2005.<sup>23</sup> Despite decades of warnings about the folly of deforestation, the trend has actually worsened.



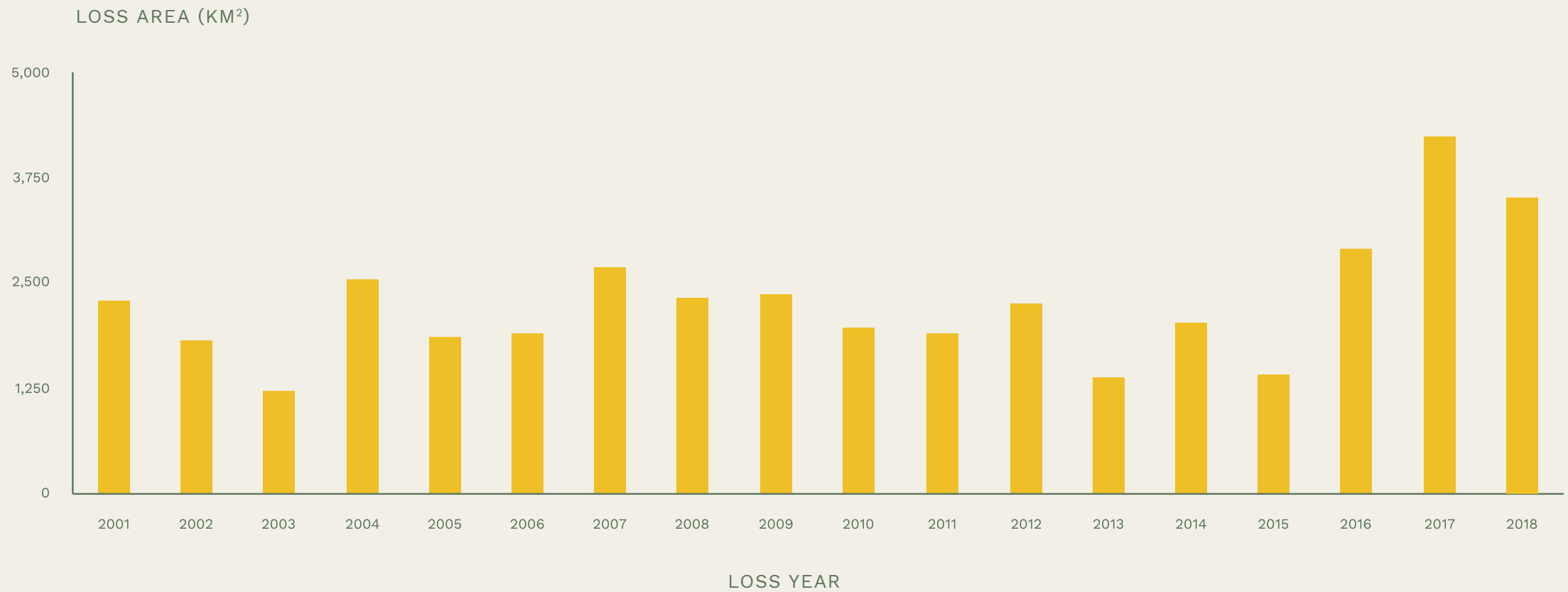
Colombia was ranked seventh among tropical countries with the greatest deforestation in 2017. From 1990 to 2015, the country lost nearly 6 million hectares of tree cover.

The recent spike in forest loss may result from the “power vacuum” created after the signing of the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and armed groups. While deforestation certainly did occur during the previous years of the conflict, the peace agreement opened the way for mining, logging, agriculture, cattle grazing and the cultivation of illegal crops<sup>17</sup> in areas previously controlled by armed groups or inaccessible due to conflict—all of which stimulated forest clearing. Land speculation may also be spurring forest loss, as land is cleared and occupied to claim title under the expectations of an agricultural reform that would accompany the Peace Agreement,<sup>17</sup> especially in the Meta, Guaviare and Caquetá departments within the Amazon<sup>17</sup>.

The World Resources Institute ranked Colombia seventh among tropical countries with the greatest deforestation in 2017.<sup>24</sup> The country’s historical deforestation, along with the multiple threats currently facing its forests and indigenous peoples, represent a grave danger to this important ecological and cultural treasure.

