

Forest Ecosystem Integrity and Article 5 of the Paris Agreement

Background: UNFCCC decisions and guidelines contribute to substantial ecosystem carbon loss, jeopardising both climate and biodiversity goals, because forest-related definitions and carbon accounting rules overlook the importance of biodiversity and ecosystem integrity in mitigation and adaptation.

- Current IPCC guidelines and rules treat all forests as equal, irrespective of their condition. However, forest condition is crucially important. Forests with a high degree of “ecosystem integrity” (i.e. forests which still retain their native biodiversity and vegetation structure) *maximize* climate benefits. Primary, old-growth and other ecologically mature forests are more resistant and resilient to disturbances (e.g. fire, insects, disease) than degraded forests, which means that they store carbon much more securely (their carbon is “lower risk”). They also store much more carbon per hectare.¹
- Primary forests and other high integrity ecosystems also maximize many other vital ecosystem services: e.g. they have higher biodiversity than degraded ecosystems of the same type, regulate water flows more effectively, offer more cooling capacity, and produce cleaner freshwater.
- The UNFCCC’s failure to recognize the critical importance of ecosystem integrity, and the biodiversity that underpins it, allows the destruction of primary forests to be “offset” by tree planting or by regenerating degraded forests. As a result, the UNFCCC is failing to prevent the loss of irrecoverable primary, old-growth and other ecologically mature forests.
- IPCC accounting rules also treat burning forest biomass for energy as carbon neutral, artificially lowering reported emissions and incentivizing the clearing of forests, including primary / old-growth forests, to produce biomass and wood pellets.
- The vital roles of Indigenous Peoples, local communities and smallholders in protecting forests and maintaining ecosystem health are also undervalued in the UNFCCC.
- Article 5 of the Paris Agreement calls for **all** countries to take action to conserve and **enhance** GHG **sinks** and **reservoirs**. This should function as a mandate to protect and restore ecosystem integrity, opening the door to supporting climate, biodiversity and social / Indigenous objectives holistically and at scale across large landscapes (e.g. Amazonia). However, the UNFCCC has yet to revisit and fully operationalize Article 5 and finally recognize the crucial role that biodiversity and ecosystem integrity play in recovering and retaining carbon in ecosystem reservoirs.

¹ These points are true for all biodiversity-rich, carbon dense ecosystems with high ecosystem integrity, including grasslands, freshwater wetlands and coastal ecosystems, which are also critical to mitigation and adaptation.

- The COP28 decision on the Global Stocktake calls for synergistic action between the CBD and UNFCCC, creating an important opening to maximize synergistic outcomes. CBD COP16 in Colombia, and COP30 in Brazil also create opportunities for addressing climate and biodiversity more holistically.

What must change to maximize synergies between climate and biodiversity crisis?

- It is urgent to build on paragraph 33 of the GST decision at COP 28² by securing operational language calling for the protection and recovery of ecosystem integrity, including in forests and ideally mentioning the importance of primary forests, at COP 29.
- We need a decision at CBD COP16 in Target 8 of the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework that recognizes the importance of ecosystem integrity for retaining and recovering carbon over the long term to elevate the importance of biodiversity and ecological integrity for climate mitigation and climate adaptation. We also need mention of primary forests, in Target 8 or a separate decision.
- A SBSTA work plan is needed that covers all natural ecosystems including forests (either a joint SBSTTA/SBSTA work plan or a UNFCCC workplan supported by relevant biological experts) to fully operationalize Article 5 of the PA and address problems with current accounting guidelines.
- There is a parallel need to address problems in forest policy comprehensively throughout the UN system, including: highly problematic definitions of “forest” and “deforestation” in the FAO; a strong focus on logging with best practices (SFM) as “conservation” in the International Arrangement on Forests even though logging is never sustainable in primary forests; and lack of recognition of the importance of ecosystem integrity in the SDGs. These changes would benefit climate and biodiversity objectives, would hold the Global North accountable for its catastrophic forest management practices, and prevent it from characterizing the global forest crisis as a problem of the Global South.

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² Paragraph 33, 1/CMA.5: “Further emphasizes the importance of conserving, protecting and restoring nature and ecosystems towards achieving the Paris Agreement temperature goal, including through enhanced efforts towards halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation by 2030, and other terrestrial and marine ecosystems acting as sinks and reservoirs of greenhouse gases and by conserving biodiversity, while ensuring social and environmental safeguards, in line with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework”