The case for REDD+: why it pays to protect forests

- By South Pole -

Riparian forests on the Igara Paraná river, in Predio Putumayo – Colombia's largest indigenous reserve. The reserve is home to one of the most preserved forest ecosystems in the Colombian Amazon. Image credit: South Pole

Our planet's forests contain more carbon than exploitable oil, gas, and coal deposits combined. Preventing emissions from deforestation and land-use change is just as urgent, if not more, than transitioning away from fossil fuels. They are also the lifeline to a quarter of the world's population, many of whom are among the world's poorest.

The good news? By working with nature, we can avoid unleashing 'irrecoverable carbon' and conserve biodiversity – a cornerstone of our economic and social fabric that affects the industries we have and the food we eat. This is something that REDD+ projects ('reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation') are working to do.

The world needs trees – especially standing ones

There are a multitude of reasons for clearing forests: for farming and agriculture, to graze livestock or build a mine, or to expand infrastructure and cities. But when we cut down trees, we are not only releasing the carbon that they store above and below the ground, but actively preventing them from continuing to grow and suck more carbon from the atmosphere – now and over the long term. Furthermore, the lack of trees means lack of natural shade, disappearing sources of water and ultimately drought, affecting farmers and beyond.

In other words: by cutting down trees we are simultaneously driving global warming and reducing our ability to tackle it.

Given the devastating effects of deforestation on both rising temperatures, atmospheric greenhouse gas levels and global biodiversity loss, it's not surprising that planting trees – one trillion of them, to be exact – was recently heralded as "one of the most effective carbon drawdown solutions to date".

But what about our remaining forests? There are around three trillion trees still standing, and looking after these should be our first priority. These trees currently store around 400 gigatons of CO_2 and losing them would have disastrous consequences for everyone. To put that into perspective: our remaining global carbon budget is not that much higher, about 500 gigatons of CO_2 – and this is if we want to have just a 50% chance of limiting global warming to 1.5°C by mid-century.

The Amazon rainforest has often been referred to as the Earth's lungs – or a giant air conditioner that cools the planet – and for good reason: existing trees, particularly ancient tropical forests, store much more carbon than recently planted seedlings, which take time to mature. But they're much more than carbon sinks: trees provide vital ecosystem services. They protect watersheds, prevent erosion, regulate the soil cycle and local temperatures and even filter air quality. They are home to 80% of terrestrial biodiversity and provide livelihoods for nearly two billion people. Protecting them is key not only in addressing climate change but in building our collective resilience by preventing a looming biodiversity crisis.

Robust REDD+ projects can support planet and people

Protecting our last remaining strongholds of nature is critical – and this is where REDD+ projects come in.

The core concept of REDD+ is simple – to preserve and sustainably manage forests to prevent carbon from being released into the atmosphere when trees are cut or burned. However, putting this into practice is not. Protecting existing, complex forest environments is at times more challenging than planting new ones, for several reasons.

Benefit-sharing: Just like the ecosystems they protect, successful REDD+ projects are a delicate balance between a bottom up and top down approach between local communities, governments and the companies who support them. To change behaviour means changing entire socio-economic systems that traditionally rely on destruction of natural environments, and this requires concerted efforts from everyone. Forest protection activities are sustainable only when local communities benefit from the social, economic and ecological benefits that ecosystems provide.

Price: Another challenge is the price and scale of activities required to stop the underlying drivers of deforestation. While carbon finance[1] helps create opportunities for locals by assigning more financial value to healthy forests, it is still hard to compete with the profits that come from large-scale agriculture, mining and other commercial activities. In a country with poor economic alternatives, it still pays to destroy the forest, reminding us that economic development and environmental conservation are deeply intertwined. The role of business in scaling up and funding REDD+ projects where governments fall short is pivotal to address the true need of climate and biodiversity crisis, and to ensure a just transition. Finding ways that continue to allow for private sector participation in REDD+ projects – both under voluntary and compliance schemes – will be critical.

Monitoring: Lastly, robust REDD+ projects must have sound ways to monitor, report and verify the impact of activities that are being supported. A foundation of strong self-governance ensures strong community institutions and territorial protection, including having the technological and financial resources to monitor indigenous lands against illegal incursions.

The challenge and opportunity

In many places, the lifeline provided to REDD+ projects by companies such as JetBlue and Microsoft looks shaky as a result of the global Covid-19 pandemic. This health crisis is putting communities under additional pressure - a threat that they are ill prepared for. Covid-19 has already struck deep into isolated Amazon regions of Colombia, for example, threatening populations of the Murui-Muina, Okaina, Bora and Muinane people in La Chorrera in Putumayo – people who have long served as guardians of the forest.

Local assembly on REDD+ project management with communities and authorities of indigenous associations at Predio Putumayo. Fully engaging indigenous peoples and local communities is key in upholding their rights and leadership, in ensuring they can manage and monitor REDD+ project activities independently. [Image credit: South Pole.]

"*We have been working side by side with these communities to help them set up a forest protection project within the Amazon rainforest and to empower them to independently manage and monitor conservation activities – while guaranteeing social and environmental safeguards*," says Samuel Monsalve Correa, Project Manager of Predio Putumayo at South Pole.

"*Now, after a full year of rigorous work, several site visits, and over 70 educational and social events involving the 55 different communities in the project area, we are finally gearing up to issue the project's first REDD+ credits. But these achievements are being threatened by the coronavirus. We have already sent the local communities a humanitarian relief donation, which was well received, but this is not enough. We must find sustainable solutions to solve the human and planetary health crisis by conserving forests and their people.*"

REDD+ projects such as the one in Putumayo invest in indigenous peoples' capacity to meaningfully engage in the sustainable management of forests and creation of livelihoods. These make a real difference over the long-term, whether they are fighting a global pandemic or climate change.

References:

1 Carbon finance from the sales of carbon credits generated by certified REDD+ projects