Indigenous Territorial Entities, Autonomy, and Land Management in the Eastern Colombian Amazon: effective strategies for climate and biodiversity

One of the most solid and innovative land management processes on the planet is taking place in the heart of the eastern Colombian Amazon. This is not only measured in hectares of conserved forest, but in living knowledge systems that sustain climate balance and global biodiversity.

Here, Indigenous peoples have historically exercised their own forms of government and land management, grounded in reciprocity, complementarity, and a deep observation of natural cycles. Their experience shows that Indigenous land management not only guarantees collective and land rights, but also represents one of the most effective strategies for conservation, mitigation, and adaptation to climate change.

In this context, the formalization of Indigenous Territorial Entities (ETIs) in Colombia emerges as a globally relevant legal and political innovation. Constitutionally recognized as special public entities, ETIs allow Indigenous peoples to fully exercise their territorial competencies in planning, and in environmental, economic, and social management—coordinating their own systems of governance with State institutions and with international commitments related to climate and biodiversity.



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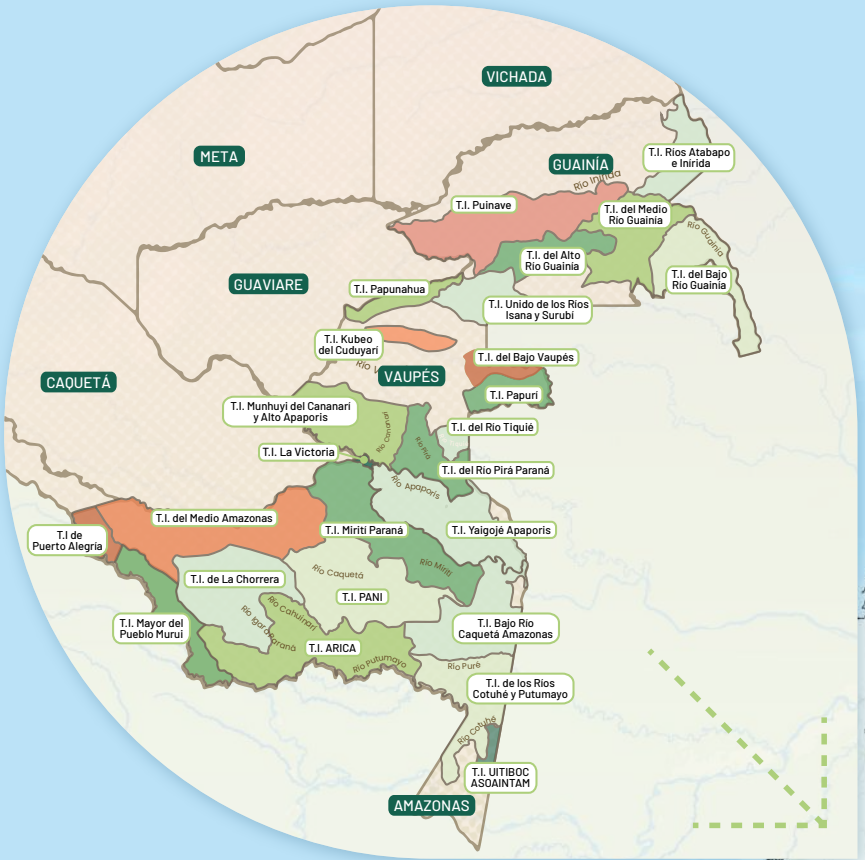
The Eastern Colombian Amazon:
A Strategic Territory for Climate Balance and Global Biodiversity

The eastern Colombian Amazon is far more than a vast expanse of continuous rainforest. With 99.2% of its territory under natural cover—distributed among forests, water bodies, and natural grasslands—it forms a core area of high ecological integrity within the Amazon biome and plays a decisive role in maintaining atmospheric and ecological stability across the Southern Hemisphere. Its geographic location creates a biocultural corridor linking Indigenous territories and protected areas, ensuring the continuity of widely distributed species and ecological connectivity between Colombia, Peru, Brazil, and Venezuela.

The continuity of this rainforest, together with the millions of trees that make up the basin, generates enormous flows of moisture—known as flying rivers—that travel more than 3,000 kilometers, delivering vital rainfall to Andean ecosystems and to the lowlands of southern Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina. In addition, the Eastern Colombian Amazon holds one of the largest carbon reserves in the Colombian Amazon, with around **3.5 billion tons** stored in its aboveground biomass (representing 54% of the total carbon stored in the Colombian Amazon as of 2023). This makes it a key pillar for regional and global climate stability.

