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ILLEGAL LOGGING: CUTTING THE LUNGS OF PLANET EARTH



January 2025

**COMMON GOOD
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Dignity Rights Justice

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In 2018, members of the Tai Khamyang People of Assam, India started an ecological organization, the Chala Village Sanctuary Conservation Society, in order to protect the trees within the Chala Reserve Forest which were being decimated by illegal logging. The community depends on the Chala Reserve for their livelihood and sustenance, and because of local conservation efforts, “timber yielding plants such as the ajar and the burflower-tree have been brought back from near extinction.”¹

Sadly, in other parts of Assam, protected forest areas are vulnerable to illegal logging by organized criminal networks, and the forests also face challenges due to the increasing number of development projects.²

Illegal logging is not an isolated issue. Illegal logging has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the environment and, as highlighted in the example above, can hurt communities and their cultures. The livelihoods of indigenous people and species are threatened when their forests experience degradation from unlicensed and unsustainable logging operations. At the same time, poverty levels incentivize locals to prioritize the money brought in from timber harvesting over community led conservation efforts. Being a profitable industry, corruption permeates each part of the logging process, making reform difficult. Illegal logging remains a significant problem, where the impact of it can be felt by high forest degradation levels, declining environmental health, the negative impacts on indigenous communities, and increasing rates of corruption and violence.³

Levels of forest loss from logging range from degradation to deforestation. Degradation is a reduction in tree cover, while deforestation refers to a complete erasure of an area’s forest. Degradation and deforestation have a variety of causes. Illegal logging is one of these causes. Illegal logging includes any instance in which trees are felled (cut down and harvested), without regard for national and international regulations. Timber trafficking occurs when wood which was illegally obtained is moved from one area to another or sold from the domestic to international market, often by converting permits, making the timber appear to be legally sourced. Some also define this process as laundering, as the origins of the timber or amounts collected are forged.

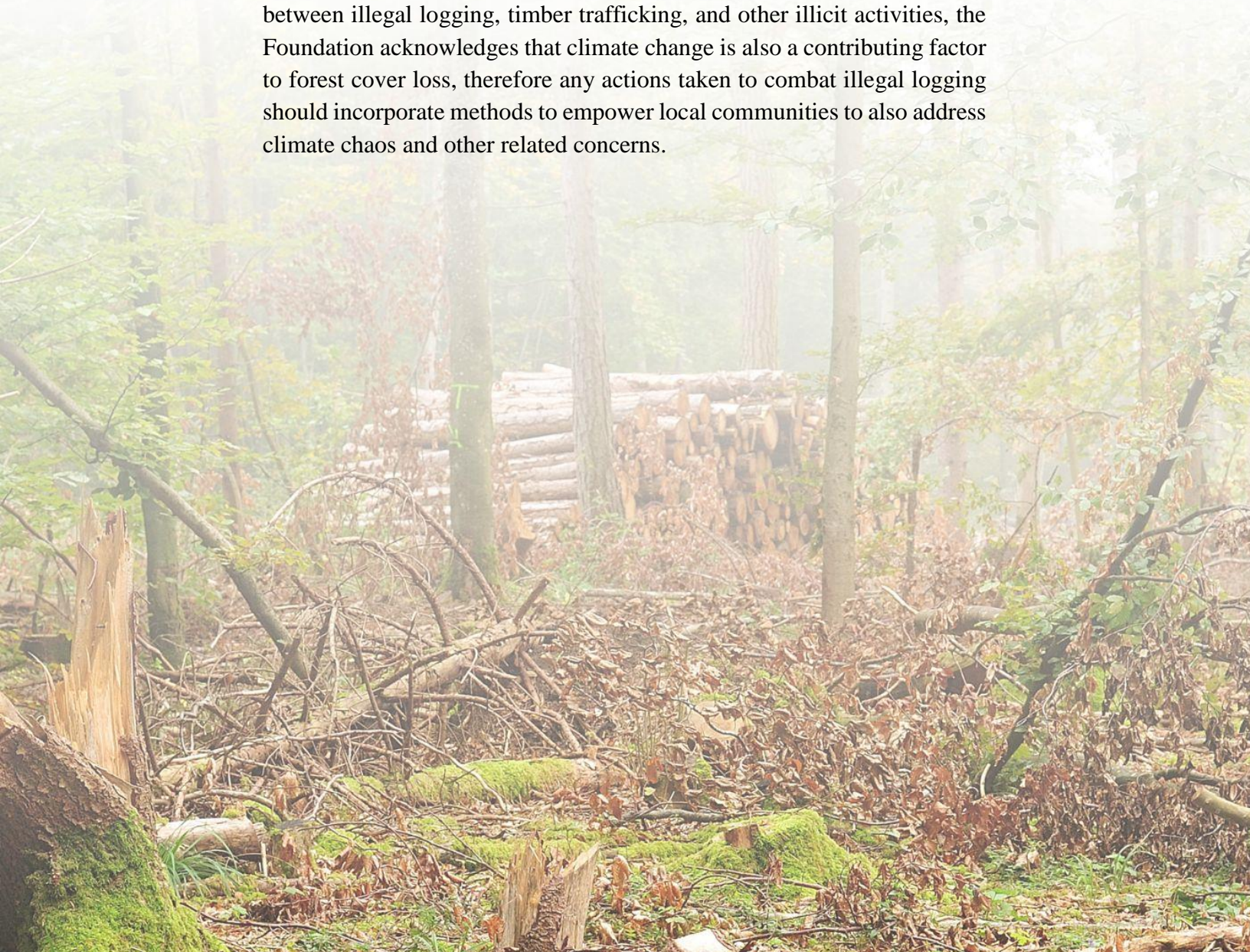
¹ Aatreyee Dhar, “Like Killing my children”: former loggers now defend Assam’s forests,” THE GUARDIAN, June 10, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jun/10/like-killing-my-children-former-loggers-now-defend-assams-forests#>.