Against this stark backdrop, recent political developments offer cause for hope. In a remarkable and historic 2018 ruling, Colombia’s Supreme Court recognised Colombia’s Amazon as an “entity subject of rights”—essentially giving forests inherent legal protections—and ordered the Government of Colombia to take action to halt the rise in deforestation.<sup>25,26</sup> This recognition expanded Colombians’ understanding of the Amazon as no longer just an area to be colonized, but a living member of the national community. Responding to this mandate, authorities at national and subnational levels set new and ambitious plans to halt deforestation. These plans would enhance actions already taken by the national government, such as the addition of 1.5 million hectares to the Chiribiquete National Park,<sup>27</sup> and the cancellation of a major transboundary highway project.<sup>28</sup> The government also launched the “Cinturón Verde” (Green Belt) initiative, aimed at halting deforestation in the Amazon and the Orinoquía transition area,<sup>29</sup> and destroyed a series of illegal roads, amongst other actions.<sup>28</sup> Ensuring the continued implementation of the Supreme Court ruling is vital to the future of Colombia’s forests.





**FIGURE 1. COLOMBIA TREE LOSS, 2001 TO 2018**

Source: Global Forest Watch, Open Data Portal, 2019



# PROTECTING COLOMBIA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES



Also vital to the protection of Colombia's forests is empowerment of indigenous peoples and the protection of their rights. In Colombia and around the globe, protecting and enforcing the rights of indigenous peoples has often proved to be the most effective way to protect forests.<sup>30-33</sup> However, in Colombia as elsewhere, indigenous peoples are often ignored or disparaged and their rights unprotected. Human rights violations, physical violence, and even murders of indigenous peoples are far too common.<sup>34-37</sup>

In 2012, Colombia's indigenous population was estimated to be approximately 1.5 million people.<sup>3</sup> About 80 percent of the indigenous population is located in the Andes—in the Cauca, La Guajira and Nariño departments.<sup>38</sup> The Colombian Amazon is more sparsely populated, but is home to more than 70 indigenous tribes.<sup>39</sup>

Colombia's constitution recognises the ancestral rights to land of both indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombian traditional communities.<sup>39,40</sup> As of 2016, these groups managed an estimated 26 million hectares of forest,<sup>6</sup> which represents more than a fifth of the country's territory and more than half of its forests.<sup>6</sup> More than half of the Colombian Amazon is legally managed by indigenous peoples as Resguardos Indígenas (indigenous reserves).<sup>31</sup>



Significantly, the Resguardos Indígenas include the areas of highest biodiversity within the Colombian Amazon.<sup>41</sup> Their indigenous inhabitants have the right to use and manage the forests, benefit from its resources and exclude outsiders, although commercial use of forest products requires government approval,<sup>31</sup> and the land remains state-owned.<sup>42</sup> As mentioned above, secure tenure within indigenous territories has been linked to lower rates of forest loss, and to the sustainable use of timber and other forest products.<sup>31</sup> Deforestation rates in Resguardos Indígenas, for example, were a remarkable ten times lower than in other areas of the Colombian Amazon between 2000 and 2012.<sup>32</sup>

Colombian law recognises the rights of indigenous peoples to be consulted about any projects that might affect their land. Although indigenous peoples' right to free, prior and informed consent (i.e., the right to give or withhold consent for any developments planned within their territories) has not been fully recognized under Colombian law, a landmark 2011 case in Colombia's Constitutional Court was heralded as a significant step forward in this respect when three industrial projects were halted for failing to properly consult and gain the consent of the affected indigenous communities.<sup>43</sup>

Colombia's forests benefit from the existence of national and regional indigenous organizations committed to a vision of regional development that embraces sustainable use of the environment, safeguarding of territorial and cultural rights, and the well-being and food security of indigenous communities. At the national level, 47 regional organizations, which are in 28 of the country's 32 departments, are affiliates of ONIC, the Organización Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas de Colombia. In the Amazon region, OPIAC (Organization Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Amazonia Colombiana) works to promote the development of indigenous communities and ensure their rights are recognised and respected.

Both ONIC and OPIAC participate in an official capacity in dialogue tables with the government, while subregional indigenous organizations are actively involved in planning and implementing land management plans and environmental management based on their indigenous worldviews and traditional knowledge.

