

LESSON 3: INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND THE RAINFOREST

Lesson plan overview

In this lesson, students will explore how Indigenous communities play a vital role in protecting rainforest ecosystems and promoting environmental justice. Through case studies from Cameroon, Guatemala, and Indonesia, they will examine how local communities defend their land rights, preserve cultural heritage, and lead conservation initiatives. Students will also consider the challenges these groups face—such as land grabs and threats to defenders—and reflect on the importance of equity and advocacy in global conservation efforts.

Educational materials

- **Video:** ‘Guardians of the Forest’ (Indigenous communities, land rights, environmental justice)
- **Worksheet:** Case study analysis (summarize who’s involved, what the issue is, and how communities are advocating for change)
- **Quiz:** Identify terms (land tenure, conservation, Indigenous rights, advocacy)
- **Math tie-in:** Charting threats against land defenders
- **Art tie-in:** Design murals or posts to promote Indigenous-led conservation and advocacy
- **Classroom discussion questions:**
 - Why do Indigenous communities play such a key role in protecting rainforests?
 - What challenges do they face in doing so?

WORKSHEET: Indigenous Justice Case Studies



Name: _____ Date: _____

Watch the video 'Guardians of the Forest' carefully and read the attached case studies. For each case study, fill in the chart below by identifying:

Who's involved—Which Indigenous group or community is taking action?

The issue—What problem or threat are they facing?

Community action—How are they responding or advocating for change?

Impact—What results or successes have they had (or what are they still fighting for)?

Case Study 1: Amazon Rainforest (Brazil/Peru)

Who's involved:

The issue:

Community action:

Impact:

Case Study 2: Cameroon (Congo Basin)

Who's involved:

The issue:

Community action:

Impact:

Case Study 3: Indonesia (Borneo and Sumatra)



Who's involved:

The issue:

Community action:

Impact:

.....

Reflection questions (short answer)

Why do Indigenous communities often succeed at protecting rainforests and tropical forest where governments and corporations fail?

What does this teach us about the connection between justice and conservation?

Teacher's note: You can adapt this chart to a jigsaw activity—assign different groups of students different case studies, then have them present their findings to the class.

Case Study 1: Amazon Rainforest (Brazil and Peru)



Indigenous peoples, such as the Kayapo in Brazil and Asháninka in Peru, have lived in the Amazon for centuries. They depend on the forest for food, medicine, and culture. However, their lands are threatened by illegal logging, gold mining, cattle ranching, and oil drilling. These activities destroy forests, pollute rivers, and bring violence to local communities.

To protect their territory, Indigenous groups have organized forest patrols, mapped their traditional lands, and partnered with NGOs to monitor deforestation with satellite data. In Brazil, some communities even use drones to track illegal logging. Despite threats, these actions have slowed forest loss and pressured governments to recognize Indigenous land rights. Studies show that deforestation rates are lowest inside Indigenous territories, proving that these communities are effective guardians of the forest.



Kayapo Peoples, Brazil



Asháninka Peoples, Peru

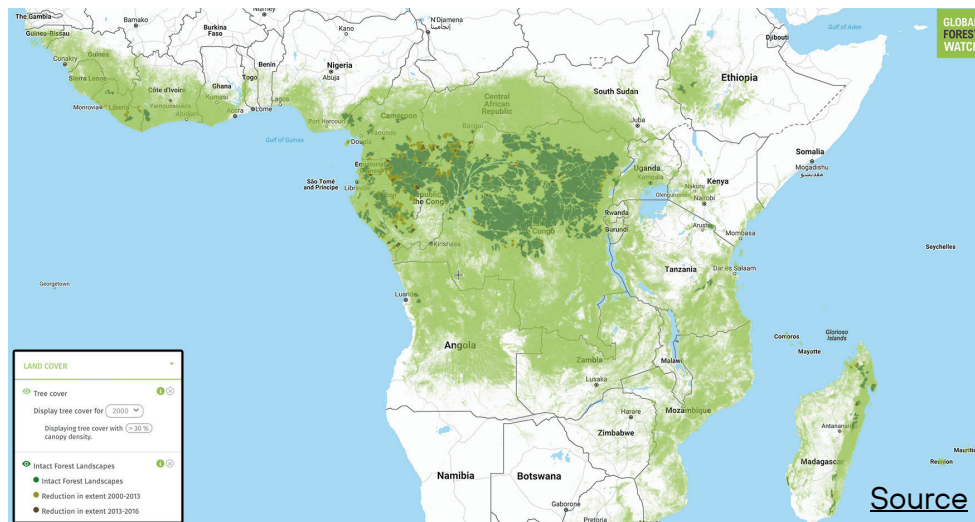


Case Study 2: Cameroon (Congo Basin)



The Congo Basin rainforest, often called the “second lung of the Earth,” is home to Indigenous groups like the Baka people. These communities face challenges from large-scale logging, palm oil plantations, and poaching. In many cases, companies take land without consent, violating human rights and destroying forests.