* Eastern Amazon	23.2 **million hectares -Mha-** (46% % of the Colombian Amazon)	99.2% **of the area retains its natural cover**	0.8% **of the area consists of human-modified cover**	87.7% **of the area corresponds to Indigenous territories**	0.4% **Loss of connectivity between 1985–2023**
	*Region where the formalization process of Indigenous Territorial Entities (ETIs) is taking place				
** Western Amazon	27.1 **million hectares -Mha-** (54% % of the Colombian Amazon)	79.8% **of the area retains its natural cover**	20.2% **of the area consists of human-modified cover**	27.2% **of the area corresponds to Indigenous territories**	10.8% **Loss of connectivity between 1985–2023**
	**Amazon Deforestation Arc				
Colombian Amazon	50.3 **million hectares -Mha-**	88.8% **of the area retains its natural cover**	11.2% **of the area consists of human-modified cover**	55.1% **of the area corresponds to Indigenous territories**	9.9% **Loss of connectivity between 1985–2023**

The formalization process of Indigenous Territorial Entities (ETIs) is underway in the Eastern Colombian Amazon





CONVENTIONS

INDIGENOUS TERRITORIAL ENTITIES (ETIS) IN THE PROCESS OF FORMALIZATION

- T.I. del Alto Rio Guainia
- T.I. del Bajo Rio Guainia
- T.I. Bajo Rio Caquetá Amazonas
- T.I. Papunahua
- T.I. Yaigojé Apaporis
- T.I. de los Rios Cotuhé y Putumayo
- T.I. Rios Atabapo e Inirida
- T.I. del Rio Tiquié
- T.I. Mayor del Pueblo Murui
- T.I. ARICA
- T.I. Papuri
- T.I. Unido de los Rios Isana y Surubi
- T.I. del Rio Pirá Paraná
- T.I. PANI
- T.I. Munhuyi del Cananarí y Alto Apaporis
- T.I. de La Chorrera
- T.I. Miriti Paraná
- T.I. UITIBOC - ASOAINTAM
- T.I. La Victoria
- T.I. del Medio Rio Guainia

INDIGENOUS TERRITORIES EXPRESSING INTEREST

- T.I. de Puerto Alegria
- T.I. del Medio Amazonas
- T.I. Puinave
- T.I. Kubeo del Cuduyarí
- Animación y Lucha Indígena del Bajo Vaupés

OTHER CATEGORIES

- Pan-Amazon region RAISG boundary
- Eastern Colombian Amazon: area where ETIs are being formalized
- Colombian Amazon boundary
- Western Colombian Amazon

However, its exceptional integrity is not the result of an absence of human presence, but of sophisticated forms of land management and Indigenous governance, based on knowledge systems, regulatory practices, and territorial management that integrate the spiritual, the ecological, and the political. This management process, consolidated through life plans, cultural agreements, ecological-cultural calendars, and sacred site systems, has enabled the maintenance of a functional and healthy territory, whose continuity now depends on the full recognition and strengthening of territorial autonomy for Indigenous peoples and governments.

Indigenous land management: exercise of governance and authority grounded in their own knowledge, regulation, and management systems

For the Indigenous peoples of the eastern Colombian Amazon, land management is a continuous process of governance, regulation, and management in accordance with their Law of Origin and the knowledge systems that sustain balance among human, spiritual, and natural beings. It is not centered on zoning or land use, but rather on maintaining the integrity and connectivity of the territory as a living system—one whose purpose is to restore the original order, ensure cultural continuity, and guarantee the reproduction of life in its ecological, spiritual, social, and political dimensions.

Life plans are the concrete expression of this management process. More than documents, they are collective mandates that guide community life and shape decisions on land use, food sovereignty, education, health, the local economy, and the transmission of knowledge. They function as instruments of Indigenous land management policy, articulating ancestral knowledge with contemporary environmental and climate management needs.

Indigenous land management stands out for its integrality and adaptability: it does not separate the ecological from the social and cultural, and it adapts to changes in the environment without losing coherence with their Law of Origin. Its effectiveness is reflected in the exemplary land management strategies that support it: sacred site systems that serve as axes of spiritual and ecological regulation; ecological-cultural calendars that synchronize collective life cycles with natural rhythms; environmental monitoring that combines biocultural indicators to evaluate territorial health; and territorial action plans that translate collective mandates into concrete local policies. Through these practices, peoples in the Amazon not only conserve biodiversity, they actively reproduce it through the collective management of fauna, flora, and agricultural systems. They are ecosystem architects who, through knowledge passed down through generations, have maintained one of the most intact territories in the Amazon biome

ETIs: an effective response to the climate crisis and biodiversity loss

The legal recognition of ETIs marks a milestone in decentralization and governance in Colombia. Established in the 1991 Constitution and regulated by Decree Law 632 of 2018—with new provisions in Decree Law 488 of 2025—ETIs guarantee the political, administrative, and fiscal autonomy of Indigenous peoples and governments over their territories, in coordination with the rest of the State.

