

Forest Dwellers are Its Best Protectors



THE world's tropical rainforests should be handed back to their inhabitants, who protect them better than governments or rangers, and spend more on their upkeep. That is the conclusion of a major review to be presented this week to a UN meeting on the world's tropical forests.

The study, *Who Conserves the Forests?*, by the Washington-based Forest Trends group contradicts the popular image of farmers and hunters as the primary destroyers of rainforests. In fact, forest dwellers are a bigger and more effective force for conservation than park authorities, and are often better forest researchers than foreign scientists, the report's co-author Augusta Molnar says.

Most of the world's tropical rainforests are the

property of national governments. But too often that results in lawlessness and uncontrolled deforestation. By contrast, local control is a "cost-effective, long-term solution to the problem of conservation", Molnar says.

"Indigenous residents are managing at least 370 million hectares of tropical forest. Why not strengthen their rights and turn these forests into assets they can use?"

Examples of local conservation include sacred ancient groves in West Africa. By one count, there are more than 1,000 of these in Ghana alone. Besides their religious importance, villagers protect them because they help maintain local springs and increase crop yields in nearby fields, while some bring in tourists.

Elsewhere, millions of

farmers from Cameroon to Brazil protect forests that supply medicinal herbs, fodder crops, bush meat and firewood.

Locals spend both time and money on conservation. They spend around US\$2.6 billion a year, which is more than overseas aid and national government put together. Although some conservationists argue that giving rainforest inhabitants control over their forests is a recipe for plunder, the report says that in practice, it allows them to keep out commercial logging companies, land speculators and hunting gangs.

The potential value of local science is underlined by new research by Lui Hongmao of the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden in south-western China. His team has found

that the Dai people in the remote valleys of south-west China can identify thousands of plant species almost as accurately as trained scientists, and do so twice as fast (*Conservation Biology*, vol 18, p 1139).

The competing claims of logging and conservation are governed by rules set out in the UN International Tropical Timber Agreement.

Its signatories represent about 80% of the world's tropical forests and 90% of the tropical timber trade. But after almost 2 decades in operation, only 2% of rainforests are managed sustainably.

The group says the good news is that many cash-strapped national governments are ceding control of forests to their inhabitants.
— *New Scientist*

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