



WWF and IKEA are working together on forests, cotton, water and climate to protect landscapes and enhance biodiversity.



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CASE STUDY

FORESTS AND COMMUNITIES

Testing approaches to strengthen local community forest management

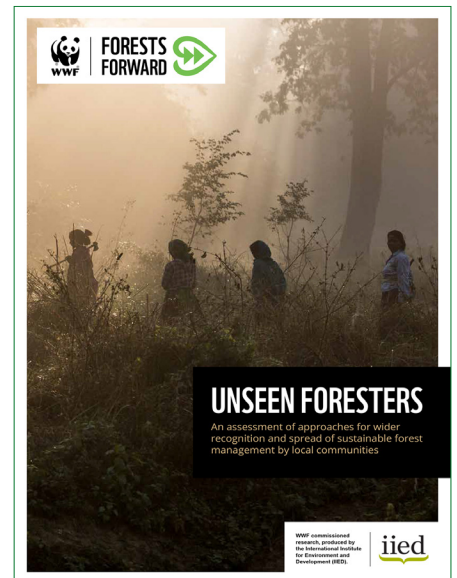
When we talk about forest conservation and responsible forest management, we tend to think of state-owned areas that are protected by law, or large-scale commercial forestry operations. But what about the vast areas of forest that don't fall within these categories?

Roughly a quarter of the world's forests are under the stewardship of Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs), who have managed their resources sustainably for generations. Yet their role and their rights to own, manage and make a living from the forest are often not recognized. This can leave them powerless to resist the march of agriculture, illegal and unsustainable logging, mining, infrastructure and other causes of deforestation and forest degradation.

Over the last 20 years, the WWF and IKEA partnership has made considerable progress in promoting

responsible forest management and forest conservation in the regions where IKEA sources its timber. But to maintain the healthy forest landscapes our planet so direly needs, it's crucial to work with the communities in these landscapes too.

"A key outlook for the WWF and IKEA partnership is to advance multiple types of sustainable forest management, including by Indigenous peoples and local communities," says Gijs Breukink, senior advisor on responsible forestry at WWF. "The partnership has grappled with working with communities as a force for conservation. So we commissioned research to see what the most effective forest stewardship approaches could be, with a view to supporting forest management and improving livelihoods."



This led to the [Unseen Foresters](#) report. This research paper, released in 2020, drew on examples from around the world to identify opportunities for strengthening the recognition and spread of sustainable forest management led by local communities.

Based on the findings, WWF and IKEA are now testing some of these approaches in India and Romania, two countries where IKEA also sources timber. The aim is to come up with sustainable forest management models that can be replicated, adapted and upscaled to support more effective conservation and sustainable development.



INDIA: STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

Over the last 15 years, WWF has supported communities to win legal recognition for their traditional rights over their lands and resources.



The evergreen forests in India's Western Ghats landscape, stretching some 1,600km from the north of Mumbai to the southern tip of the country, are rich in biodiversity, including Bengal tigers, Asian elephants, sloth bears and much more. They are also home to many tribal communities who depend on the forest and the resources it provides.

As part of the WWF and IKEA partnership, WWF-India is working with nine tribal communities in the Vazhachal Forest Division and six communities in the neighbouring Parambikulam Tiger Reserve in the state of Kerala. Over the last 15 years, WWF has supported these communities to win legal recognition for their traditional rights over their lands and resources through the 2006 Forest Rights Act.

"The majority of these settlements belong to the Kadar tribal community, which is a particularly vulnerable group," says Tiju Thomas from WWF-India, who coordinates the community work in the region. "They are completely dependent on the forest for their livelihoods." Of the 1,600 Kadar people in India, more than two-thirds live in the project area.

The partnership's project aims to strengthen the community institutions responsible for forest governance,

including by supporting them to develop a management plan for the area and providing training in areas such as finance. It's supporting communities to manage forest resources sustainably – including making sure non-timber forest products aren't overharvested, restoring degraded areas and preventing fires. The project also helps communities to improve their livelihoods – for example, through ecotourism and building the market for non-timber forest products, such as honey, medicinal plants and handicrafts.

"We believe this is a model that works well and has a lot of potential to replicate in other regions," says Sanket Bhale, who leads WWF-India's work in Western Ghats. "What we don't have yet is proof of concept, showing evidence that where community forest governance improves there are positive impacts on forest quality, wildlife habitats, biodiversity and so on. That's what we're working toward together with IKEA."

Tiju stresses that the communities are in the driving seat: "We never try to impose our own attitudes and ideas on the communities. It's not our mandate. The communities are the owners of the forest, and the decisions they take in their village meetings are final."

"Our partnership with WWF is rooted in our ambition to deliver our IKEA Forest Positive agenda. By using our business as a springboard, we seek to generate a demonstrable positive impact to influence the wider market, for the sake of people and planet, going far beyond the needs of our own supply chain. We work together to create greater good for the environment and for communities by making responsible management a global norm – a long-stretching and inspiring journey."

