



Press Release

International Union of Forest Research Organizations

Forest Day – Traditional forest knowledge: An untapped source for coping with climate change

New publication by IUFRO researchers highlights role of indigenous and local communities to design mitigation measures

(Durban/Vienna, 1 December 2011) Indigenous peoples, who comprise approximately 5% of the world's population, manage an estimated 11% of the world's forests. As climate change has already affected forests and forest-dependent people in a number of ways, both indigenous and local communities who depend on forests and woodlands for food, clean water and other basic needs have learned how to cope with climatic shifts and extreme weather events. Over generations, they have adapted their forest management practices in ways that have ensured the conservation of forest biodiversity and food security. However, neither the importance of this traditional knowledge nor its role in development of more effective and equitable approaches for facing the challenges posed by climate change have been adequately recognized, concludes a new publication of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO).

This work will be presented on Sunday 4 December at a discussion forum on social safeguards to protect the rights and interests of indigenous and local communities in REDD+, initiated by the United Nations Development Programme, IUCN and IUFRO during *Forest Day 5* in Durban, South Africa.

“Green” technologies and innovations

“The sustainable management of forests for the multiple goods and services they provide requires the application of the best available knowledge and wisdom”, says John Parrotta, coordinator of IUFRO's Task Force on Traditional Forest Knowledge: “We have much to learn from traditional societies' knowledge, innovations, and practices for weather prediction, sustainable use of wild plant and animal species, and agricultural techniques for managing and conserving water and soil resources.” Of particular relevance are practices that, unlike modern energy-intensive industrial agriculture or many forestry practices, neither depend on significant fossil fuel inputs, nor result in deforestation and CO₂ emissions from forest conversion and agricultural management.

The local knowledge and practices associated with the creation and management of oases in arid regions, as well as sophisticated agroforest and traditional shifting cultivation management systems, demonstrate the importance of traditional knowledge for human adaptation to environmental extremes. Decreased rainfall and more severe droughts are expected to be particularly stressful for forest-dependent people in many parts of Africa. Coping with drought has often focused on maintaining fodder availability during even the driest years. For example, farmers in Ethiopia have developed their own criteria for selection and evaluation of indigenous fodder trees and shrubs, and have also perfected protocols for the propagation and effective conservation of such species.

Strong need for safeguards in REDD+

However, the rights, interests, and knowledge of local and indigenous communities are greatly undervalued in the climate change policy arena. According to the IUFRO experts, these rights and interests also have not been adequately considered in the formulation of climate change

policies and programmes. The effective engagement of forest-dependent local and indigenous communities as well as the effective incorporation of traditional forest-knowledge in forest management will determine the success of REDD+, the funding mechanism currently under discussion that aims to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries while fostering forest conservation, sustainable management, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks.

Based on past experiences of forest conservation and climate change mitigation projects carried out in areas inhabited by local and indigenous communities, there is, according to the new publication, reason for concern that REDD programs may not result in positive outcomes from the point of view of traditional communities. While providing financial incentives for forest protection, “there is a strong need to establish appropriate safeguards for protecting indigenous peoples’ rights under REDD+ and to foster good forest governance, including the fair and equitable distribution of REDD benefits”, says Parrotta: “At present, the cultural capital of traditional societies is no match for the financial capital of the interests that dominate the policy debates worldwide on climate change and REDD+.”

Traditional knowledge to meet formal science

IUFRO President Niels Elers Koch highlights the need for an enhanced integration of such knowledge in research and forest management: “A greater appreciation of the past and present-day knowledge of local and indigenous communities would bring benefits to all – scientists, policy-makers, and the general public. “Traditional knowledge could complement formal science in various ways, for example in monitoring the effects of climate change. “The scientific community has an important role to play in this through collaborative and participatory research with the holders and users of traditional forest-related knowledge to better understand and deal with uncertainties that climate change presents”, concludes Parrotta.

The book [*Traditional Forest-Related Knowledge: Sustaining Communities, Ecosystems and Biocultural Diversity*](#), published by Springer in November, examines the contribution traditional knowledge has made and continues to make to sustainable resource management: 76 authors from all corners of the globe contributed to the book. It constitutes the final report of IUFRO’s Task Force on Traditional Forest Knowledge, led by the book’s co-editor John Parrotta.

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The **International Union of Forest Research Organizations** ([IUFRO](#)) is the only world-wide organization devoted to forest research and related sciences. Its members are research institutions, universities, and individual scientists as well as decision-making authorities and other stakeholders with a focus on forests and trees.

Forest Day 5 will be held in Durban, South Africa on 4 December 2011, and seeks to inform the UNFCCC global agenda and forest stakeholders on ways to implement an international REDD+ funding mechanism that produces social and environmental benefits, above and beyond avoided emissions. [Forest Day 5](#) has a particular African focus, and is convened by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR).

Programme of the [Discussion Forum](#) *Social safeguards: protecting the rights and interests of Indigenous Peoples and forest-dependent communities in REDD+*, cohosted by IUFRO, UNDP (UN-REDD) and IUCN, on Sunday 4 December 2011, 16:00 – 17:30, La Vita, Olive Convention Centre, Durban, South Africa.