

Notes from the field: Indigenous peoples protecting nature through tradition

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Though news headlines about the state of the planet may seem bleak, they don't always capture the whole story. Right now, around the world, the work of protecting nature and the climate is happening in the field — and achieving small triumphs that don't make the news.

Here are three recent conservation success stories you should know about.

1. A modern-day effort to restore the Amazon, powered by tradition

In Portuguese, the term “muvuca” is traditionally defined by a large group of people in one place. For communities in the Amazon Basin, this term inspired a new way to restore the forests surrounding their land — through a muvuca of seeds.

The Xingu region in northern Brazil is surrounded by Amazon rainforest and the dry savanna of the Cerrado corridor. Over time, the majority of this once-thriving area has been severely degraded, converted into land for soybean farms and ravaged by the fires that [burned through the Amazon in 2019](#).

To restore the forests, the people of Xingu implemented the muvuca farming technique — sowing a large and varied mixture of seeds that yield plants native to the area, such as cashew and açaí. With financial and scientific support from Conservation International, indigenous peoples and farmers have worked with a Brazilian conservation organization called the Socio-Environmental Institute for more than a decade to perfect this technique. By using traditional knowledge, the group ensured the seeds used would produce the highest yield of vegetation native to the land, while restoring the soil.

Through the Xingu Seed Network, local farmers, indigenous peoples and community members helped gather seeds for each muvuca, which is typically composed of 90 kg (198 lbs) of seeds yielding up to 120 different species of plants per hectare of forest. The group has already helped plant enough seeds to yield more than 1.8 million trees and has seen a range of positive impacts on the region, from improved water quality to increased agricultural production. This method could also help tackle climate change by growing more diverse native forests — which absorbs significantly more carbon than forests with a single type of tree, [studies show](#).

“Apart from its positive impacts on biodiversity, muvuca addresses social and economic challenges such as food security and livelihoods,” explained Mauricio Bianco, senior vice president of Conservation International Brazil. “Families can earn income from the

restoration processes and increase agricultural production of food species such as beans, peas and corn.”

“People from the forest are often the most invested in protecting and restoring it,” he continued, “because they are seeing a clear benefit by doing so.”

More about muvuca [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

2. Indigenous leaders establish haven for sea turtles

In the waters of the Lau Islands of Fiji, endangered green, hawksbill and loggerhead sea turtles find sanctuary amid the vibrant corals and abundance of fish in Duff Reef.

But this reef is at risk, threatened by overfishing and vulnerable to warming waters caused by climate change.

To protect these waters — and the species they support — the Mavana village of Fiji’s Lau Islands recently collaborated with Conservation International to create a new marine protected area. Covering 6.2 square km (2.4 square miles), this area will prevent fishing and diving activities that could disturb the turtles’ habitat. Once restrictions are lifted following the COVID-19 pandemic, Conservation International scientists will attach tags to the sea turtles in this area to further understand their movements — and how to most effectively protect them.

This protected area is part of a **12-year strategy** launched by the Fijian government in partnership with the chiefs of the Lau Province and Conservation International in 2019 to protect nature across the entire Lau province — which is made up of a chain of 60 islands in eastern Fiji which spans 335,000 sq km (129344 sq miles). With support from village chiefs throughout Lau Province, this plan aims to help fishers and communities protect the waters they depend on for food and jobs from illegal fishing, while ensuring that the coral reefs surrounding these islands are more resilient to the effects of climate change.

This work was made possible by the late Leisenia Qarase, chief of the Mavana village and former Prime Minister of Fiji. Qarase helped to create the Duff Reef MPA and championed nature conservation throughout the Lau Islands of Fiji.

3. Preserving a culture — by protecting ancient trees

For the indigenous Kanak people of New Caledonia, the cloud forest of Mount Panié provides everything they need to live — from fresh water to food to traditional medicine.

Not only is this forest crucial to the Kanak peoples’ survival, it is also central to their identity. Mount Panié holds the only stand of dayu biik, a critically endangered subspecies of the thousand-year-old Kauri trees, which the Kanak people believe holds the spirits of their ancient ancestors.

“The Kauri is among the oldest plants on Earth,” explained Gilio Farino, in a **newly released video** by Emmy award winner Shawn Heinrichs. “When we mention our elders, there is also

the spiritual aspect. The kauri is an old plant, and I believe it is the origin of all of the nature in itself.”

But these forests face increasingly severe droughts worsened by climate change as well as invasive species such as pigs and deer that contribute to soil erosion on the island.

To protect the trees they revere, the Kanak people have worked with Conservation International for the past two decades to establish the Dayu Biik Association, a local organization that manages the 5,400-hectare (13,300-acre) Mount Panié Wilderness Reserve.

Now, the Kanak people are working to expand the reserve to cover 10,000 hectares (24,711 acres) of land to protect the entire kauri tree population — and to preserve their cultural heritage.

Source: <https://www.conservation.org/blog/notes-from-the-field-indigenous-peoples-protecting-nature-through-tradition>