² See Rajeev Bhattacharyya, “Mafia wreaks havoc on Assam forests,” PROBE, October 2, 2022, <https://theprobe.in/stories/mafia-wreaks-havoc-on-assam-forests/>.

³ For example, “In recent years, settler groups have invaded their territory, bringing drug trafficking, illicit coca leaf crops and illegal logging to the area.” MONGABAY, “The illegal runways exposing the Kakataibo people to drug violence in Peru,” November 29, 2024, <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/11/the-illegal-runways-exposing-the-kakataibo-people-to-drug-violence-in-peru/>

This report gives an overview of the damages brought about by illegal logging. From the local to the international level, the efficacy of conservation programs against illegal logging operations have proven to be insufficient. Investigating the state of timber trafficking processes in Cameroon, Romania, Indonesia, Ecuador, and Honduras, indicators of the gravity of the situation include the impact on indigenous forest communities, animal and tree population health, and the frequency and severity of punishment for unsustainable logging. The accountability provided by conservation initiatives and governments makes a significant difference for each of these factors.

Finally, the reader should be aware that while this report will focus on illegal actions that destroy forest areas and trees, specifically connections between illegal logging, timber trafficking, and other illicit activities, the Foundation acknowledges that climate change is also a contributing factor to forest cover loss, therefore any actions taken to combat illegal logging should incorporate methods to empower local communities to also address climate chaos and other related concerns.



I. Background

Currently, “more than 20,000 tree species are on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species.”⁴ A number of these are trees popular for logging. The list includes “mahogany, teak, rosewood and ebony” which “have higher commercial values than others.”⁵ Unfortunately, the forests with the better valued trees are usually richer in biodiversity. This means that the reduction in tree cover threatens the survival of all other species in the area.⁶ Timber extraction leads to major losses in tree and animal populations, and forest health declines.⁷ After extensive logging occurs, any living thing near the forest will experience the effects of “severe soil degradation, biodiversity loss, water pollution, habitat destruction and extinction of flora and fauna.”⁸ Overall deforestation rates have been gradually declining: “between 2015 and 2020, the rate of deforestation was estimated at 10 million hectares per year, down from 16 million hectares per year in the 1990s.”⁹ This positive statistic, however, does not discount the ongoing destruction. Illegal logging also appears to be increasing. Timber trafficking makes up around “15-30 [percent] of all timber traded globally.”¹⁰ The illegal logging industry is as lucrative as it is prevalent, making up “an estimated value of between \$51-152 USD billion annually, representing a major loss in tax revenues.”¹¹ The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) claims timber trafficking is also more common in developing countries, because their governments have fewer resources to delegate to regulating their forests.¹²

Multiple factors make comprehensive data collection on illegal logging difficult. There is the issue of obtaining warrants and respecting privacy in land monitoring.¹³ Additionally, satellite imagery and field monitoring, the most effective ways to measure illegal logging, are difficult to manage and costly in practice.¹⁴ Therefore, surveyors use on the ground estimations, which cannot provide

⁴ J. Kleemann, et al., “Deforestation in continental Ecuador with a focus on protected areas,” *LAND*, 2022, 11(2), 268. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/land11020268>.

⁵ Bösch Matthias, “Institutional quality, economic development and illegal logging: A quantitative cross-national analysis,” *EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF FOREST RESEARCH*, 2021, 140(5), p. 1054. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10342-021-01382-z>.

⁶ FAO, “The State of World’s Forests,” 2020, <http://www.fao.org/state-of-forests/en/>.

⁷ Hannah Ritchie, “Not all forest loss is equal: what is the difference between deforestation and forest degradation,” *OUR WORLD IN DATA*, February 6, 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/deforestation-degradation>.

⁸ Muhammad Nur Haniff Mohd Noor, et al., “Timber Theft: Examining the Factors of Illegal Logging,” *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INNOVATION, CREATIVITY AND CHANGE*, Volume 13, Issue 12, 2020, p. 608, https://www.ijicc.net/images/vol_13/Iss_12/131256_Noor_2020_E_R.pdf.

⁹ FAO, note 6.

¹⁰ INTERPOL, “Forestry Crime,” <https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Environmental-crime/Forestry-crime>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² UNODC, “Transnational Organized Crime Fact Sheet, Environmental crime — Trafficking in wildlife and timber,” p.1-5, https://www.unodc.org/documents/toc/factsheets/TOC12_fs_environment_EN_Plain.pdf.

¹³ FAO, “Improving data and knowledge,” <https://www.fao.org/4/a0146e/A0146E10.htm#TopOfPage>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

timely or accurate data.¹⁵ Because of these challenges, much of the information released on the illegal timber trade relates to smaller areas of land, or of instances where illicit operations have been uncovered. For example, the Global Illegal Logging and Associated Trade Risk Data Tool only demonstrates an area's risk of engaging in illegal logging, not any concrete data.¹⁶ The effects of illegal logging are therefore more easily quantified by studying a combination of individual cases and measuring the subsequent harm done to the species and communities housed in those areas.

II. Regulatory Framework

International, regional and local frameworks related to illegal logging are in need of reflection and revision given the current circumstances and because of climate change. In many places around the world, weak or unclear laws have allowed illegal loggers to go unpunished.¹⁷ The importance of strong local and national laws cannot be overemphasized when it comes to addressing the problems of illegal logging. In addition to national laws, international conventions also have an important role to play in addressing illegal logging. Namely, the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) are suppression conventions which provide model laws and emphasize the importance of mutual legal assistance in combatting these types of crimes. Further, the OECD Convention on Bribery, which makes it a crime to bribe a foreign official, has a pivotal role to play in illegal logging situations as one of the connected crimes to illegal logging is corruption.

The Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) initiative was piloted by the EU in 2003 to regulate forests. It was created to provide an internationally standardized regulation for timber, but participation in the program is voluntary by country. The FLEGT program “is working with 348 projects in 27 countries of which twelve [are] in Africa, nine [are] in South-East Asia and six [are] in Latin America.”¹⁸ The plan mandates accountability and strives to set up a system that harmonizes with each country including adapted “laws on taxation and transport, forest management and biodiversity conservation, [and] community benefits and worker safety.”¹⁹ In 2018, the European Commission created a “generic work plan that mentions action lines, but no

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ FOREST TRENDS, “Global Illegal Logging and Associated Trade (ILAT) Risk Data Tool,” February 2022, <https://www.forest-trends.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ILAT-Risk-Data-Tool-User-Guide-February-2022.pdf>.

¹⁷ Hans Nicholas Jong, “Legal failings leave illegal loggers unpunished and certified in Indonesia,” MONGABAY, February 2, 2021, <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/02/illegal-logging-law-enforcement-indonesia-study/>.

¹⁸ FAO, “Evaluation of the FAO-EU forest law enforcement, governance and trade programme – Phase III,” Programme Evaluation Series, 04/2022. Rome. p.9-16 <https://www.fao.org/3/cb9469en/cb9469en.pdf>.

¹⁹ Jussi Viitanen, “Boosting Rule of Law: Lessons from the Fight Against Illegal Logging,” EUROPEAN FOREST INSTITUTE, May 21, 2019 <https://worldjusticeproject.org/news/boosting-rule-law-lessons-fight-against-illegal-logging>.

timelines, geographic priorities or responsibilities” for FLEGT.²⁰ The process is slow. As of 2022, Indonesia was the only country that had “issued FLEGT licenses and in total only a limited number of eight countries [had] ratified its [Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA)].”²¹ VPAs are an integral part of FLEGT. These are “legally binding trade agreements between the EU and timber-exporting countries outside the EU.”²² Not all countries which are members of FLEGT agreements have joined VPAs, but in the majority of those that have, FLEGT maintains better management.²³ In the current stage of the program, it was found that FLEGT “funds were mostly targeting smaller civil society organizations ... that would otherwise not have access to funding to engage in forest governance.”²⁴ The implementation of FLEGT has revealed its strengths, but also its flaws.

Illegal loggers employ numerous strategies to bypass regulations. The offender decides that “a criminal act will be advantageous rather than disadvantageous as risks to commit the crime remain low while the rewards are high, from the offender's perspective.”²⁵ High demand for wood increases the advantage for offenders to perpetrate these kinds of acts. As the value of wood surges, so do “incentives for illegal commercial harvesting and trade.”²⁶ Simultaneously, permitting and legal fees can be costly, so loggers can get more money if they work illegally.²⁷ Aside from legal repercussions, the benefits still come at a significant cost. Those who complete the labor in timber trafficking are often exposed to dangerous work conditions.²⁸ Basic strategies employed to limit unregulated timber extraction include “signage indicating boundaries, gates lining access roads, and checkpoint locations.”²⁹ However, it is common that loggers will obtain false certificates and bypass checkpoints using bribery.³⁰ They also forge their licenses by “fraudulently declaring a protected hardwood as an ordinary variety or falsifying certificates of origin, thereby declaring wood obtained in a protected area to be from an authorized source.”³¹

While states and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have their own national programs to combat deforestation, REDD+ works as another global initiative, similarly to FLEGT. REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. REDD+ “offers developing countries financial incentives for reducing GHG

²⁰ FAO, note 18, p. 15.

²¹ Ibid, 43.

²² FLEGT licensed timber, “FLEGT and VPA countries” <https://flegtlicence.org/www.flegtlicence.org/th/vpa-countries.html>.

²³ FAO, note 18.

²⁴ Ibid, 16.

²⁵ Sara T. Thompson and William B. Magrath, “Preventing illegal logging,” *FOREST POLICY AND ECONOMICS*, 128, July 2021, 102479, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2021.102479>.

²⁶ Matthias, note 5.

²⁷ Noor, note 8.

²⁸ Josiane Kouagheu, et al., “Forest Communities' Complicity with Illegal Loggers,” *PULITZER CENTER*, June 13, 2023, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/forest-communities-complicity-illegal-loggers>.

²⁹ Thompson and Magrath, note 25.

³⁰ UNODC, note 12.

³¹ Ibid.

emissions,” and is at work in over 60 countries.³² The economic feasibility of the system is highly dependent on Carbon prices and Measuring, Reporting, and Verifying (MRV) costs.³³ The execution of the system is therefore possible but also variable. Further, in 2022, a study by the Forest Declaration Assessment Partners found that many “countries have overwhelmingly prioritized REDD+ in their forest strategies but failed to lower the rate of deforestation,” because the program fails to address all types of land use which cause deforestation.³⁴ As there is no advantage to switching to natural gas or another green fuel, therefore it is projected that REDD+ “is not an optimistic idea to reduce emissions, but just to hold the global emission at the existing level even in the best-case scenario.”³⁵ Other concerns have surfaced over the REDD+ strategy of recentralizing forest governance, or keeping forest conservation solely in the hands of the national governments. It takes power away from local foresters and underutilizes community and indigenous knowledge within conservation efforts.³⁶ Meanwhile, where REDD+ has yielded some success could overlap with the success of NGOs from the same areas.³⁷ Satisfactory results have not been observed in any international program to regulate the world’s forests.

III. Country Case Studies

a. Cameroon

Cameroon’s expansive forests continue to shrink at the hands of illegal logging operations, despite a combination of local and international intervention. Cameroon contains a significant portion of the Congo Basin, which, following the Amazon, is the world’s second largest tropical forest.³⁸ The Congo Basin “is also home to 70 percent of Africa’s forest cover and one in every five species on the planet.”³⁹ Naturally, “Cameroon has become the sixth largest exporter of tropical timber and

³² Michael Kohl, et, al, “REDD+ measurement, reporting and verification – A cost trap? Implications for financing REDD+MRV costs by result-based payments,” *ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS*, February 2020, Volume 168, p.1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.106513>, and Kishor Aryal et. al, “REDD+ at risk: Emerging ten questions that REDD+ must answer,” *ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE & POLICY*, June 2024, Volume 156, p.1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2024.103744>.

