

# Introducing the Rainforest Alliance's Integrated Community Forest Management



**Forests cover one third of the world's land surface. They play a key role in regulating the water cycle, storing carbon, preventing soil erosion, and hosting over 50 percent of the Earth's terrestrial biodiversity, mostly in tropical rainforests. Preserving forests—along with other natural climate solutions such as reforestation, sustainable forest management, and agroforestry—could help us achieve up to 37 percent of the emissions reductions needed to limit global heating to 1.5°C<sup>1</sup>. And yet we are still losing forests at a high rate by converting them to other land use, mostly agriculture. In 2019, we lost a football pitch of tropical forest every six seconds<sup>2</sup>. We also degrade forests through fires and unsustainable forest and wildlife management, as well as through mining and human infrastructures that result in fragmentation<sup>3,4</sup>.**

Throughout its 30+ year history, the Rainforest Alliance has worked to halt forest degradation and deforestation, while supporting the livelihoods of producers and forest-dependent communities around the world. Building on this experience, we have developed a [Deforestation Position Paper](#), presenting our approach to combating agriculture-driven deforestation and the conversion of natural ecosystems.

Our full Integrated [Community Forest Management Position Paper](#), which is summarized here, presents our approach to addressing forest degradation, including the principles that we believe must guide the global community's broader efforts.

## THE RAINFOREST ALLIANCE'S POSITION

Almost one third of the world's forest area is under some form of community based/smallholder management, and the area is increasing with the devolution of rights to local and indigenous communities in several countries<sup>5</sup>. The Rainforest Alliance has long been a proponent of a "rights-based" approach to community forestry and promotes biocultural conservation, which builds on the deep interdependence between local cultural heritage and the environment. But, while an important first step, this alone cannot halt deforestation and forest degradation, or improve livelihoods<sup>6</sup>. We are convinced that local communities and indigenous peoples, if given secured rights to land and resources, and supported with technical capacities, incentives, and market access, play a critical role in preserving

forests. For years, the community forestry concessions in the Maya Biosphere Reserve have provided living proof of this approach (see Box 1).

#### Box 1

### The Maya Biosphere Reserve

Our flagship project is the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala, where the Rainforest Alliance leads US-AID's Climate, Nature and Communities in Guatemala initiative, in partnership with the Association of Forest Communities of Petén. For more than 15 years we have supported Community Forest Concessions and created a broad alliance between forest communities, local and national government institutions, companies, local NGOs, academia, and implementing partners, to catalyze transformation in a landscape once known for crisis-level deforestation rates and poverty. Today, the deforestation rate in the forest concessions where we work is near zero, while protected areas and buffer zones nearby suffered high deforestation levels. Poverty rates in the concessions are also significantly lower than in other parts of Guatemala, making outmigration from the concession communities virtually unheard of<sup>7,8</sup>.

To develop successful community forests, the Rainforest Alliance is convinced of the need for partnerships between communities and other organizations—government, NGOs, and private companies. Successful outcomes from community forestry can be explained partly by whether there is a community of practice linking local people to external forest professionals for mutual learning<sup>9</sup>. Companies play an important role in securing access to markets for

responsibly produced community forest products; and in creating partnerships with local communities.

Recognizing the deep interdependence between forest communities and the environment, and depending on the level of forest degradation<sup>10</sup> (see Figure 1), the Rainforest Alliance's position is to:

- support the preservation or restoration of natural forests<sup>10</sup> through responsible community forest management
- promote restoration of natural vegetation in agroforests and degraded forests
- support no-deforestation smallholder agriculture production and restoration to agroforests
- promote socially beneficial and ecologically sound planted forests<sup>11</sup> through reforestation
- maintain strictly protected areas in a wider matrix of other uses and practices.

