

For decades, we've been told 80% of the world's biodiversity is found on Indigenous lands—but it's wrong

September 5 2024, by Stephen Garnett and Álvaro Fernández-Llamazares



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Everyday people understandably rely on information quoted by scientists. But when that information turns out to be incorrect, things get

complicated.

For more than two decades, the claim that 80% of biodiversity occurs on the territories of the world's Indigenous peoples has been treated as fact. It has taken root in public discourse as an established truth.

The figure, however, is wrong, as we show in a comment article published today in the leading science journal [*Nature*](#).

There is ample evidence showing Indigenous peoples and their territories are essential to the world's biodiversity. We don't need an unsupported statistic to prove it.

Right reason, wrong figure

The claim that 80% of global biodiversity is found on the lands of Indigenous peoples has been used to support a just cause.

Advocates using the figure say it shows Indigenous communities [are highly accomplished guardians](#) of the natural environment, and they [have vital roles](#) to play in [biodiversity conservation](#).

For the past 20 years or so, the 80% claim has been cited nearly 350 times in a variety of public documents. They include reports by the United Nations and the World Bank, news articles and the websites of advocacy organizations.

Some 186 of the citations were in peer-reviewed [scientific journals](#). They include top titles such as [PNAS](#), [The Lancet](#) and [Nature](#).

The earliest [reference to the figure](#) we could find was from 2002. But the figure is most commonly attributed to [a report from the World Bank](#) from 2008.

That report says around the world, the role of Indigenous peoples in conserving nature has been overlooked. That part is correct. Only recently have Indigenous peoples' enormous contributions started to be appreciated in science and policy.

But as our paper outlines, the 80% figure is wrong, for several reasons.

First, the possible sources for the figure—[an encyclopedia chapter](#) and a [report on poverty](#)—are either misquotes or a poor summary of previous research.

Second, when the figure was first published in the early 2000s, the extent of Indigenous peoples' lands and seas had not yet been mapped. So precisely determining what proportion of biodiversity it contained was not possible.

Third, biodiversity in its true sense cannot be counted. The widely accepted [definition of biodiversity](#) encompasses everything from genes to entire ecological communities. It is impossible to estimate a percentage of something that cannot be quantified.

And finally, even if one considers biodiversity simply as a list of plant and [animal species](#) in a given location, many species [have not yet been](#) "described" by science. In other words, the species has not received a scientific name and been formally recognized in a [scientific paper](#).

Why challenge a helpful number?

Our paper was a collaboration among researchers at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Australia's Charles Darwin University and elsewhere. It also involved Indigenous peoples and their representatives.

We struggled with the decision to show the 80% figure is wrong. Why

challenge a figure used to support the right of Indigenous people's to access and care for their lands?

To make the decision, we consulted ethics committees at our universities. We also talked widely with Indigenous peoples' advocates—indeed, three of our paper's authors identify as Indigenous.

Assembling the support to challenge the figure has taken five years. We decided to proceed, for several reasons.

The first is to protect the cause the figure has been used to promote.

In the wrong hands, exposure of the false figure could be used to dismiss all claims by Indigenous peoples relating to biodiversity. We took the opposite approach. We combined our analysis with many lines of evidence demonstrating the crucial importance of Indigenous peoples' [territories](#) and [knowledge systems](#) to nature conservation.

The second reason was to safeguard the reputation of Indigenous peoples and their advocates, who have relied on this figure in [good faith](#). Continuing to use an unsupported statistic risks undermining their credibility and diminishing the impact of their advocacy.

Third, we question the wisdom of reducing Indigenous peoples' contributions to a single figure. In our view, it diminishes the significance of the rich social and cultural values that guide their stewardship of nature. It suggests these values are less important than the sheer number of animals and plants in their territories.

Fourth, the figure implies that knowledge of the biodiversity on Indigenous peoples' lands and seas is complete. This could undermine efforts by Indigenous peoples themselves to document and conserve biodiversity.

And fifth, the 80% figure could be seen as patronizing. No-one attempts to give a percentage of biodiversity in, for example, protected areas. This is for good reason—such a figure would be considered implausible. So why should the standard for science on Indigenous peoples' territories be any lower?

Finally, scientists who find and fail to correct inconvenient errors are supporting disinformation by default. This runs contrary to the tenets of scientific rigor.

Should we really be worried?

You might well be asking yourself, has the spurious 80% figure actually done harm?

It is very hard to say this for sure. Certainly, at one international meeting we attended, the 80% figure was used to challenge the quality of Indigenous peoples' stewardship. The argument was that if they look after such a large percentage of biodiversity, why then are so many species declining?

We hear skepticism about the figure on the sidelines of scientific and policy meetings we attend. Commentators have also started [questioning](#) its validity.

Granted, the figure could have benefited Indigenous peoples in some ways. But nonetheless, the figure is wrong and could inadvertently undermine the cause it seeks to champion.

Indigenous peoples play central roles in protecting Earth's biodiversity. The true extent of their contributions cannot be captured in a single number.

More information: Álvaro Fernández-Llamazares et al, No basis for claim that 80% of biodiversity is found in Indigenous territories, *Nature* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/d41586-024-02811-w](https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-024-02811-w)

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