

# When more women make decisions, the environment wins

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When more women are involved in group decisions about land management, the group conserves more—particularly when offered financial incentives to do so, according to a new University of Colorado

Boulder study published this week in *Nature Climate Change*.

The study, involving 440 forest users from three developing countries, sheds new light on the role [gender quotas](#) for local governing bodies could play in reducing global deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions while also curbing local inequalities.

"When policymakers think about what to do to increase conservation around the world, gender quotas don't even come up as a viable policy instrument," said senior author Krister Andersson, a political science professor and researcher at the Institute of Behavioral Science. "This study suggests they should."

Previous research has shown that women tend to have a greater affinity for the environment, support conservation measures more and are more concerned than men are about problems of inequality. But because women often are at a financial disadvantage or are underrepresented in decision-making bodies, they may not have the opportunity to put those preferences into action.

"We wanted to know what would happen if you offered [financial incentives](#) for groups to conserve and made sure at least half the members were women," said Andersson.

## **The conservation game**

Members of the research team traveled to 31 villages near collectively-managed forests in Indonesia, Peru and Tanzania. They staged a day-long tabletop simulation game in which local forest users were divided into groups of eight and asked to make decisions about how many trees they would harvest from a shared forest.

Half the groups had gender quotas requiring that 50 percent of members

were women. Half had no quotas.

In the first stage of the game, all participants anonymously chose how many trees they would cut down, knowing that they would receive a small payment (5 tokens) for each tree. In the second stage, the participants were told that an external organization would pay them 160 tokens as a group if they didn't cut any trees down and the elected leader would decide how to distribute those tokens.

"We found that the groups with the gender quota reduced their harvesting rate far more when the incentive was introduced and also distributed the payments for conserving more equally," said lead author Nathan Cook, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute of Behavioral Science.

Notably, there was no difference between the groups when there was no financial incentive. But once cash was offered, the groups with a quota reduced their harvesting by 51 percent while the control group cut its harvesting by 39 percent.

"It appears that it is not the gender [quota](#) by itself that is making a difference, but rather the combination with the conservation incentive," said Andersson. "Maybe women have stronger environmental preferences but having a seat at the table and a payment for foregoing the immediate benefits of cutting down trees empowers them to act."

## **The rise of quotas**

The study comes as Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) - in which individuals or groups are paid to not extract resources—are growing increasingly common. More than 550 such programs exist in Ecuador, Costa Rica, Brazil and elsewhere to conserve land, water and forests.

Much of the threatened forest is collectively owned and managed by small community groups. But women are often excluded from those groups.

Governments are increasingly experimenting with gender quotas, with legislatures or [local governments](#) in India, Argentina and Rwanda earmarking 30 percent of seats for women. In Nepal, the government stipulates that at least half of local [forest](#) user committee members should be women.

Interestingly, in the new study, it didn't make much difference whether the chosen leader was a man or woman. If the majority of members were female, fewer trees were cut down.

"The big takeaway here is that when it comes to environmental conservation, the presence of [women](#) matters," said Cook.

**More information:** Nathan J. Cook et al, Gender quotas increase the equality and effectiveness of climate policy interventions, *Nature Climate Change* (2019). [DOI: 10.1038/s41558-019-0438-4](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-019-0438-4)

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