³³ Ibid, Kohl, p.3

³⁴ Aryal et. al, note 32, p. 3

³⁵ Ibid, 3.

³⁶ Ibid, 4.

³⁷ Alejandro Guizar-Coutiño, et. al, “A global evaluation of the effectiveness of voluntary REDD+ projects at reducing deforestation and degradation in the moist tropics” *CONSERVATION BIOLOGY*, June 10, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.13970>.

³⁸ Isabelle Tritsch, et al., “Do forest-management plans and FSC certification help avoid deforestation in the Congo Basin?” *ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS*, September 2020, Volume 175, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2020.106660>.

³⁹ UNEP, “In Cameroon, community-led restoration efforts are paying off,” *Nature Action*, May 2024 <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/cameroon-community-led-restoration-efforts-are-paying>.

receives an annual revenue of 60 million US dollars from this industry.”⁴⁰ The logging industry alone accounts for 4% of the country’s GDP.⁴¹ Unfortunately, the legal timber market and the illegal timber market – have produced significant threats to endangered wildlife. In the Ebo forest, the gorilla, chimpanzee, and forest elephant have all met a decline in population, while the red colobus, leopard, African golden cat, and forest buffalo are all “either close to extirpation or have been extirpated.”⁴² A 12-year study of these populations, completed in 2020, attributed these losses to logging, agriculture, and hunting.⁴³ The abundant forests of Cameroon must be protected, not exploited.

Cameroon is under the jurisdiction of COMIFAC (Conference of Ministers in charge of Forests in Central Africa) which is in place to protect the Congo Basin.⁴⁴ Cameroon is also part of a VPA with the FLEGT program.⁴⁵ Contrary to the state’s commitments, about 900,000 hectares have been completely deforested in Cameroon since 1990 and “from 2013 to 2021, Cameroon lost 1 million 260 thousand hectares of forest cover.”⁴⁶ The country’s vast timber industry makes it easier for timber trafficking to go undetected, mainly accomplished through permit forgery and falsification. Timber companies recruit traffickers to help forge their timber’s legality, while both recruit local communities to help collect timber.⁴⁷ Officials in Cameroon’s Ministry of Forest routinely clash with NGOs and Independent Forest Monitoring operations.⁴⁸ According to various NGOs in Cameroon, government agents work to avoid personal attention, reducing penalties for illegal logging.⁴⁹ Correspondingly, companies caught engaging in illegal logging are often repeat offenders, as they pay fines but retain their logging permits.⁵⁰

Excluding governmental cooperation, Cameroon’s NGOs were found more effective than in other countries, which may be partially attributed to NGOs strategic communication with local and indigenous communities.⁵¹ Transparency International - Cameroon has a program to report illegal

⁴⁰ Sarah Sra, “Illegal Logging in Cameroon,” Open Case Studies, THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, <https://cases.open.ubc.ca/illegal-logging-in-cameroon/#:~:text=The%20country%20has%20been%20engaged,often%20linked%20with%20illegal%20logging.>

⁴¹ Kouagheu, et al, note 28.

⁴² Robin C. Whytock, et al. “Mammal distribution and trends in the threatened Ebo 'intact forest landscape' Cameroon,” GLOBAL ECOLOGY AND CONSERVATION, November 2021, Vol 31, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2021.e01833>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ COMMISSION DES FORÊTS D'AFRIQUE CENTRALE, “About” <https://comifac.org/>.

⁴⁵ FAO, note 18.

⁴⁶ Tritsch, note 38.

⁴⁷ Josiane Kouagheu and Madeleine Ngeunga, “Cameroon’s Undeterred Illegal Loggers,” INFOCONGO, June 8, 2023, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/camerouns-undeterred-illegal-loggers>.

⁴⁸ Aurelian Mbzibain and Teodyl Nkuintchua Tchoudjen, “NGO-state relations in the monitoring of illegal forest logging and wildlife trafficking in Central Africa,” WORLD DEVELOPMENT, Volume 148, December 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105670>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Kouagheu and Ngeunga, note 47.

⁵¹ Ibid.

logging to local NGOs: if no change is made then Transparency International contacts the Ministry of Forest, followed by international authorities.⁵² The United Nations Environment Programme is working to provide sustainable jobs at the local level while also increasing the reach of legally protected forests.⁵³ The program targets women and youth, who are impacted more by forest issues due to disparities in education.⁵⁴ One goal is to limit the part that locals are playing in unregulated timber harvesting “by training them to process non-timber forest products into goods such as soap and avocado oil.”⁵⁵ Cameroon is also a member of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which aids in protecting its tree species, while Greenpeace Africa helps the country keep logging corporations accountable for violations.⁵⁶ Cameroon is working with the United States Justice Department’s Environment and Natural Resources Division to implement higher levels of prosecution for timber trafficking.⁵⁷ These programs hold promise, but with high levels of dependence on forest resources, indigenous communities are given high incentives to be complicit in illegal timber collection.

Forest communities are caught in the crux of illegal logging in Cameroon. Conservation efforts conflict with the incentives provided by illegal logging operations. Locals need the forest’s resources for their livelihoods. In the Bamougoum Chiefdom, around 80% of people are dependent on the land.⁵⁸ Their quality of life is restricted to the area of the forest. Communities do not have access to any alternative from what the forest provides for “food, health care, and products to sell.”⁵⁹ Here, a disadvantage is presented as “sixty percent of the sacred forests have been lost in the last 30 years” leaving “only small pockets of trees.”⁶⁰ Meanwhile, trucks used for logging damage local roads, and the loss of forest cover leads to pollution of waterways.⁶¹

The Bagyeli people are paid by illegal loggers that collect from their area.⁶² While legal logging operations do not give the villages any reimbursement for using their land, “almost all the inhabitants acknowledge that “illegal logging brings...more money than legal logging.”⁶³ The younger members of the Bagyeli population are recruited to choose the trees which the communities least rely on to be felled and search for endangered species around the logging area,

⁵² TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL, “Climate Governance Integrity Programme: From forest floor to government,” <https://www.transparency.org/en/projects/climate-governance-integrity-programme/data/climate-governance-cameroon>

⁵³ UNEP, note 39.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Sra, note 40.

