Network of leading forest restoration experts features new website

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As tropical forests around the world go up in smoke, the urgent need to stop deforestation is a growing global concern. Halting deforestation, reducing forest degradation, and protecting intact forests are essential, but alone these actions are not sufficient to reduce biodiversity loss, mitigate climate change, and improve sustainable land use and livelihoods for millions of people whose lives directly depend on forests.

"Reforestation and restoration are essential to complement conservation and sustainable forest management activities. Bringing back forests requires overcoming both biophysical and the socio-economic barriers," says Director and Principal-Investigator Robin Chazdon, Professor Emerita from the University of Connecticut. But the social and ecological processes that drive of reforestation in the tropics—and how to support and enhance them—are far less well researched and understood than the drivers of deforestation.

In 2014 a group of the world's top researchers began a 6-year journey to generate ideas, knowledge and collaborations to understand why, where and how tropical reforestation was occurring, with financial support from the U. S. National Science Foundation. The People and Reforestation in the Tropics Network for Education, Research, and Synthesis (PARTNERS), involved 180+ social and natural scientists along with a wide range of practitioners and professionals working with restoration programs and projects across the tropics.

To provide a resource for the next generation of research, scholarship, and practice in tropical reforestation, we synthesized our findings using an innovative website structure. The new website highlights key findings from 60+ publications, synthesized into eight key messages. Key messages focus on livelihoods and well-being, local decision making, planting trees, natural regeneration, tree cover change, climate change, holistic vision, and guiding principles. The interactive website guides visitors to each message and provides short summaries of foundational research findings and free access to peer-reviewed publications, policy briefs, and educational modules.

"We formed this network to bridge the gaps between research, policy, and practice, so outreach has always been a large emphasis. We don't want our findings to just remain within the scientific community. Our goal is to communicate the depth and breadth of what we have learned to a wide range of stakeholders, including other researchers, decision-makers, practitioners, and the public," says Chazdon.

The website is an unprecedented outreach effort to bridge research, reforestation, and restoration action on the ground. Although many communities of practice exist, few (and none in this field) work to synthesize their findings in a way that is accessible, holistic, and useful to a wide range of people.

"This website serves as an innovative example of how interdisciplinary science can and should be shared" says PARTNERS postdoctoral research associate Sarah Jane Wilson. "Our collective work is greater than the sum of its parts for moving the field forward and informing practice. Presenting our findings in an accessible way can empower those working to study and restore ecosystems throughout the tropics."

Many agencies and organizations who play important global roles in promoting restoration are mostly doing so without a solid knowledge base or in the absence of operational frameworks to guide action towards the most effective and lasting outcomes. Our work illustrates the value of providing a space for researchers to work closely with practitioners and decision makers in a team effort to produce relevant and accessible findings that address knowledge gaps, build capacity, and help solve problems.

"(Prior to PARTNERS) my experience had been largely on a project level. I had very little to no experience at a national or global level." says Dr. Liz Ota. "By interacting with other participants of the workshop I understood the agenda of major organisations related to forest restoration at the global scale."

Many of the participants in PARTNERS have been forever changed by the experience of working in interdisciplinary groups and stepping outside of disciplinary comfort zones in a safe space.

"(PARTNERS was) an opportunity to deepen concepts and methods which are difficult to work with in classical academic concepts" says Dr. Nicole Sibelet "It helped develop creativity and go further to deliver original results."

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