Although Colombia's laws recognize indigenous peoples' land rights, many indigenous territories remain unmapped and unregistered, and legal protections are not sufficient to prevent indigenous rights from being violated.<sup>34,44</sup> Indeed, even within recognized Resguardos Indígenas, pressures on forests are high. In part, this is due to the high number of armed actors and commercial groups that have entered the rainforest after the signing of the peace agreement. In addition, in many places such as Putumayo and Caqueta, oil drilling concessions overlap with established Resguardos, inviting conflict. As a result of such tensions, violence against indigenous forest peoples has increased. In 2016, 37 land and environmental defenders were murdered in Colombia, and a further 32 were killed in 2017,<sup>34,45</sup> a disproportionate number of whom were indigenous. The guardians of Colombia's forests, those most competent at protecting this precious resource, are themselves in urgent need of protection.

**In 2016, indigenous groups managed more than a fifth of Colombia's territory and more than half of its forests. But pressures on these forests from outside actors are high.**

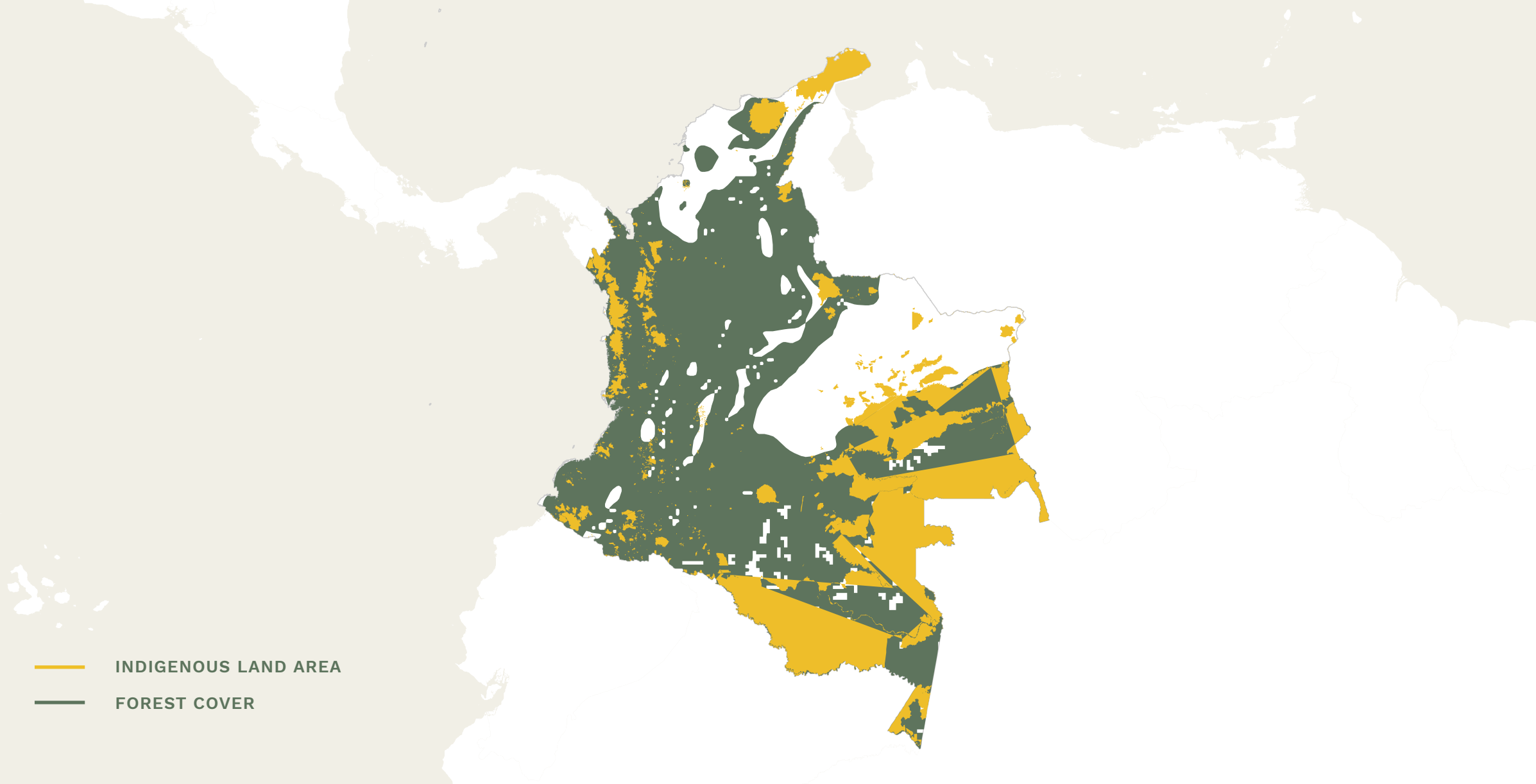




## SECURE TENURE FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES REDUCES DEFORESTATION RATES<sup>31</sup>

In 2016, the World Resources Institute published a study investigating the carbon and ecosystem service benefits of indigenous lands where tenure rights are legally secure. The study compared rates of deforestation on indigenous lands in which tenure is secure with rates of deforestation on non-indigenous lands with similar characteristics. The deforestation rate in tenure-secure indigenous forests was 0.04 percent; while the rate outside indigenous forests was double that. The study also found that without secure tenure on indigenous peoples' lands and forests, Colombia's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions would have been 3 percent higher per year. The study further credits secure tenure for indigenous peoples with saving Colombia US\$ 5-7 per hectare per year in avoided climate damages because of reduced deforestation.





## FIGURE 2. FOREST COVER AND INDIGENOUS LAND AREA IN COLOMBIA

Source: Garnett, S.T., Burgess, N.D., Fa, J.E., Fernández-Llamazares, Á., Molnár, Z., Robinson, C.J., Watson, J.E.M., Zander, K.K., Austin, B., Brondizio, E.S. et al. 2018. A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. *Nature Sustainability*, 1(7): 369–374. Hansen, M. C., P. V. Potapov, R. Moore, M. Hancher, S. A. Turubanova, A. Tyukavina, D. Thau, S. V. Stehman, S. J. Goetz, T. R. Loveland, A. Kommareddy, A. Egorov, L. Chini, C. O. Justice, and J. R. G. Townshend. 2013. "High-Resolution Global Maps of 21st-Century Forest Cover Change." *Science* 342 (15 November): 850–53. Data available on-line from: <http://earthenginepartners.appspot.com/science-2013-global-forest>.

The boundaries and names shown and the designation used on maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by UN Environment or contributory organisations.





# KEY COMMITMENTS AND INITIATIVES

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## INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS

Under the Paris Agreement, the Government of Colombia committed, through its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) to reduce the country's greenhouse gas emissions by 20 percent by 2030 compared to business as usual (or by 30 percent, conditional on international support).<sup>46</sup> Since 58 percent of the country's total emissions emanate from agriculture, forests and land use change (including deforestation), Colombia's NDC commits the country to reduce deforestation and preserve important ecosystems, such as the Amazon region, as part of its efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>46</sup> In 2014, under the Bonn Challenge, Colombia committed to restore one million hectares of degraded land through Initiative 20x20<sup>47</sup>—a regional effort in Latin

America and the Caribbean to begin the restoration of 20 million hectares of degraded land by 2020. In 2014, Colombia also endorsed the New York Declaration on Forests,<sup>48</sup> committing to do its part to at least halve the rate of loss of natural forests globally by 2020 and strive to end natural forest loss by 2030.<sup>49</sup> In addition, in its National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, Colombia committed to reduce 58 percent of deforestation within heavily impacted areas by 2020.<sup>13</sup>

## BILATERAL COOPERATION AND REDD+

The Colombian government has produced a national strategy to control deforestation and to sustainably manage its forests. This strategy, which



is embedded in Colombia's national climate strategy and its commitments under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, outlines a REDD+ approach and aims to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. REDD+ is an international climate mitigation strategy with the goal of reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in tropical forest countries, while providing sustainable development benefits to participating communities. It does this, in part, by providing financial incentives for sustainably managing forests, and halting or reversing forest loss.

Colombia's REDD+ strategy is implemented by Colombia's Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development and has evolved into a national action plan called *Bosques: Territorios de Vida* (Forests: Territories of Life), which identifies the actions Colombia will take to reduce deforestation. The action plan is centered around five pillars: sociocultural management of forests and public awareness; creation of a forest economy to close the agricultural frontier; cross-sectoral management of land-use planning; forest monitoring and control; and strengthened legal, institutional and financial capacities.<sup>7</sup>

In 2015, Norway, Germany and the United Kingdom pledged almost US\$ 300 million to support Colombia's REDD+ ambitions through 2020. The pledge involves the use of results-based payments to encourage reduced deforestation and successful policy design and implementation. This means that the size of the payments will depend on how much Colombia manages to reduce its deforestation.<sup>50</sup> Colombia's REDD+ plan is implemented through several initiatives, such as the Joint Declaration of Intent; Vision Amazonia; and the Biocarbon Fund.