⁵⁷ US Department of Justice, “Justice Department Working with Cameroon to Combat Timber Trafficking,” November 9, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/blog/justice-department-working-cameroon-combat-timber-trafficking>.

⁵⁸ UNEP, note 39.

⁵⁹ Ritchie, note 7. *See also* Kouagheu, note 28.

⁶⁰ UNEP, note 39.

⁶¹ Kouagheu, note 28.

⁶² UNEP, 39.

⁶³ Kouagheu, note 28.

as damage limitation for both the Bagyeli and the loggers.⁶⁴ Some farmers choose to illegally sell the trees on their land to traffickers.⁶⁵ One Lokoundje village collects up to one hundred thousand CFA francs for each truck that passes through, while other villages have obtained 4 to 13 million in illegal logging funds.⁶⁶ The money is then used to improve schools and infrastructure.⁶⁷ These forest communities are left with two options: aid the illegal operation and receive compensation, or aid the legal operation, and only be left with the environmental damages. Though the losses yearly in forest cover have met a slight decrease, forest resources are vital to all inhabitants of Cameroon, making the illegal timber trade a pressing issue.⁶⁸ Environmental programs must help indigenous communities become leaders on these issues as they are best situated to respond and understand the impact of devastation to forests.

b. Romania

It is estimated that over half of the timber harvested in Romania is done so illegally.⁶⁹ The country contains “two-thirds of Europe’s last remaining virgin forests,” but over the last decade, illegal logging has taken two-thirds Romania’s primary forests.⁷⁰ Stealing wood in Romania is now a criminal offense yielding jail time. Further, in 2016 the President of Romania, Iohanni, signed a bill that makes “illegal logging of more than one hectare a threat to national security.”⁷¹ In 2020, the European Commission announced legal action against Romania in 2020 for its handling of illegal logging.⁷² The country disobeyed EU law for “failure to carry adequate and strategic environmental assessments when approving logging in protected areas and lack of access to environmental information.”⁷³ Romania also defied EU policy by allowing illegally sourced wood into European markets.⁷⁴ As a solution, from 2023 through 2027, the European Commission enacted a “€200 million in state aid scheme allowing Romania to pay foresters to leave trees

⁶⁴ Kouagheu and Ngeunga, note 47.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Kouagheu, note 28.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Tritsch, note 38.

⁶⁹ Amanda Wikström Avaria, “PETI Fact-finding visit to Romania,” EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT POLICY DEPARTMENT FOR CITIZENS’ RIGHTS AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS, May 2023, p.5-9
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/748893/IPOL_BRI\(2023\)748893_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/748893/IPOL_BRI(2023)748893_EN.pdf).

⁷⁰ Ibid. See also Alexandra Stegorean, “Illegal logging is destroying Europe’s last virgin forests,” FOOTPRINT MAGAZINE, August 27, 2021, <https://www.footprintmag.net/illegal-logging-is-destroying-europes-last-remaining-virgin-forests/>.

⁷¹ Louise Guillot and Carmen Paun, “Romanian politics clash with forest protection,” POLITICO, August 21, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/romanian-politics-clash-with-forest-protection/>.

⁷² CLIENT EARTH, “EU announces legal action against Romania for illegal logging of Europe’s last natural forests,” February 12, 2020, <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/press-office/press/eu-announces-legal-action-against-romania-for-illegal-logging-of-europe-s-last-natural-forests/>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

standing.”⁷⁵ A result of stricter laws, but also indicative of the issue’s severity, “Romanian authorities filed about a thousand criminal proceedings over illegal logging in the first half of 2020.”⁷⁶ This corresponds with reports of 650 forest workers injured and 6 dead at the hands of illegal loggers.⁷⁷

Despite the EU’s crackdown, there is still progress to be made. Loggers collect more timber than stated on their documents or conceal trucks full of timber as “logging waste.”⁷⁸ For tracking, “the GPS data records proved insufficient to curtail legislation breaches because truck drivers would use fake GPS loading points.”⁷⁹ A significant portion of illegal logging in this area is conducted by IKEA and its subsidiary Holzindustrie Schweighofer.⁸⁰ The Austrian company, Holzindustrie Schweighofer, has been found “openly accepting illegal wood, offering bonuses for suppliers of illicit timber, and putting pressure on Romanian’s government to refrain for policy reforms that could hinder its activities.”⁸¹ IKEA, which “owns amount to 50,000 hectares of forest in Romania, making it the single largest private owner of forest in the country” operates out of multiple protected Natura 2000 sites.⁸² These sites are allocated for sustainable tourism, not logging. The NGO Agent Green found IKEA engaging in illegal logging within three protected areas: Black Valley Forest, the Dalhauti Area, and Penteleu, marked by heavy soil erosion, incorrect felling techniques, and loss of forest cover.⁸³ This practice disrupts both the EU’s standards and the health of the forest for locals and inhabiting species.

Habitat degradation poses a threat to the bear populations in Romania. This is the largest population of brown bears in Europe, making up 40%, or “a stable population of 6000 to 6500 bears.”⁸⁴ A combination of logging, mining, and urbanization have led to overall habitat losses.⁸⁵ When forest cover is removed, it pushes bears into urban areas, creating conflict with traffic and livestock.⁸⁶ These conflicts do not just harm the bears: “from 2016 to 2021, Romania recorded 154 bear attacks, which resulted in 14 deaths and 158 injuries.”⁸⁷ Excessive removal of Romanian forests is worsening the collisions between human and bear populations.

⁷⁵ Louise Guillot, “Romania to pay farmers to leave trees standing,” POLITICO, August 10, 2023,

<https://www.politico.eu/article/romania-to-pay-farmers-to-leave-trees-standing/>.

