

# Forests in protected Indigenous lands are healthier, scientists find

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Over the last two centuries, human actions have resulted in rising temperatures, a massive carbon imbalance, and tremendous biodiversity loss. However, there are cases in which human stewardship seems to

help remediate this damage. Researchers publishing on October 26 in the journal *Current Biology* examined tropical forests across Asia, Africa and the Americas and found that the forests located on protected Indigenous lands were the healthiest, highest functioning, most diverse, and most ecologically resilient.

"I'm looking at Indigenous lands to see how conservation outcomes on these lands are, instead of only focusing on protected areas, which are often state run, so that conservation policies might be designed to be more effective and equitable," says lead author Jocelyne Sze, an ecologist at the University of Sheffield.

When evaluating forest health, the team looked at four categories of land: non-protected lands, Indigenous lands, protected areas overlapping Indigenous lands, and protected forests that were not found on Indigenous lands.

"We used a metric called forest integrity to measure the quality of the forest pertaining to its structure, its composition, and its function—it refers to how resilient and healthy a forest is," says Sze. "Our previous research found that across the tropics, deforestation and degradation rates were lower in Indigenous lands compared to non-protected areas, but deforestation and degradation rates are quite simple measures, so we wanted to look at forest integrity."

Sze and her colleagues found that in all the regions they analyzed, forests in areas where protected lands and Indigenous lands overlapped had higher [forest](#) integrity than in any other category. The Americas had the most land that fell into this category, and Africa had the lowest. Some of their findings were surprising to the team.

"It was actually really interesting that it wasn't all positive. We found that, in Asia and the Americas, within spaces that are only Indigenous

lands—so outside of protected areas—the effect on integrity was actually worse than non-protected areas," says Sze.

While Sze didn't specifically study why the forests in non-protected Indigenous lands were worse off, she has some theories. "In a lot of Asia, Indigenous lands and Indigenous rights are not recognized. So, while an area may be categorized as traditionally Indigenous, Indigenous people may not have control over the land," she says. "Also, because lots of minerals, oil, and gas deposits are often found within Indigenous lands, it's not surprising that those lands are often really exploited."

Sze hopes that she and her colleagues can continue to understand how Indigenous land rights and management fit into our conservation policy. "My research is very much inspired by what decolonial climate movements are trying to achieve, in trying to have Indigenous communities and [local communities](#) have more autonomy over these spaces," she says.

**More information:** Jocelyne S. Sze, Indigenous lands in protected areas have high forest integrity across the tropics, *Current Biology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cub.2022.09.040](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2022.09.040). [www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822\(22\)01540-8](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(22)01540-8)

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