## **VISION AMAZONÍA**

Visión Amazonía (Amazon Vision) is a national initiative that was launched in 2016 with the goal of achieving zero net deforestation in the Colombian Amazon

by 2020.<sup>51</sup> The initiative was launched by the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, together with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the National Planning Department, National Parks of Colombia, the Amazon Institute of Scientific Studies, the Institute of Environmental Studies and Meteorology, as well as regional and local partners. It promotes strategies for forest protection, while empowering local communities and indigenous peoples, and respecting traditional practices. It also strengthens sustainable agriculture practices, as well as land-use planning and forest governance. So far, activities have been carried out in the departments of Caquetá, Guaviare, Putumayo, Meta, Guainia, Amazonas, Vichada and Vaupés.

## **EXPANDING PROTECTED AREAS**

Over the past decade, Colombia has embarked on an unprecedented effort to expand the size of its national protected areas. The Serranía de Chiribiquete National Park, established at the meeting point of the Amazon, Andes, Orinoco and Guyana regions, was expanded in 2013 to become the largest rainforest national park on Earth.<sup>27</sup> In 2018, it was expanded by an additional 1.5 million hectares.<sup>52</sup> In April 2018, the Government of Colombia announced that it would incorporate an additional 8 million hectares of forests into the existing protected area network, a 27 percent increase. With this expanded coverage, fully 85 percent of the Colombian Amazon is now recognised as protected areas,<sup>53</sup> although this does not necessarily translate to effective enforcement of that status.

## **CORAZÓN DE LA AMAZONÍA**

Supported by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Colombian government is implementing the 'Corazón de la Amazonía' (Heart of the Amazon) project to support improved forest governance and sustainable land management in Colombia.<sup>54</sup>

Fully 85 percent of the Colombian Amazon is now recognised as protected areas, but this does not necessarily translate to effective enforcement and protection.

The project works within a 9-million hectare area spanning the departments of Guaviare and Caquetá, close to the Chiribiquete National Park.<sup>55</sup> It will benefit close to 3,500 indigenous people in seven indigenous reserves, and some 200 campesino families will benefit from the implementation of agroforestry systems and from training in forest conservation techniques.<sup>55</sup>

#### **TFA 2020 COLOMBIA ALLIANCE**

In 2016, Colombia became the first Latin American country to join the Tropical Forest Alliance 2020<sup>56</sup>—a global public-private partnership whose members take voluntary actions, individually and in combination, to reduce tropical deforestation associated with commodities such as palm oil, soy, beef, and paper and pulp. In 2017, a national TFA 2020 platform—the TFA 2020 Colombia Alliance—was launched in Colombia.<sup>57</sup> The platform supports Colombia’s efforts to promote deforestation-free growth in key commodities. It does this by helping to develop a national alliance of stakeholders (from government, business and civil society) linked to global supply chains who commit to zero-net-deforestation practices. The Alliance’s initial focus is promoting zero-deforestation palm oil commitments. The platform will later focus on cattle, dairy and timber supply chains.<sup>57</sup>

#### **THE ANDES-AMAZON-ATLANTIC CORRIDOR**

The Andes-Amazon-Atlantic Corridor is a regional initiative that seeks to re-establish and maintain the ecosystem connectivity of the region north of the Amazon River. The goal is to safeguard cultural and biological diversity, encourage sustainable development, and safeguard the Amazon’s ecosystem services. The proposed area for the Corridor encompasses about 265 million hectares, including the Colombian Amazon, as well as parts of Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, French Guiana, Guyana, Suriname and Venezuela. The Colombian portion of the proposed Corridor is made up of 222 Protected Natural Areas and 2003 indigenous territories that connect the Amazon with the ecosystems of the Andes and the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>58</sup>





## HOW RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES CAN GET INVOLVED

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Religious believers and spiritual communities have a unique role to play in protecting Colombia's rainforests and supporting its indigenous peoples. The ethical case for caring for the planet is deeply rooted in all of the world's religious traditions, and now is the time to reinvigorate and mobilize our respective spiritual resources, our influence, and our moral authority to collectively make the case that rainforests are a sacred trust and that tropical deforestation is a sanctity of life issue: it is wrong and it must stop.

