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**Money and maps: is this how to save the Amazon's 400bn trees?**

Alarmed by the impact of logging, indigenous Peruvians are using satellite mapping to manage their land

[**Clare Longrigg**](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/clarelongrigg) *in Cutivireni, Peru*

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he first thing Ramón heard about the deal was the televisions. A number of families from the Asháninka indigenous group had received them from outsiders, in exchange for land. Loggers were interested in the mahogany, oak and tornillo trees that grow to impressive heights in this part of the rainforest around Cutivireni in central [Peru](https://www.theguardian.com/world/peru).

The loggers had other means of persuasion, besides bribery. They might offer to build a school or a meeting house in exchange for timber. When the work ran over budget, they would demand money – and since the Asháninka had none, they would take more trees to service the debt, according to Adelaida Bustamante, the community treasurer. And if that failed, they used violence. In 2014, four forest defenders from the [Asháninka were murdered](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/09/illegal-loggers-blamed-for-of-peru-forest-campaigner) for their campaign to keep loggers off their land(Ramón asked me not to use his real name).

Conflict such as this – over land, timber and forest – has taken on huge significance in the global struggle to confront the climate emergency and keep the world from overheating. According to the [2018 International Panel on Climate Change](https://www.cgdev.org/blog/tropical-forests-offer-24%E2%80%9330-percent-potential-climate-mitigation) report, halting deforestation is essential to prevent climate catastrophe. A [study this summer](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jul/04/planting-billions-trees-best-tackle-climate-crisis-scientists-canopy-emissions) indicated the huge potential of tree planting and retention for stabilising the world’s climate.

But in the Amazon, [remote communities](https://forestsnews.cifor.org/61745/now-the-ipcc-knows-it-too-climate-change-cant-be-solved-without-rights?fnl=en) come under sustained pressure – financial, physical and, yes, televisual – to clear their land and surrender their trees. Almost 60% of Peru (675,000 square kilometres, or 260,000 square miles) is covered by Amazon forest. Peru’s primary forest, where you find the lofty hardwoods so prized by commercial timber traders, is shrinking at an alarming rate: Global Forest Watch [reported](https://blog.globalforestwatch.org/data-and-research/world-lost-belgium-sized-area-of-primary-rainforests-last-year) that Peru lost 140,185 hectares (346,405 acres) of primary forest in 2018**.** Asháninka territory spans a protected area of primary forest across the east of Peru, near the border with Brazil, so their lands are effectively a buffer zone.

Ramón discovered that, besides TVs and other gifts, people in the Cutivireni area were being offered a derisory price for their timber. He persuaded the community not to sell their part of the forest, and insisted they give back the TV sets. The loggers retreated, but it was pretty clear they would not give up. Working in secret, for fear of retaliation from the loggers, Ramón tried to come up with a long-term strategy for preserving the rainforest. He spoke to a Welsh anthropologist, Dilwyn Jenkins, who had been living in the region and studying the Asháninka people for decades. Jenkins, who [died in 2014](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/09/dilwyn-jenkins), suggested the community contact Cool Earth**,** a rainforest charity set up in 2007 by MP Frank Field.

Cool Earth, which also has projects in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Cambodia and Papua New Guinea, offers finance and training to indigenous communities to support them in protecting their areas of the forest. The charity sets up funding for community associations, on condition that the whole group decides how they will spend it (in this remote region, the money is mostly wanted for emergency healthcare).It also uses satellite maps to show locals the extent of forest clearance in their area, and the speed with which the rainforest is disappearing.

“The most effective strategy to conserve the rainforest, in any part of the world, is to empower indigenous groups who are motivated in the same direction,” says Tony Juniper, former director of Friends of the Earth, Cool Earth ambassador and author of Rainforest. “It’s a tried-and-tested strategy in South America. It has worked in Brazil, Colombia and Peru: if you look at maps of the forest in those countries, you will see that the areas under indigenous control are best protected.”

The Asháninka know all about external threats. For years they survived a terror onslaught from the Maoist Shining Path guerrillas, who targeted young men to join their ranks and occupied villages that then came under retaliatory fire from government forces. In the 1990s, after the guerrillas were defeated, narco-traffickers slipped into their place, offering a high price for remote land for cultivating coca. They restored an airstrip that missionaries had built in Cutivireni in the 1970s and used it to transport drugs and weapons.

After the years of conflict, the Asháninka face a new threat. The greatest driver of deforestation in the Peruvian Amazon is now subsistence farming, and as the population grows in these more peaceful times, there is an urgent push to grow more food. A study published in May this year, [by Princeton University](https://news.mongabay.com/2019/07/small-scale-farming-is-a-big-threat-to-biodiversity-in-the-western-amazon-study/), on biodiversity loss in Peru, showed that in the western Amazon, smallholder “slash-and-burn” agriculture is the “primary driver of forest destruction”. The main method of farming among the Asháninka involves felling trees to make a clearing, creating space in the sunlight where their food crops can grow.

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/06/local-tribe-save-amazon-indigenous-peruvians