

6 guiding principles for successful restoration of tropical forest landscapes

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Forest landscape restoration (FLR) has been hailed as one of the most critical and effective solutions to mitigate climate change, conserve and build biodiversity, reverse land degradation and restore and maintain sustainable livelihoods. The need for such solutions is pressing: nearly a billion hectares of land, across the humid and semi-humid tropics alone, is degraded and requires urgent restoration. As such, and as the global community embarks on the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration this year, FLR is increasingly in the spotlight.

But FLR is a more complex process than it might first appear. “It’s not just about planting trees,” says Hwan-ok Ma, a senior project manager at the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO). “At its heart, it’s about diverse groups of people and the different ways that they use the landscapes that are the focus of restoration processes.”

That’s why ITTO and its partners have put together the new ‘Guidelines for Forest Landscape Restoration in the Tropics,’ which lays out six key principles for successful FLR, and 32 guiding elements with recommended actions for putting FLR into effect in the field. The manual also presents 18 case studies from three regions across the tropics, which explore how FLR can be achieved – and the challenges and opportunities it can present for local people and other stakeholders along the way.

Ma says it is designed to offer “a better understanding of the FLR framework for all stakeholders, which they can then use to identify appropriate actions and policies.” In the bigger picture, “we hope to help catalyze fast implementation of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration by providing a reference for how to do this work, for practitioners on the ground,” he says.

The new Guidelines build on the 2002 ITTO ‘Guidelines for the Restoration, Management and Rehabilitation of Degraded and Secondary Tropical Forests,’ which was the first international effort to provide overall guidance on tropical forest restoration. The six principles included in this version were first identified by the Global Partnership on Forest and Landscape Restoration (GPFLR), and have been adapted and elaborated upon with the help of a team of restoration experts from across the globe, who hail from organizations such as the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the International Union of Forestry Research Organizations (IUFRO), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Resources Institute (WRI), among others.

1. Focus on landscapes. Many restoration projects focus on individual sites, and don’t take the surrounding areas – or the ways they are used, managed and accessed by local stakeholders – sufficiently into account. This principle highlights that the focus of FLR should be on restoring entire landscapes in the context of the variety of land-uses, and tenure and governance arrangements, that occur within them. “FLR will only be successful when the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation are understood and addressed,” the guidelines note.

2. Engage stakeholders and support participatory governance. “To have the impact that’s required, FLR requires very well organized and scheduled participation of stakeholders,” says Ma. This principle emphasizes the engagement of all relevant stakeholders – including women, young people

and vulnerable groups – in planning and decision-making processes, including setting goals and strategies, deciding on implementation and benefit-sharing methods, and carrying out monitoring, assessment and review.

3. Restore multiple functions for multiple benefits. Successful FLR makes use of locally-based knowledge to restore a wide range of economic, social and environmental functions within a landscape – and to generate ecosystem goods and services that benefit stakeholders in an equitable manner. “Many environmental functions at the landscape scale are closely associated with the presence of natural forests, which can be managed or restored to meet multiple complementary objectives,” notes the manual. “Although, in practice, multipurpose management is not a dominant strategy in the forest sector, exemplars are emerging through FLR ranging from the small scale, such as community forestry regimes, to the large scale, such as jurisdictional programs to implement REDD+ strategies.”

4. Maintain and enhance natural forest ecosystems within landscapes. This principle refers to the need to preserve and restore the dynamic processes and connectivity of all types of natural forest, grasslands, savannas and wetlands within a landscape, in order to build their productivity, ecosystem functions and carbon stocks. Many natural forests are degraded – but not destroyed – by human activities such as timber and wood-fuel harvesting, hunting, shifting cultivation and mining, and to deal effectively with this degradation, “it is important to see it not as the beginning of a deforestation process,” states the manual, “but as a form of poor forest management that can be reversed and improved.”

5. Tailor to the local context. Every community, landscape and ecosystem is different, and FLR interventions need to take this into account if they’re to succeed. “The best way to ensure that FLR is well adapted to local conditions is for local stakeholders to be fully involved in its development, implementation, monitoring and assessment,” states the manual. Generating local benefits, including opportunities to increase incomes and develop sustainable supply chains, is particularly key.

6. Manage adaptively for long-term resilience. Successful FLR is a long-term process. As such, it’s important to remember that the local context and conditions for intervention are not static and may well change over time, due to diverse factors such as shifts in communities’ composition and aspirations; market fluctuations; and the biophysical impacts of climate change. “The...conditions that exist when, for example, a tree is planted are seldom the same as when it is harvested perhaps decades later, and nor do the priorities of stakeholders remain the same,” the manual observes. That’s why ongoing participatory monitoring, dialogue and information-sharing is especially important, and interventions must be designed with the ability to adapt to changing economic, social and environmental circumstances.

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