

Land rights essential to protect biodiversity and indigenous cultures

May 13 2020



Credit: Rodrigo Anzolin Begotti

New research argues that legally protected large territories in Brazil are crucial to protect biodiversity and provide essential conditions for indigenous populations to maintain their traditional livelihoods.

Researchers at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in the UK show how

several legislative alterations under deliberation in the Brazilian Congress—supported by well-funded and co-ordinated agriculture and mining lobbies, combined with an anti-indigenous policy of the top executive—would affect the long-term ethnocultural and environmental viability of Indigenous Lands. These include changes to the protection status of and/or opening up of territories to economic exploitation.

Brazilian Indigenous Lands comprise 13.5% of the national territory and are occupied by some 515,000 Indians speaking around 280 different languages. Nearly a fifth of all Amazonian animal and plant populations live within these territories, which retain nearly 25.5% of all carbon stocks in Brazil and have a key role in climate change mitigation.

The researchers found that almost 90% of all indigenous territories retain a higher proportion of native vegetation cover than their vicinities, protecting more than 100 million hectares of forests, savannahs and prairies. Moreover, relatively intact territories harbour nearly 54% of all [indigenous peoples](#) living within Indigenous Lands.

However, even before the increasingly dangerous spread of COVID-19 to indigenous peoples and their lands, Rodrigo Begotti and Carlos Peres of UEA's School of Environmental Sciences say they had been exposed to unprecedented pressures.

These threats, which include invasions of many Indigenous Lands by illegal gold miners, loggers and squatters, have become increasingly frequent and more intensive, yet have increasingly been condoned by [government agencies](#) in what the authors say is "haphazard frontier expansion" and "highly degrading predatory land use".

Commenting on their findings, which are published in the journal *Land Use Policy*, Prof Peres said: "These results show the critical importance of legally protecting sufficiently large indigenous territories. Larger

[indigenous populations](#) mainly occupy vast territories and these lands remain critical if Brazil is to accomplish its international commitments to both protect tropical biodiversity and mitigate climate change.

"Our findings reject the repeatedly used argument in Brazil that there is 'too much land for too few Indians' as a justification against new demarcations of Indigenous Lands. We also find that traditional livelihoods of native Brazilians are intricately linked to healthy environmental conditions, and that Indigenous Lands are still efficient in deterring deforestation."

The authors used census data of indigenous and non-indigenous populations and land use maps to depict the geographic context and the conservation performance of all 587 Brazil's indigenous territories and their surroundings.

They compared indigenous population density inside Indigenous Lands and the dominant non-indigenous populations outside, and found that population density is higher inside than outside for nearly one half (295) of all physically demarcated territories. The results also show that relatively low population densities typical of traditional hunter-gatherers, and semi-nomadic and horticulturalist societies were found in only 208 Brazilian Indigenous Lands.

Indigenous [population](#) density is 50 times higher where vegetation cover is reduced to 30% of any given territory or less. For this reason, retaining the rich ethnocultural diversity of all approximately 300 indigenous groups in Brazil requires large and sparsely-settled territories that have been demarcated and ratified by the [federal government](#).

The authors also raise concerns around the effectiveness of Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI), the federal agency responsible for new demarcations and protection of Indigenous Lands, including isolated and

uncontacted groups. It has undergone severe budget cuts, and more recently the dismantling of its administration by what they describe as ideological shifts towards a clear anti-indigenous policy.

Dr. Begotti said: "For indigenous peoples, securing their land rights is critical to maintaining their collective identity and self-determination. Unfortunately, Brazil's current legislative scenario coupled with a hostile federal executive has only fuelled land conflicts and rural violence against native peoples, and increased deforestation rates within Indigenous Lands.

"There is now strong political pressure to integrate indigenous peoples into the market economy by means of establishing commodity agricultural crops and unleashing mining activities inside Indigenous Lands. The justification is that indigenous peoples want to gain access to consumer goods and should generate monetary revenues, regardless of the risks to their ethnocultural diversity and traditional knowledge.

"However, a large body of evidence points to the highly detrimental impacts of down-grading the current protection status of Indigenous Lands, whose legislative status has been hard-won over many years. We hope that Brazil's current and future executive administrations and National Congress will explicitly consider both indigenous welfare and the multiple irreplaceable benefits flowing from Indigenous Lands."

"Rapidly escalating threats to the biodiversity and ethnocultural capital of Brazilian Indigenous Lands" by Rodrigo Anzolin Begotti and Carlos A Peres, is published in *Land Use Policy*.

More information: Rodrigo A. Begotti et al. Rapidly escalating threats to the biodiversity and ethnocultural capital of Brazilian Indigenous Lands, *Land Use Policy* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104694](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104694)

Provided by University of East Anglia

Citation: Land rights essential to protect biodiversity and indigenous cultures (2020, May 13)
retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-05-rights-essential-biodiversity-indigenous-cultures.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.