Domestic Policy Focus Highly Important For Protecting Primary Forests

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We applaud Mackey et al.’s (2014) recent piece in Conservation Letters (Policy Options for the World’s Primary Forests in Multilateral Environmental Agreements) that highlights the lack of international recognition of the critical importance of the world’s primary forests. These last, remaining forests that are free of large-scale industrial development are desperately in need of a focused effort to protect them from future loss and degradation.

Mackey et al.’s focus on multilateral environmental agreements, however, may provide an incomplete outlook on the full range of opportunities to best achieve protection of the world’s primary forests. International treaties and other policy instruments can certainly be incredibly important in providing incentives or disincentives, increasing funding support, and providing novel economic mechanisms to achieve further protections of primary forests. However, as Mackey et al. point out, about half of the world’s remaining primary forests are found in five developed countries (Canada, United States, Russia, Australia, and New Zealand). We contend that conservation opportunities in at least some of these nations are currently most effectively pursued by focusing on domestic policy options.

Canada, for example, holds an estimated 25% of the world’s remaining primary forest within its Boreal Forest region—an area of approximately 5.6 million km². The region stores a minimum of 208 billion tons of carbon (Carlson et al. 2009) and supports some of the world’s largest populations of northern large mammals including some that undertake large-scale annual migrations, a phenomena lost in much of the world (Bradshaw et al. 2009; IBCSP 2013; Wells et al. 2013). The region is estimated to support between one and three billion nesting birds, most of which migrate south to populate temperate...
and tropical ecological communities (Wells & Blancher 2011). Importantly, Canada’s Boreal Forest region is home to hundreds of indigenous communities where the inhabitants still maintain their cultural traditions including extensive use of native fish and wildlife for food.

Management decisions about the use of these lands generally now sit with provincial governments and indigenous governments. In the last 15 years, more than 870,000 km² of new protected areas have been established across Canada’s Boreal Forest region. The provinces of Quebec and Ontario, which are each larger than about 90% of the world’s nations, are actively moving toward official conservation goals that together would result in an additional 858,000 km² of primary forest becoming strictly protected (IUCN categories I–IV). Indigenous governments throughout Canada’s Boreal Forest region have been particularly effective in moving forward protections for primary forest through their own initiatives. In the Northwest Territories, indigenous governments have carried out leading-edge land-use planning that has led to the development of over 425,000 km² of protected areas and interim protected areas. In Manitoba and Ontario, five indigenous governments working collectively with provincial government, have protected 30,000 km² of primary forest within an area they call Pimachiowin Aki.

In Australia, although not focused on forest habitats, indigenous conservation efforts are also impressive with the area of land in Indigenous Protected Areas increasing from 568 km² in 1998 to 500,347 km² in 2014 (Woinarski et al. 2014). One of the more innovative and promising innovations in Australia is that of indigenous ranger programs that now involve more than 700 indigenous rangers in various environmental land management activities across at least 35 Indigenous Protected Areas (Woinarski et al. 2014).

Efforts to protect the world’s primary forests and other intact habitats through changes to international multilateral agreements are vitally important, but in some countries the most substantial on-the-ground results will likely be achieved through efforts instead focused on domestic policy options.

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