

Rainforest Alert - Panama

INTRODUCTION

Rainforest Foundation US works with indigenous peoples' organizations in Panama to support Wounaan, Emberá, and Guna communities in monitoring over 772 square miles (200,000 hectares) of tropical rainforest against illegal logging, land invasions, and other threats. We train community members in forest monitoring techniques—including GPS and GIS systems, smartphones, and drones—to document evidence of environmental crimes and submit them to the appropriate government authorities.

REGIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Darien is the largest intact forest in Central America and creates the only break in the 19,000-mile Pan-American Highway, which extends from the tip of Argentina to Alaska. This area, known as the Darien Gap, is home to one of the richest repositories of biodiversity in the hemisphere and significant cultural diversity.

THREATS

With 63.4% of its territory still forested, Panama has the highest tree cover in Central America. However, between 2001 and 2019 Panama lost 7.3% of forest cover (approximately 1,600 square miles or 414,000 hectares), despite governmental promises to prioritize forest protection. Of that loss, more than 280 square miles (73,000 hectares) were old growth, largely untouched rainforest (referred to as primary forests). The Darien region saw the most deforestation in that span, losing more than 400 square miles (104,000 hectares).

The indigenous peoples' land rights movement in Panama faces the triple threat of 1) increasing deforestation levels, 2) a government that is slow to recognize indigenous peoples' rights in or near protected areas (which overlay the majority of untitled indigenous peoples' lands), and 3) a dangerous border region with neighboring Colombia, where migrants, drug traffickers, and paramilitary organizations put indigenous communities and their forests at risk.

The main drivers of deforestation in Panama are cattle ranching and logging, which are both on the rise as the agricultural frontier expands into primary forests. Illegal incursions by loggers and ranchers onto indigenous peoples' lands are commonplace, and the source of growing tensions that have led to the murder of indigenous land defenders. The expansion of commercial oil palm, mining, and road and infrastructure development are other sources of deforestation in Panama, as is the growing number of annual forest fires.

PARTNERS

Congreso General de Tierras Colectivas Emberá y Wounaan, Congreso Nacional del Pueblo Wounaan, Congreso General Tule Ancestral de Taragkunyul, Coordinadora Nacional de Pueblos Indígenas de Panamá, who collectively represent untitled indigenous peoples' lands in eastern Panama and Darien.

We also partner with GeoIndigena, a civil association led by indigenous youth, to provide training and capacity building for mapping, monitoring, and community natural resource management with indigenous traditional governance structures.

PROJECT DETAILS

Rainforest Foundation US has been working closely with partners in Panama to establish GeoIndigena, an indigenous-led civil society organization that provides technical services to indigenous communities and territories across Panama and the rest of Mesoamerica. Their work to address the pandemic in Panama was recently [featured in NPR](#).

How it works

- Primary data hub located at GeoIndigena headquarters in Panama City receives satellite deforestation alerts and reviews satellite imagery to detect threats on indigenous peoples' lands. Additionally, these initial indications of a threat frequently come from locals on the ground.
- Information collected at the primary data hub is passed to field hubs in the respective indigenous territories and alerts are verified by monitors via foot patrols.
- Field data hubs compile evidence for discussion with regional indigenous leaders, who decide how to address the threat.
- In the event that local leaders decide to address the threat by engaging with government authorities, legal agents or the media, the data managers support them to build compelling evidence-based cases for their advocacy.

Results

In general, this program has succeeded in both addressing discrete threats to indigenous peoples' land as well as strengthening governance, management, and expanded territorial rights in Panama. Specific results include:

- 23 indigenous community-based monitors trained
- 14 deforestation threats detected
- 11 coordinated government interventions
- 756 square miles (196,000 hectares) of forests monitored

PROJECT NEEDS

Support needs for ongoing activities are listed below (figures are annual):

- Continued support for staffing the current field data hubs and community forest monitoring operations: 200k
- Equipment costs for forest monitors and data hubs: 50k
- Support for advocacy, including travel and meetings with governmental agencies and outreach to public media: 100k
- Costs for field visits by Panamanian authorities: 50k

Contact Cameron Ellis, Senior Geographer, Rainforest Foundation US: cellis@rffny.org