As special public entities, ETIs hold competencies in land management and planning, and in environmental, economic, and social management, as well as in the direct administration of

resources, which represent effective strategies for climate action and biodiversity conservation in the eastern Colombian Amazon. Through their governance and land management, life plans, action plans, and information systems, ETIs translate the commitments of the Paris Agreement and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework into concrete conservation, mitigation, and adaptation decisions and actions.

In addition, their formalization increases the legal and political security of Indigenous territories, reducing overlap and institutional fragmentation. Evidence shows that in territories with full legal recognition, deforestation is minimal and ecological integrity is significantly higher, conserving 99.5% of natural cover, while areas under municipal governance conserve 82.8%. In summary, ETIs represent both an institutional and climate innovation: a model of intercultural decentralization that strengthens Indigenous autonomy while advancing environmental governance over the common goods of humanity.



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Indigenous peoples' high-impact solutions to the environmental crisis: mitigation, adaptation, and sustainable use of biodiversity

The indigenous peoples of the eastern Colombian Amazon are not recipients of environmental policy, but authors of their own solutions to the climate and ecological crisis. Their knowledge and land management systems offer nature-based responses that integrate environmental effectiveness, cultural sustainability, and social justice.

Their mitigation strategies include the maintenance of forest cover, protection of water balance, and roaming agricultural systems, which ensure carbon sequestration and ecosystem regeneration. In terms of adaptation, ecological calendars and agricultural diversification make it possible to anticipate climatic variations and improve food security. Knowledge of native seeds, medicinal plants, and landscape management directly supports the conservation of genetic biodiversity and strengthens resilient local economies.

At the institutional level, Indigenous peoples have promoted exemplary governance mechanisms, including neighboring management agreements, territorial associative schemes based on political and cultural agreements, coordination between ETIs and protected areas through co-governance arrangements and strategic use of law, as reflected in **Constitutional Court rulings T-248 of 2023 and T-106 of 2025**, which recognize their importance in the protection of the Amazon. In addition, Indigenous governments have initiated coordination processes with other public authorities at the national level, strengthening governance across the Amazon.

Ruling

T-248 of 2023

establishes the obligation to incorporate the rights of Indigenous peoples into the standards for REDD+ projects, recognizing Indigenous governments as public and environmental authorities with the power to regulate these initiatives within their territories, in accordance with their constitutional mandate to govern land use and management.

Ruling

T-106 of 2025

recognizes the violation of fundamental rights of the Indigenous peoples of the Jaguares de Yuruparí Macro-territory due to mining and mercury contamination. The Court declared the physical and cultural survival of these communities to be at risk and ordered the State to take a series of actions to guarantee, together with Indigenous authorities, their rights to identity, territory, self-determination, health, water, and cultural survival. These measures must be implemented through intercultural dialogue and coordination between Indigenous governments and other authorities of the Colombian State.

ETI formalization: the path toward full territorial autonomy and decentralization

The formalization of ETIs marks a milestone in the real decentralization of the Colombian State by recognizing the capacity of Indigenous peoples to plan, manage, and administer their territories autonomously and responsibly. More than a legal development, this process transforms public governance by transferring environmental, economic, and social competencies that make ETIs legitimate territorial authorities within the State structure. Their consolidation harmonizes State and Indigenous management systems, fostering intercultural dialogue that enriches public policy.

The recognition of ETIs also facilitates direct financing, reducing intermediation and ensuring that climate and biodiversity resources reach those who actually protect ecosystems, strengthening transparency, efficiency, and equity in resource distribution.

At the global level, ETIs demonstrate that Indigenous governance is an advanced form of climate action: by aligning ancestral planning with contemporary policy frameworks, they show that autonomy does not fragment governance—it strengthens multilevel coordination. Their experience shows that sustainability is not imposed from the outside; it is put into practice on a daily basis in the territory through knowledge, reciprocity, and co-responsibility



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Indigenous land management, supported by national regulatory frameworks and their own management instruments, represents an innovative strategy for territorial and climate governance—where autonomy translates into co-responsibility, and cultural diversity becomes the foundation of global sustainability.

Recognizing and financing these processes is not an act of inclusion; it is a condition for the survival of humanity and the planet.