Colombian religious believers can take action at several different levels, including regulating their personal choices and working through their religious institutions to promote education about the value of and dangers to rainforests, advocate for economic choices that safeguard rainforests, and pursue coordinated political initiatives that combat deforestation and support indigenous peoples' rights.

## **PERSONAL CHOICES**

People of faith can honor the planet and forests by making conscious and informed decisions that signal an awareness of where and how their food and consumer items are sourced and who produces them. Diet is one area where personal choice can directly support rainforest health. A shift toward a plant-based diet and eating less meat, particularly beef, is one of the most powerful personal choices any individual can make in solidarity with rainforests, since beef and soy production (much of it used as cattle feed) are important drivers of deforestation. Indeed, animal raising is remarkably land-intensive: supplying meat to a global population requires two-thirds of the world's agricultural land, including pastureland and cropland for feed. This extensive area is often taken from forests. Even reducing meat intake to twice a week can make a measurable impact. Reducing meat consumption also reduces pressure on a range of agricultural resources beyond forest land. Water use, fertilizer production, and greenhouse gas emissions that drive climate change—each of these declines substantially for every foregone kilo of meat.

As with meat, religious believers can make informed consumer choices around palm oil, paper, and wood products. Consumers can look for products made by companies committed to zero deforestation and ensure that up and down their supply-chains there is no activity that negatively impacts forests. This means choosing paper, wood, and other products made from 100 percent post-consumer content materials and opting for virgin wood products certified by reputable authorities such as the Forest Stewardship Council.

## **RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY ACTIVITY**

Religious believers can also help to address deforestation by working with and through their own religious institutions. More than 85 percent of people in the world have a religious affiliation, making the religious public a formidable force

for positive social and environmental change when they and their institutions pursue a common goal. Religious institutions and places of worship can incorporate forests into existing communal religious activities and practices—such as liturgies, large prayer gatherings, or celebrations around festivals, feasts, or commemorations. For example, communities that emphasize fasting can include a notion of “fasting for the forest.” And communities can set aside particular periods to pray for the forests.

Religious communities, congregations, universities, schools and places of worship can also counter deforestation by protecting trees on religiously owned land. This can involve declaring protected forests, putting in place prohibitions on deforestation or hunting wildlife, or restoring degraded lands. Many of these practices have been adopted by Hindus in India, Christians in Africa, Buddhists in Thailand and Cambodia, and followers of Shinto in Japan. Because places of worship are community gathering spots, they can help to set norms around respecting and protecting forests and biodiversity. In Ethiopia, for example, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, a Christian denomination that traces its lineage to the first century, is credited with saving many of the nation's remaining trees. Its churches have planted more than 1000 “sacred forests,” each averaging a few football fields in size, around its many churches. The forests are seen as the “clothing” of the churches, serving as community centers, meeting places, schools, and burial grounds, in addition to providing shade for people and habitat for many species.

## **ECONOMIC ACTION**

Every economic decision constitutes a moral decision. Businesses and investors that work in forest landscapes and that depend on forests for their products have a responsibility to social and environmental stewardship that can and must be guided by the world's religious communities. Investor movements driven by people of faith can exert shareholder pressure on



businesses by insisting that they adopt sustainable practices, clean up their supply chains, and respect the forests. Corporations run by people with religious convictions need to hear from religious leaders and places of worship that deforestation is a sanctity of life issue and that business practices that destroy forests and biodiversity and that disregard the rights of indigenous peoples and forest communities are in violation of the tenets of their faith.

Divestment can be another potent strategy, given the substantial financial assets and investment portfolios held by some faith groups. There is great potential for a faith-based movement that encourages divestment from industries that engage in deforestation and investment in renewable energy projects, community-based natural resource management and social enterprises that benefit local people and local economies, not multi-national corporations and their shareholders. Making the moral decision to refuse to fund activities that destroy forests is a powerful and effective avenue to bring about change. There is ample evidence to suggest that divestment from industries that damage the planet and a transition to ethical investing can change behavior and will ultimately encourage other investors to follow suit. The faith-based movement to divest from fossil fuels—from oil, coal and gas companies—provides an instructive example of what is possible when religious institutions take a stand in this regard.