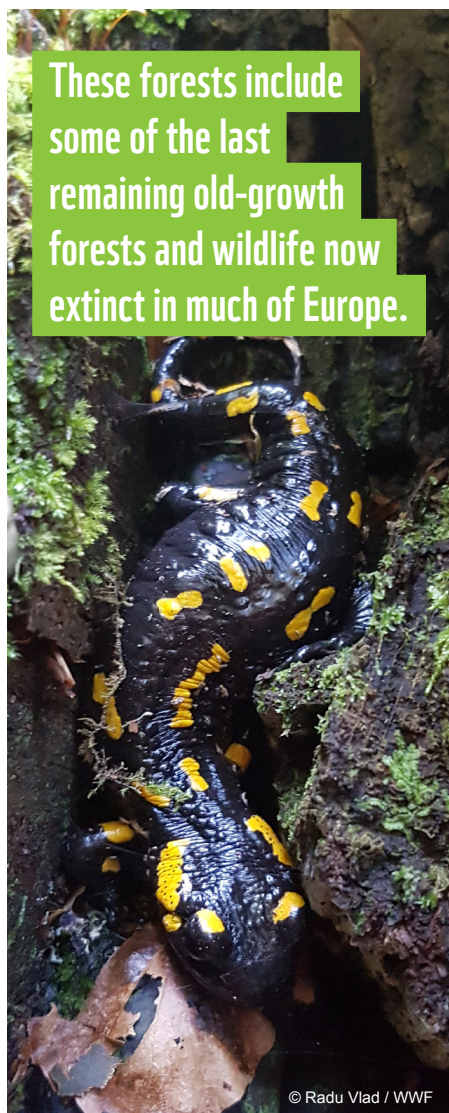
Mikhail Tarasov,
Global Forestry Manager,
IKEA

ROMANIA: PAYMENTS FOR ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

In Europe, too, communities can be highly dependent on forests – like those of Strâmbu Băiut in Maramures, Romania.

“This is the land of ‘wood civilization’, where local communities have lived in harmony with nature for centuries,” explains WWF-Romania forest coordinator Radu Vlad. “From the cradle to the wooden churches where we worshipped, woodworking is part of people’s cultural identity.”

It’s a region rich in biodiversity, but poor by the socioeconomic standards of the European Union. “Everyone used to live off forests or mining, but now the mines are closed so forestry is one of the few job opportunities,” says Radu.



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These forests include some of the last remaining old-growth forests in Europe, home to brown bears, wolves, lynx and other wildlife now extinct in much of Europe. Since 2005, the WWF and IKEA partnership has been working to map out and protect areas of high conservation value, and to strengthen sustainable forest management. This has enabled the area to receive certification from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). But protecting environmental values has meant reduced logging and fewer jobs in forestry operations and related industries like timber processing, so people need alternative sources of income.

One potential source of income which the WWF and IKEA partnership is now exploring is through payments for ecosystem services. Essentially, this means that the local people who help to conserve the forest receive additional support from those who benefit. Payments can support conservation efforts and sustainable development opportunities for local communities, such as ecotourism

activities or innovative green businesses that can add value to sustainably sourced forest products.

“Society and companies are beneficiaries of the services that forests provide, so this is a way of mobilizing them to reinvest in the forests that sustain them,” explains Radu. “With no support for forest conservation in Romania from state or EU funds, a voluntary payment for ecosystem services scheme is one of the only means to raise funds to protect forests while also supporting local sustainable development.”

The next step is to assess the positive impact on ecosystem services – in this case, biodiversity and tourism-related services – using the FSC’s ecosystem services procedure. With third-party verification, the project will be in a stronger position to approach potential donors willing to invest in maintaining the ecosystem services they profit from. Ecotourism operators are the primary target, but the other potential donors could include companies that want to show their support for wildlife conservation.

Though the forest here is owned by the state, the forest administration will funnel all the funds raised into community-led projects. But if local people are to truly benefit, then they need to take charge of the process. Through the partnership, WWF has been leading discussions with community groups, businesses and the public sector to understand local needs, build a common vision and develop a transparent, participatory governance system for forest conservation and sustainable development.

“Ecosystem services and voluntary mechanisms like payment for ecosystem services schemes are pretty new concepts in Romania,” says Radu. “People are still learning about how to make use of their values, and we lack concrete, functional examples to show as best practices. But we’ve seen a clear interest from all stakeholders in the pilot project, and we believe this can become a replicable model.”



LESSONS LEARNT: STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY-LED FOREST MANAGEMENT

Success factors:



Building rapport: In both India and Romania, the WWF teams have built trust and strong relationships with local communities through long-term, multi-dimensional engagement in the area. Engaging on social and cultural issues and educational activities, along with natural resource management, helps to build a rapport.



Public sector involvement: Teams in India and Romania both pointed to good relationships with the local forest authorities as key to success.



Enabling legislation: In India, the [Forest Rights Act](#) has been transformational in giving a legal basis to community forest governance – but communities need awareness raising and capacity building support to take advantage of it.

Ongoing challenges:



Showing results: Replicable models demonstrating evidence of positive results are rare – these projects aim to fill that gap.



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