The Baka and other Indigenous groups have partnered with conservation organizations to advocate for “Free, Prior, and Informed Consent” (FPIC) before any project uses their land. They are also involved in wildlife monitoring, especially for endangered species such as forest elephants and gorillas. These efforts highlight the struggle for environmental justice—where conservation must also respect Indigenous rights. Global advocacy has pressured logging companies and governments to include Indigenous voices in forest management, though progress is still uneven.



Baka Peoples, Congo Basin



Case Study 3: Indonesia (Borneo and Sumatra)



Indonesia's rainforests are among the most biodiverse on Earth, home to orangutans, tigers, and hornbills. But they are also some of the most endangered, as palm oil plantations, mining, and fires drive massive deforestation. Indigenous groups like the Dayak people in Borneo and communities in Sumatra have been at the frontlines of protecting their land.

These groups practice sustainable farming and forest management, resisting land grabs by corporations. Some villages have reclaimed burned or logged land and replanted it with native trees, creating community forests. In many cases, Indigenous activism has led to court victories where palm oil concessions were cancelled. International campaigns, often led by local groups, have also pressured global companies to adopt "no deforestation" pledges. This case shows how Indigenous leadership can connect local survival with global climate solutions.



**Palm oil
concession**



**Dayak peoples,
Borneo**



Source

QUIZ: Indigenous Solutions and Environmental Justice



Name: _____ Date: _____

Part A: Definitions (multiple choice)

1. What does land tenure mean?

- a) A type of farming used in rainforests
- b) Legal rights to own, use, or manage land
- c) A method of protecting wildlife corridors
- d) International trade of forest products

2. What is advocacy?

- a) Cutting down forests for farming
- b) Speaking up or acting in support of a cause
- c) A legal system for punishing companies
- d) Planting crops in rainforest regions

3. Which of the following best defines Indigenous rights?

- a) The right of governments to control natural resources
- b) The rights of companies to develop land
- c) The rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain their land, culture, and traditions
- d) The right of anyone to settle in rainforests

4. In conservation, what does equity mean?

- a) Treating all groups exactly the same, regardless of need
- b) Ensuring fairness and including marginalized voices in decisions
- c) Focusing only on economic benefits of conservation
- d) Giving companies equal access to rainforest land

Part B: Scenario questions

5. In Brazil, the Kayapo people use drones to monitor illegal logging. Which term best fits this action?

- a) Land tenure
- b) Advocacy
- c) Equity
- d) Conservation

6. In Cameroon, the Baka people demand that companies get “Free, Prior, and Informed Consent” before logging.



This is an example of:

- a) Advocacy for Indigenous rights
- b) Palm oil expansion
- c) Camouflage and adaptation
- d) Equity being ignored

7. In Indonesia, local communities win court cases to stop palm oil plantations from destroying their forests. What concept is shown here?

- a) Predation
- b) Equity in conservation
- c) Land tenure and advocacy
- d) Camouflage

Part C: Matching (write the letter)

Match each case study to its main conservation lesson:

8. Indigenous forest patrols and satellite monitoring prove these communities are effective guardians.

9. The demand for Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) highlights the importance of justice in conservation.

10. Legal battles against palm oil plantations show how communities protect biodiversity and climate.

A. Amazon Rainforest
(Brazil and Peru)

B. Cameroon
(Congo Basin)

C. Indonesia
(Borneo and Sumatra)

QUIZ: ANSWER KEY



Part A: Definitions

- b) Legal rights to own, use, or manage land → Land tenure
- b) Speaking up or acting in support of a cause → Advocacy
- c) The rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain land, culture, and traditions → Indigenous rights
- b) Ensuring fairness and including marginalized voices in decisions → Equity

Part B: Scenario Questions

- b) Advocacy → Kayapo people using drones to monitor illegal logging is advocacy.
- a) Advocacy for Indigenous rights → Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) demands.
- c) Land tenure and advocacy → Court cases in Indonesia securing land rights.