## **EDUCATION**

Religious leaders are often among the most trusted figures in any society, looked to for ethical and spiritual guidance on economic, social and political life. They are also teachers and conduits of education, awareness and learning. Religious leaders, then, are key actors in the effort to raise awareness about the deforestation crisis, the risks that deforestation poses to progress on climate change and sustainable development, and the entry points for people of faith to get into action to fight for the protection of forests.

As such, one of the best ways for religious leaders to take action on forest protection is to use their influence and authority to relay information and resources on the deforestation crisis to those in their congregation.

Some of the most powerful lessons to be taken from forests are not on deforestation rates and numbers of displaced indigenous peoples (important as these are), but lessons of the heart that teach appreciation of forests in their spiritual fullness. Attitudes toward forests and trees could be markedly changed for western audiences if forests were viewed primarily as a gift, rather than resources. Indigenous traditions have much to teach in this regard. Gratitude and sufficiency are familiar concepts to people of many faiths; it is not a stretch to imagine applying these attitudes widely in our consumption of palm oil, paper, wood, and other forest products. Such a shift could be transformational.

## **POLITICAL ACTION**

Ending deforestation comes down to mobilizing sufficient political will. Until now, globally and in major rainforest countries, the enforcement of laws and policies around forest protection have been largely insufficient to stop the destruction. Religious believers, leaders and places of worship can help to influence public debate and public policies on forests and the rights of indigenous peoples, making them moral issues that demand a moral response from elected officials. Halting and reversing deforestation will require the cultivation of new public virtues and a seismic shift in values and the way that we as a human family understand and manage forests.

Many religious leaders are uniquely positioned to lobby governments at local, regional, national and global levels and other decision-making bodies that determine the policies and practices that govern forests and the rights of their guardians. Advocacy can take various forms, ranging from quiet

diplomacy and back-channel meetings to more public statements, campaigns, petitions and demonstrations around the moral and spiritual responsibility to protect forests. To be effective, coordination across sectors is critical, to ensure that advocacy by religious believers is bolstering and advancing campaigns and efforts already underway by the broader coalition of indigenous peoples, NGOs, multilateral organizations, and grassroots activists working to end deforestation. Religious leaders also have a role in holding political leaders accountable for past commitments, and encouraging greater ambition to new commitments over time.

#### **MULTI-RELIGIOUS COLLABORATION**

The gains from deploying religious resources in the fight against deforestation are multiplied when the world's religions stand together. This kind of cooperation can prove more powerful—symbolically and substantively—than unilateral action by individual religious groups. When religious communities demonstrate the ability to work closely together, they build credibility and trust among the population at large. When they speak with one voice on issues like forest protection, their moral authority is magnified, giving them greater ability to influence policies through their influence on individuals and institutions.

For more information on actions you can take to support rainforests in Colombia, connect with the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia at [colombia@interfaithrainforest.org](mailto:colombia@interfaithrainforest.org).

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## ABOUT THIS PRIMER

This primer is part of a series of briefs meant to inform and inspire faith communities to action to help safeguard tropical forests and their inhabitants. Through facts, graphics, analysis, and photos, these primers present the moral case for conserving and restoring rainforest ecosystems, supported by the latest science and policy insights. They bring together the research and practical tools that faith communities and religious leaders need to better understand the importance of tropical forests, to advocate for their protection, and to raise awareness about the ethical responsibility that exists across faiths to take action to end tropical deforestation.

## PARTNERS

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative welcomes engagement by all organizations, institutions and individuals of good faith and conscience that are committed to the protection, restoration and sustainable management of rainforests.

## INTERFAITH RAINFOREST INITIATIVE

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is an international, multi-faith alliance working to bring moral urgency and faith-based leadership to global efforts to end tropical deforestation. It is a platform for religious leaders and faith communities to work hand-in-hand with indigenous peoples, governments, NGOs and businesses on actions that protect rainforest and the rights of those that serve as their guardians. The Initiative believes the time has come for a worldwide movement for the care of tropical forests, one that is grounded in the inherent value of forests, and inspired by the values, ethics, and moral guidance of indigenous peoples and faith communities.

## QUESTIONS?

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is eager to work with you to protect tropical forests and the rights of indigenous peoples. Contact us at [info@interfaithrainforest.org](mailto:info@interfaithrainforest.org).



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