

New conservation method empowers indigenous peoples

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A Peruvian man in a traditional headdress mapping out land use. Credit: Ashwin Ravikumar

For many in the Western world, the conventional notion of "development," or the idea that societies progress through industrialization and agricultural intensification, goes unquestioned: it provides people with housing, education, jobs, food, and overall stability. Particularly in Western culture, this notion of development is widely accepted, but in a new study published in *Ecology and Society*, researchers are "attempting to flip this historically dominant ideology on its head," says Ashwin Ravikumar, an environmental social scientist at The Field Museum and one of the study's authors. Governments, says Ravikumar, have been too quick to assume that indigenous peoples' lives need improvement, ignoring the well-being that traditional ways of life produce. Indigenous communities have not only established a high quality of life, but have found ways to manage their natural resources sustainably through traditional hunting, fishing, and small-scale agriculture.

"Rather than fixating on what they lack, we focus on the assets they already have, especially their skills in managing local resources. We create spaces for local communities to think about what choices make the most sense for them," Ravikumar explains. This is called an assets-based approach to conservation. Working with rural communities in the Peruvian Amazon, Ravikumar and colleagues determined that local people meet their basic needs through diverse subsistence activities, such as hunting, fishing, and farming, and over centuries they have developed sophisticated [natural resource](#) management systems that protect the robust rainforest ecosystem.

Overall, people in these communities evaluate their well-being more holistically. "When they talk about well-being, they do talk about money, but they always include basic needs and natural resources, like having a healthy forest, since forests can be of cultural and spiritual importance," says Ravikumar. While they rely on money for things like transportation, their basic needs, including food, water, and shelter, are largely met by

their environment. They not only highly value these resources, but have a wealth of knowledge regarding the flora and fauna in the area.



Peruvian people celebrating Carnaval with a decorated palm tree. Credit: Ashwin Ravikumar

Ultimately, by working with the people of these communities, the project aims to implement a conservation plan that works well with their existing practices."We build strong relationships with these communities through a combination of direct work with them on the ground and cataloging how they use traditional knowledge to manage natural resources in an ecosystem," he explains.

However, he also emphasizes that these relationships are, "explicitly political tools to empower [indigenous peoples](#)." They help communities politically organize and secure support from government and non-government allies for priorities that serve their own needs. Historically, these communities have been taken advantage of by commercial industries and their own government, from enslavement by rubber barons in the early 20th century to hostile government officials who have even recently failed to respect their rights. This new approach focuses on their assets, rather than imposing outside solutions, and in doing so challenges prevailing ideas about "development" that tend to favor intensifying agricultural production and extracting resources over sustainability and cultural sensitivity.

By overcoming cultural boundaries and building programs to achieve a common goal, says Ravikumar, The Field Museum and other organizations can bring to light how successful these [communities](#) are at maintaining healthy ecosystems and help establish them as respected conservation leaders.



A house in the region of Amazonian Peru where the study took place. Credit: Ashwin Ravikumar

Provided by Field Museum

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