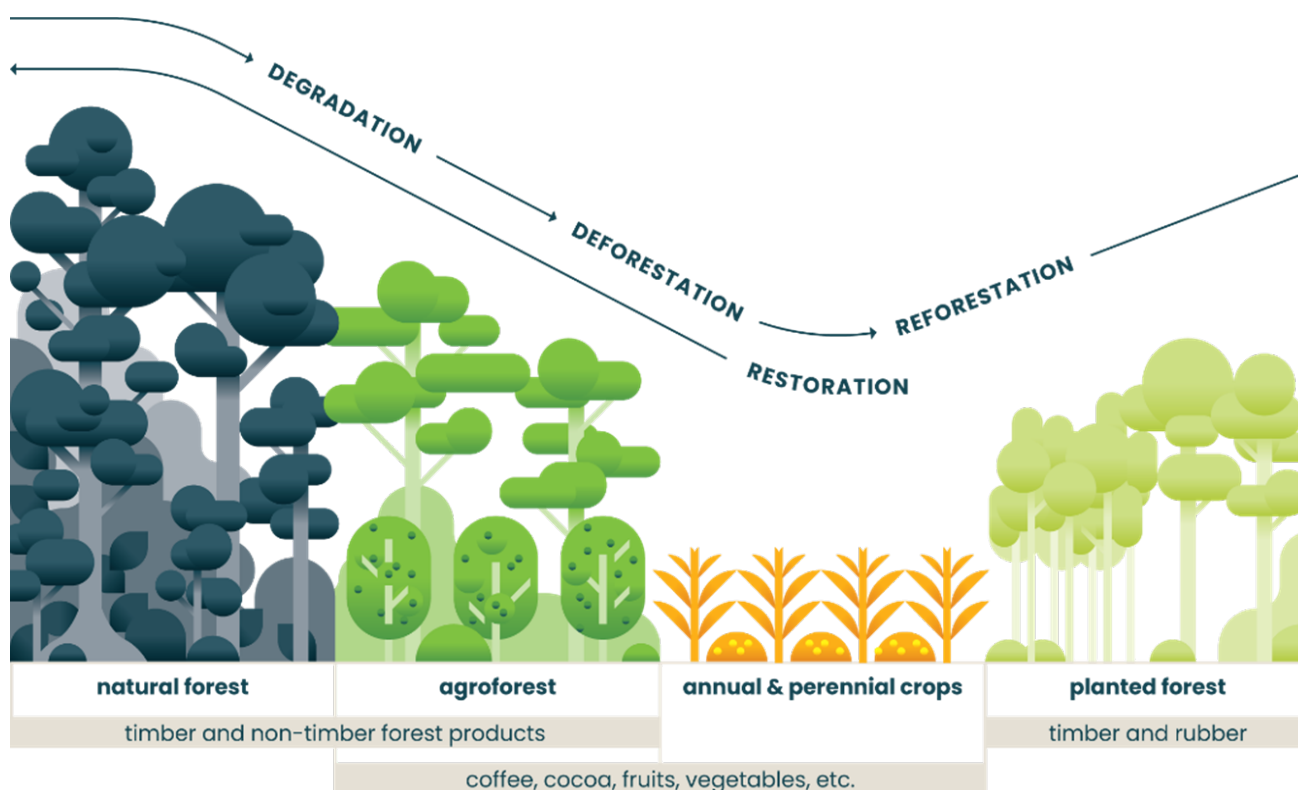


Figure 1: Forest transition curve and related interventions in tropical areas

## THE RAINFOREST ALLIANCE'S STRATEGY ON FORESTS

### Our vision for forests and core interventions

Our vision is thriving communities and forests, where the interdependency of local communities' livelihoods and their natural environment is recognized and valued, and the enabling conditions for local communities to be the stewards of forests are encouraged and enforced.

To achieve this vision, we have supported community forest enterprises, particularly in Mexico and Guatemala. But not all contexts enable successful community forest enterprises. To be effective at scale, we have reframed our work within a broader concept of **integrated community forest management**.

Embodying our vision of people and nature thriving in harmony, integrated community forest management contributes to the [integrated landscape management](#) approach, engaging multiple actors at multiple scales. Integrated community forest management enables robust environmental policy structures and active market participation to exist alongside practical, field-based strategies to strengthen forest management, while boosting the long-term economic and social resilience of rural communities. This is achieved by placing forest communities at the heart of safeguarding and restoring our world's forests.

Integrated community forest management:

- **supports community forest enterprises** through training, tools, and knowledge to provide sustained economic development and foster strong social governance and inclusion, providing equitable benefits to households, incorporating young people in activities, and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment

- **implements sustainable forest management, restoration or reforestation** in order to reduce forest degradation and deforestation, and to increase forest cover, biodiversity, and carbon capture
- **manages the forest in harmony** with other crops and ecosystems in the landscape
- **fosters secured rights to forests**, and access to alliances, finance, and markets, to create an enabling environment for successful community forest enterprises at scale.

Based on our experience and a learning inventory of our work over the past 15 years, we have defined an implementation pathway (Figure 2). Recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all approach or single model for community forestry, this pathway serves as guidance for our projects, which needs to be tailored to local contexts using a participatory approach.