⁷⁶ Guillot and Paun, note 71.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Alexandra Stegorean, “Illegal logging is destroying Europe’s last virgin forests,” FOOTPRINT MAGAZINE, August 27, 2021, <https://www.footprintmag.net/illegal-logging-is-destroying-europes-last-remaining-virgin-forests/>.

⁷⁹ Avaria, note 69.

⁸⁰ Stegorean, note 78.

⁸¹ Avaria, note 69.

⁸² AGENT GREEN, “Hypocrisy! Ikea’s Cynical Destruction of Romania’s Old-Growth Forests,” August 2021.

https://www.agentgreen.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/20210826_IKEA_hipocrisy_EN.pdf.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Avaria, note 69.

⁸⁵ Alina Cimpoca and Mircea Voiculescu, “Patterns of Human–Brown Bear Conflict in the Urban Area of Braşov, Romania,” SUSTAINABILITY 14, no. 13: 7833, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14137833>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 9.

c. Indonesia

Indonesia is another prime location for logging operations. Indonesia is home to the world's third largest tropical forest, necessary for the survival of the species and communities it houses.⁸⁸ The country also contains 2.3% of the world's forests and third most tree species of any country.⁸⁹ Most Indonesian timber producers rent certificates to sell their timber past regulated levels.⁹⁰ Attempts to curtail degradation from illegal logging have been minimal in the region. Non-compliance with timber regulations is instigated by “poverty, scarcity of resources, livelihood insecurity, crisis situations, nepotism, corruption, political patronage, ineffective state institutions, increasing product prices, and ownership rights to resources.”⁹¹ Similar to Cameroon, Indonesia's indigenous communities are at the forefront of sustainability efforts within the timber industry. The Indonesian NGO, Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (National Alliance of Indigenous Communities), helped “the Kenegerian Kuntu community in Riau Province and the Kasepuhan Cisitu community in Banten Province” to win the rights to their customary forest through a lawsuit in 2013, after a forestry law put their land under state jurisdiction.⁹² The friction between state and local forest policies curtails the implementation of sustainability measures.

Indonesia's Social Forestry Program

The Social Forestry Program in Indonesia has been praised for promoting sustainable forest management through indigenous communities. The initiative strives to give communities legal access to forest resources with a “target of providing communities with legal access to 12.7 million hectares of state forests, allowing them to manage these resources sustainably for their own livelihoods and for forest protection.”⁹³ To be used for agroforestry-based businesses and honey production, “the government [had] granted land titles for 4.7 million hectares (11.6 million acres)

⁸⁸ Heleena De Oliveira, “A fight to save the forests of Indonesia,” TADAMON, <https://tadamon.community/forest-rangers-in-indonesia>.

⁸⁹ FAO, note 5.

⁹⁰ Emmanuel Acheampong and Ahmad Maryudi, “Avoiding legality: Timber producers' strategies and motivations under FLEGT in Ghana and Indonesia,” *FOREST POLICY AND ECONOMICS*, 111, February 2020, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1389934118304441>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Kazuhiro Harada, et al. “The role of NGOs in recognition and sustainable maintenance of customary forests within indigenous communities: The case of Kerinci, Indonesia,” *LAND USE POLICY*, February 2022, Vol 113, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2021.105865>.

⁹³ WORLD BANK GROUP, “Opening the Door to Community Forest Access and Management in Indonesia,” October 21, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/10/21/opening-the-door-to-community-forest-access-and-management-in-indonesia>.

of state forest to 1 million households as of August 2021.”⁹⁴ The program’s implementation, however, has not seen the intended results. A study by the Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change showed this program to be ineffective.⁹⁵ Within their “analysis of 4,349 land titles across Indonesia, covering 2.4 million hectares (5.93 million acres), or more than half the total granted” the researchers found that the program did not lead to improvements for levels of forest degradation.⁹⁶ The amount of forest lost actually increased under both village forest and community forest titles.⁹⁷ The only forest use permitted under these titles are “non-logging activities such as the collection of non-timber forest products (such as honey), agroforestry and ecotourism, as well as restricted logging for noncommercial purposes.”⁹⁸ In Sulawesi “while the program succeeded in improving the welfare of the communities there, it also saw a significant increase in the deforestation rate at the same time.”⁹⁹ Only one division of land, the Community Plantation Forests, set for the operation of old timber plantations, managed to revitalize degraded areas.¹⁰⁰ The only area which the Social Forestry Program managed success, was in monitored and restored timber plantations. Because of the profitability of the logging industry, sustainable restoration for commercial use was more appealing to locals than reorienting the forest’s use altogether.

Indonesian communities have engaged in a number of more localized actions against the illegal harvesting and trade of timber. In Customary Law Communities, residents manage their forests and impose sanctions on those that defy sustainability measures.¹⁰¹ Another group, called Hutan Itu, “targets the youth, namely those living in urban areas of Indonesia far away from the forests” using social media to gain donors and volunteers.¹⁰² Some of the funds go toward employing forest rangers, who put themselves at risk to prevent illegal loggers from entering the forests.¹⁰³

The locals are not the only ones put in jeopardy with logging operations. For the Sumatran orangutan, “if the rate of decline observed since 1985 and predicted continues unabated, the population decline will exceed 80% over a three-generation period.”¹⁰⁴ The degradation caused by large scale logging operations leads to fragmentation of the forest canopy, prohibiting movement

⁹⁴ Hans Nicholas Jong, “Community control of forests hasn’t slowed deforestation, Indonesia study finds,” MONGABAY, January 4, 2022 <https://news.mongabay.com/2022/01/community-control-of-forests-hasnt-slowed-deforestation-indonesia-study-finds/>.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ De Oliveira, note 88.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ I. Singleton, et al. "Pongo abelii, Sumatran Orangutan." IUCN RED LIST, 2017. p. 2, <https://www.scribd.com/document/441044567/10-2305-IUCN-UK-2017-3-RLTS-T121097935A115575085-en>.