Part C: Matching

- A. Amazon Rainforest (Brazil and Peru) → Forest patrols and satellite monitoring.
- C. Cameroon (Congo Basin) → FPIC highlights justice in conservation.
- D. Indonesia (Borneo and Sumatra) → Legal battles against palm oil plantations.

MATH TIE-IN



Charting Threats Against Land Defenders

Students will be provided with Global Witness data (e.g., annual reports on killings, attacks, or threats against environmental defenders).

Students will:

- Create a bar graph showing the number of land defenders killed each year over the past decade.
- Break down data by region (e.g., Latin America, Africa, Asia-Pacific).
- Calculate percent change across years and identify which region shows the most dramatic increase or decrease.

Optional extension: Ask students to model a simple projection (line of best fit) to predict how many defenders might be at risk by 2030 if current trends continue.



Charting Threats Against Land Defenders

Land defenders at risk background:

Global Witness reports on the number of land and environmental defenders killed each year around the world. These are people protecting rainforests, rivers, and communities from mining, logging, and agribusiness. By analyzing this data, we can better understand the risks they face over time.

Killings of environmental defenders (2012–2023)

Year	Number of defenders killed
2012	147
2013	147
2014	116
2015	185
2016	200
2017	201
2018	167
2019	212
2020	227
2021	200
2022	177

Part 1: Graphing

On graph paper (or Excel/Google Sheets), make a graph of the data.

X-axis (horizontal): Years (2012–2022)

Y-axis (vertical): Number of defenders killed

Choose either a bar graph or line graph.

Label your axes and give your graph a title:

“Environmental defenders killed, 2012–2022.”

Part 2: Analyzing the data

Answer these questions using the data and your graph:

Which year had the highest number of killings?

Which year had the lowest number of killings?

Between which two years do you see the biggest jump in killings? How many more defenders were killed?

Between which two years do you see the biggest drop in killings?

What does the overall trend tell us about the danger defenders face over the last decade?

Part 3: Critical thinking

Why do you think 2015 shows such a sharp increase compared to 2014?

What do you notice about the pattern in the last five years (2018–2022)?

What might be some global events or pressures (like mining, agriculture, or politics) that explain these numbers?

MATH TIE-IN (FOR TEACHERS)



Charting Threats Against Land Defenders

Part 1: Graphing

Students should create a line graph or bar chart with years (2012–2022) on the x-axis and number of defenders killed on the y-axis.

Correct graph should show:

- Relatively steady numbers in 2012–2013.
- A dip in 2014.
- A spike in 2015 (185 deaths).
- An even sharper rise in 2016–2017, peaking again in 2019–2020.
- Slight decline after 2020, though numbers remain very high.

Teacher note: Highlight the significance of the 2015 jump (185 deaths, a 59% increase from 2014) as a turning point.

Part 2: Data analysis questions

Which year had the highest number of killings?

→ 2020 (227 deaths).

What was the largest year-to-year increase?

→ 2014 (116) → 2015 (185): an increase of 69 defenders killed.

Which years show a decline compared to the previous year?

→ 2014 (down from 147 in 2013), 2018 (down from 201 in 2017), 2021 (down from 227 in 2020), and 2022 (down from 200 in 2021).

What does this data suggest about the risks faced by land defenders over time?

→ Risks are consistently high and worsening over the decade, with spikes linked to periods of increased resource exploitation and political instability. Despite some fluctuations, the overall pattern is alarming.

Part 3: Extension and critical thinking

Why might 2015 show such a sharp increase compared to 2014?

→ Possible reasons include:

- Escalation of mining, logging, and agribusiness projects.
- Weak legal protections for Indigenous and local land defenders.
- Rising global demand for natural resources.

What patterns do you notice in the last five years (2018–2022)?

→ While deaths remain above 170 each year, there's fluctuation, suggesting ongoing danger without significant long-term reduction.

ART TIE-IN



Indigenous-led Conservation and Advocacy

Activity: Students will design murals or posters that advocate for land rights, equity, and cultural heritage in rainforest regions.

Guidelines:

- Choose one or more themes: Protecting Indigenous land rights, highlighting cultural traditions, promoting equity in conservation, or celebrating communities as guardians of the forest.
- Use imagery, colors, and words that communicate respect, resilience, and the value of Indigenous land stewardship.
- Students can work individually or in groups, and completed murals/posters can be displayed in the classroom or around the school to inspire conversations about environmental justice.

INSPIRATION