Through [tailored supply-chain services](#) the Rainforest Alliance supports actors in supply chains to build corporate policies that address their sourcing of forest-risk commodities (products such as pulp and paper, timber, rubber, and non-timber forest products). When working with companies on forests beyond their individual supply chains, **Forest Allies** is our main vehicle. Through our Forest Allies community of practice, we bring together companies, regional civil society organizations and forest communities to form powerful partnerships. The Forest Allies community of practice convenes twice a year to exchange knowledge, best practices, and solutions for shared challenges. Forest Allies supports the Rainforest Alliance's integrated community forest management approach by contributing to a pool of capital used to invest directly in support of community forest enterprises, and by fostering a foundation of mutual respect, trust, and a shared vision between forest communities and markets.

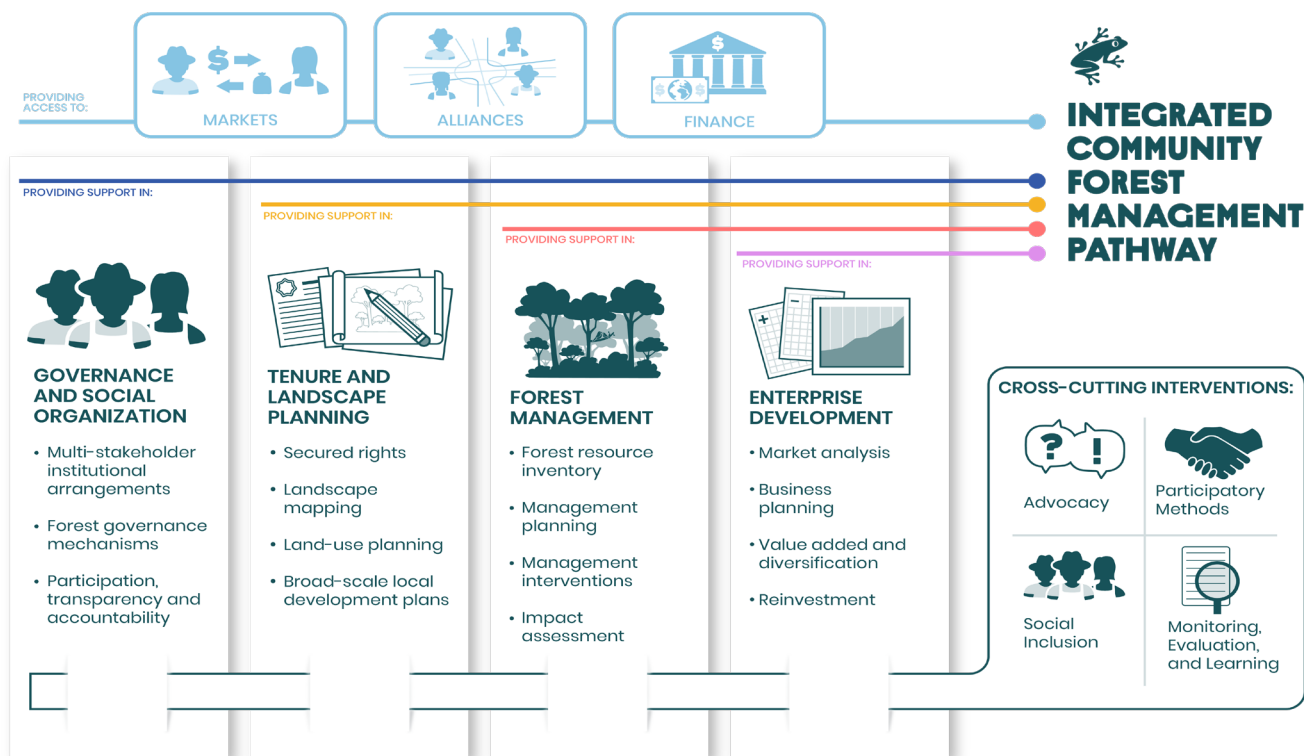


Figure 2: The Rainforest Alliance's integrated community forest management (ICFM) pathway

## PRINCIPLES OF INTEGRATED COMMUNITY FOREST MANAGEMENT

The Rainforest Alliance's own interventions are one set of contributions to the broader effort towards minimizing deforestation and forest degradation, and fostering sustainable forest management. The following five principles are crucial for guiding all efforts to meet these goals:

- **Forests' values should be protected and/or restored**
  - Preserve High Conservation Values: identify, protect, manage with care
  - Restore forests: natural regeneration and agroforestry have a role to play
- **Local communities must become ecosystem stewards at scale**
  - Foster policies to ensure community rights over forests
  - Promote sound governance and ensure social inclusion in local organizations
  - Enable effective alliances, governance, and funding at scale
- **Responsible forest management needs to be enhanced and monitored**
  - Base a management plan on current science and best forestry practices
  - Monitor the forest
- **Communities should be supported in adapting to and mitigating climate change**
  - Increase ecological resilience to climate change
  - Support climate change mitigation practices
- **Livelihoods from forest product value chains must be strengthened**
  - Develop market access and diversification to boost income and profitability
  - Support supply chain accountability and responsible forest management through certification and multistakeholder processes

## WE CANNOT DO THIS ALONE

Progress can only be achieved collaboratively and when all actors take responsibility. If we aim to reverse forest degradation and leverage forests as a natural climate solution, we need to scale our interventions. Integrated community forest management proposes a pathway that enables local communities to become ecosystem stewards at scale. Directing the flow of public and private capital towards these efforts will be critical in achieving this goal.

Through alliances and collaboration we believe we can innovate and take action. Together with you, we are inspired to make the coming years a time of successful forest preservation and restoration.

*If you wish to partner with and support forest communities, please contact [forests@ra.org](mailto:forests@ra.org).*



# References

- 1        Griscom BW, Adams J, Ellis PW, et al. (2017). Natural climate solutions. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114(44), 11645–11650. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1710465114>
- 2        Weisse M, Goldman L. (2020). We lost a football pitch of primary rainforest every 6 seconds in 2019. *Global Forest Watch* blog post, 2 June. <https://blog.globalforest-watch.org/data-and-research/global-tree-cover-lossdata-2019>
- 3        Bebbington AJ, Humphreys Bebbington D, Sauls LA, et al. (2018). Resource extraction and infrastructure threaten forest cover and community rights. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(52), 13164–13173. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1812505115>
- 4        Pacheco P, Mo K, Dudley N, et al. (2021). *Deforestation Fronts: Drivers and Responses in a Changing World*. Gland, Switzerland: WWF. [https://www.panda.org/discover/our\\_focus/forests\\_practice/deforestation\\_fronts\\_/](https://www.panda.org/discover/our_focus/forests_practice/deforestation_fronts_/)
- 5        RRI. (2020). *Rights-Based Conservation: The Path to Preserving Earth's Biological and Cultural Diversity?* Washington, DC: Rights and Resources Initiative. [https://rightsandresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Final\\_Rights\\_Conervation\\_RRI.pdf](https://rightsandresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Final_Rights_Conervation_RRI.pdf)
- 6        Kusters K, De Graaf M. (2019). *Formalizing Community Rights to Forests, Expectations, Outcomes and Conditions for Success*. Ede, The Netherlands: Tropenbos International. <https://www.tropenbos.org/resources/publications/formalizing+community+rights+to+forests:+expectations,+outcomes+and+conditions+for+success>
- 7        Rainforest Alliance. (2018). *The Secret to Stopping Deforestation in Guatemala*. <https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/articles/community-the-secret-to-stopping-deforestation-in-guatemala>
- 8        Stoian D, Rodas A, Butler M, Monterroso I & Hodgdon B. (2018). Forest concessions in Petén, Guatemala A systematic analysis of the socioeconomic performance of community enterprises in the Maya Biosphere Reserve. *CI- FOR Brief* 7163
- 9        Macqueen D, Mayers J. (2020). *Unseen Foresters—An Assessment of Approaches for Wider Recognition and Spread of Sustainable Forest Management by Local Communities*. Stockholm: WWF. [https://www.panda.org/downloads/report\\_wwf\\_iied\\_unseen\\_foresters\\_2020\\_1.pdf](https://www.panda.org/downloads/report_wwf_iied_unseen_foresters_2020_1.pdf)
- 10        The Rainforest Alliance uses the definitions of forest degradation and natural forest from the Accountability Framework Initiative <https://accountability-framework.org/the-framework/contents/definitions/>
- 11        FAO. (2018). *Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, p. 5. <http://www.fao.org/3/i8661en/i8661en.pdf>. "Forest predominantly composed of trees established through planting and/or deliberate seeding."



The Rainforest Alliance is an international non-profit organization working in 70 countries at the intersection of business, agriculture and forests. We are building an alliance to create a better future for people and nature by making responsible business the new normal.

[rainforest-alliance.org](https://rainforest-alliance.org)