between orangutan populations.¹⁰⁵ Not only does “the fragmentation that occurs in forests gradually [lead] to loss of biodiversity, aesthetic views of the landscape and ecological functions,” it increases orangutan mortality rates.¹⁰⁶ The Sumatran orangutan is currently fragmented into 10 populations, which puts the critically endangered species at a high risk of extinction.¹⁰⁷ Contrary to the people that need the forests, orangutans cannot invest in the timber trade to compensate for their loss of tree cover.

d. Ecuador

Ecuador “is among the five most deforested countries in Latin America.”¹⁰⁸ In 2022, “the [orellana] province lost 15,250 acres of primary forest.”¹⁰⁹ In the span of three months in 2023, “376 deforestation alerts were issued in Orellana between January and March 2023,” each alert signifying the loss of about 2.5 acres.¹¹⁰ In the west, the “Pacific Forest of Ecuador...has lost 96% of its primary forest.”¹¹¹ Timber trafficking makes up a substantial portion of Ecuador's forest loss. The industry is significant as “almost half of the timber sold in the country is illegal, with over a million cubic meters sold locally every year.”¹¹² Illegal loggers work out of protected areas like the Yasuni National Park, “home to the last representatives of the Waorani ethnic group...two indigenous groups in voluntary isolation,” and “over 130 globally threatened species.”¹¹³ The Great Green Macaw is critically endangered, with the “rate of decline of 34% over three generations for the national population in Ecuador.”¹¹⁴ Unregulated logging is also endangering trees in Ecuador. Traffickers collect Mahogany, the most threatened tree species in the Amazon,

¹⁰⁵ Dave J. I. Seaman, et al. "Orangutan movement and population dynamics across human-modified landscapes: implications of policy and management," *LANDSCAPE ECOLOGY*, 2021, 2957–2975, link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10980-021-01286-8.

¹⁰⁶ N.L. Auliah, et al. “Habitat Fragmentation Effect on the Characteristics of orangutan Nest Tree Selection.” *IOP CONFERENCE SERIES: EARTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE*, June 2021, vol. 782, no. 3, p. 032016, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/782/3/032016>.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Ana Cristina Alvarado, “Oil palm and balsa plantations trigger deforestation in Ecuadorian Amazon,” *MONGABAY*, August 8, 2023, <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/08/oil-palm-and-balsa-plantations-trigger-deforestation-in-ecuadorian-amazon/>.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ J. M. Tleimat, et al., “Economic pressures of Covid-19 lockdowns result in increased timber extraction within a critically endangered region: A case study from the pacific forest of Ecuador,” *ECOLOGY AND EVOLUTION*, 2022, 12(11), <https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.9550>.

¹¹² GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME, “Ecuador,” *Global Organized Crime Index*, 2023, p. 3 https://ocindex.net/assets/downloads/2023/english/ocindex_profile_ecuador_2023.pdf.

¹¹³ GLOBAL CONSERVATION, “Yasuni National Park, Ecuador,” <https://globalconservation.org/projects/yasuni-national-park-ecuador>.

¹¹⁴ BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL, “Ara ambiguus,” *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* 2020, <https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/22685553/172908289>.

and “the logging has been so intense that balsa has been completely removed from some areas.”¹¹⁵ Ecuador’s forests are centers of biodiversity and control the country’s water cycles, yet “22% of the forest ecosystems in Ecuador are threatened according to the IUCN Red List of Ecosystems.”¹¹⁶ The prevalence of illegal logging adding to Ecuador’s struggling forests creates grounds for concern.

For Ecuador, poverty is the dominant incentive for illegal logging. When poverty climbed during the COVID-19 pandemic, so did the practice of illegal logging. The economy of Ecuador “was severely impacted by lockdowns as oil demand and tourism declined.”¹¹⁷ The GDP decreased and poverty rose.¹¹⁸ As a result, “satellite imagery revealed an increase in deforestation across several tropical countries facilitated by higher unemployment—especially of park rangers.”¹¹⁹ At this point, loggers in Ecuador already targeted teak and gmelina.¹²⁰ The industry spiked when the markets began accumulating demand for wind turbines, made with balsa wood.¹²¹ Less forest regulation compounded higher poverty levels which compounded an increased demand for balsa wood, leading to an increase in illegal logging.¹²² Though the entire logging industry was impacted, poverty levels only contribute to levels of illegal trade. In monitoring chainsaw activity through acoustics, “illegal extraction of timber resources by chainsaws within a protected area of the endangered Pacific Coastal ecosystem of Ecuador increased during and following COVID-19 lockdowns.”¹²³ The poverty inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged illegal logging.

Locals are also disadvantaged by the increase in demand for timber through the harm inflicted on their land and the spread of illegal activity. For the “indigenous communities in Ecuador’s Pastaza River Basin,” the lost balsa wood is not only vital to the animals in the region, but the religion of the indigenous Sapara Nation.¹²⁴ Unlawful operations are also carried out seizing balsa from within

¹¹⁵ Diego Cazar Baquero, “Indigenous Amazonian communities bear the burden of Ecuador’s balsa boom,” MONGABAY, August 17, 2021 <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/08/indigenous-amazonian-communities-bear-the-burden-of-ecuadors-balsa-boom/>.

¹¹⁶ D. D. Castillo Vizuete, et al., “A critical review on the perspectives of the forestry sector in Ecuador,” 2023, LAND, 12(1), 258, <https://doi.org/10.3390/land12010258>. See also, JK Noh JK, et. al, “Warning about conservation status of forest ecosystems in tropical Andes: National assessment based on IUCN criteria” 2020, PLOS ONE 15(8): e0237877. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0237877>.

¹¹⁷ Tleimat, note 111.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Baquero, note 115.

the protected land of the indigenous Waorani people.¹²⁵ In other communities, “[wood harvesting] constitutes up to 50% of family income.”¹²⁶

Organized-crime groups pay bribes to pass through police and military checkpoints with their illegally sourced timber, and forging where they obtained it.¹²⁷ Narcisa Mashienta, living in the Achuar territory, says that “after logging commercially valuable tree species, the logger’s plant illegal crops like coca and marijuana.”¹²⁸ The reach of illegal logging operations in Latin America extends past the timber trade.

e. Honduras

In Honduras, there is an established link between drug and timber trafficking. Within the Catacamas Pine Forest, drug and timber trafficking go hand in hand. The primary group in this area is the Los Amador family, who deal in organized crime and timber trafficking.¹²⁹ The family is now also prominent in drug trafficking, given the gateway from timber trafficking.¹³⁰ The two industries are closely related: both dealing in illicit trade of forest-derived material. It is convenient for operations to engage in both at once. In Río Plátano, “50% of the biosphere’s land belongs to the Miskito and Pech Indigenous communities,” but between 2016-2020 “each day an average of 21.4 hectares (about 54 acres) of forest was cleared.”¹³¹ This was the outcome of poverty, drug trafficking, and illegal logging combined.¹³² Loggers in Honduras have been found “simply [cutting] more timber than is registered on the permit” or forging it to state the greater amount harvested.¹³³ Meanwhile, the poverty rate in Honduras currently sits around 50%.¹³⁴ Organized crime coupled with poverty has intensified forest degradation in Honduras.

¹²⁵ Gabriela Coba, “Las mafias de la balsa amenazan a la Amazonía ecuatoriana,” PRIMICIAS, 2021, <https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/economia/tala-ilegal-madera-amazonia-balsa/>.

¹²⁶ Vizueté, et al., note 116.

¹²⁷ GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME, note 112.

¹²⁸ Baquero, note 115.

¹²⁹ Héctor Silva Ávalos, “The Logging Barons of Catacamas, Honduras,” INSIGHT CRIME, September 18, 2020, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/logging-barons-catacamas-honduras/>.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Karen Paredes, et al. “Drugs and agriculture cause deforestation to skyrocket at Honduran UNESCO site,” MONGABAY, April 30, 2021, <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/04/drugs-and-agriculture-cause-deforestation-to-skyrocket-at-honduran-unesco-site/>.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ávalos, note 129.

¹³⁴ World Bank, “Honduras,” April 24, 2024, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099650104042439056/pdf/IDU19a5059a71f41d142f71968615d40a4e39aa6.pdf>.

Rather than cooperation, the logging issue in Honduras has led to violence between loggers and communities. Logging companies often operate in “the Tolupan reserve of Montana de La Flor, where the community still practices traditional lifestyles through agriculture and the use of resources found in the pine forests surrounding the area.”¹³⁵ As deterrence from their native land, the Tolupan people have been met with threats, “people starting fires on their land, and the systematic murders of outspoken Tolupan leaders.”¹³⁶ The Honduran government criminalized indigenous protests of logging operations which resulted in the murder of three Tolupan men who protested logging.¹³⁷ The government has also turned a blind eye to unregulated operations, without undergoing the “proper consultations with the Tolupan people.”¹³⁸ This unauthorized timber extraction in the Tolupan reserve not only robs the land of its resources, but endangers its people.

Honduras, in 2021, was the first Latin American country to sign a VPA with the European Union.¹³⁹ Environmental damages from logging, however, remain in full force. In Santa Rosa, illegal logging has intensified to the point of creating a water shortage in the region, unyielding to local protests.¹⁴⁰ Among a number of other Honduran forest species, the spike-thumb frog is classified as critically endangered by the IUCN, with forest degradation from logging as a primary factor.¹⁴¹ Though the FLEGT program is working with organizations of every level in Honduras, it reportedly struggles with funding and efficiency.¹⁴² The subsequent years will be crucial for Honduras to turn these issues around.

¹³⁵ Hannah Lahey, “Environmentally-Fueled Violence in Honduras: The Case Studies of Berta Cáceres and the Indigenous Tolupan People,” *URCA JOURNAL*, 2020, pp. 184-197 <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jr4q83p>.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 189, 190-191.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹³⁹ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, “EU and Honduras sign agreement to reduce illegal timber logging,” February 23, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/02/23/eu-and-honduras-sign-agreement-to-reduce-illegal-timber-logging/>.

¹⁴⁰ Allan Bu, “Journalists threatened for denouncing deforestation in western Honduras,” *CONTRA CORRIENTE*, April 8, 2024 <https://contracorriente.red/en/2024/04/08/journalists-threatened-for-denouncing-deforestation-in-western-honduras/>.

¹⁴¹ Amphibian Survival Alliance, “Spike-thumb Frog, *Plectrohyla dasypus*,” <https://www.amphibians.org/amazing-amphibians/spike-thumb-frog/>.

¹⁴² FAO, note 18.

IV. Recommendations

Timber trafficking and illegal logging is a complex concern. There is no established solution which has been able to prove it can address the crime directly. As this report indicates the challenges mainly involve corruption, economic survival, and lack of prosecutions. Loggers take multiple pathways to bypass regulations, and local communities can choose to work with or against their operations. While these groups sometimes conflict, the environment suffers brutal consequences and this causes setbacks for the numerous goals and policies which are created to address indigenous rights, environmental degradation, and climate change.

The Common Good Foundation recommends:

- That local and indigenous communities who have a direct connection with forest areas, be identified as stewards of these areas and be given technological assistance in order to help track and rehabilitate the loss of forest cover and species loss in these critical areas. This report has highlighted successful community interventions.
- That governments and regional organizations work to effectively locally implement and enforce the UNCAC and the UNTOC. Particularly interlinking these Conventions with local and regional actions on climate change.
- That forest certification processes should continue with higher standards for enforcement and intervention which should include routine check-ins, ample protection for park rangers, and an economic advantage for communities to sustainable timber operations are assured.
- That international governments work together to utilize mutual legal assistance to prosecute perpetrators of logging crimes.