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# The Importance of Indigenous Environmental Activism Around the World

by Sheri Radford / Jul 21, 2021

“We’re fighting for soil, land, food, trees, water, birds. We’re fighting for life.”

Those words were spoken by José Gregorio Díaz Mirabal, an Indigenous leader and board member of [Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica](#), at the [2019 Global Landscapes Forum](#).

According to [National Geographic](#), Indigenous peoples make up less than 5 percent of the global population, but they protect 80 percent of the planet’s biodiversity. Many Indigenous groups view the natural world as sacred and see themselves as caretakers of the Earth.

As a result, Indigenous peoples have long been at the forefront of efforts to save the environment, ranging from peaceful protests to more combative actions. Here are a few examples of Indigenous activism around the world.

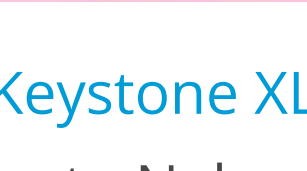
## Keystone XL Pipeline



Photo by Mike Berna on Unsplash

Indigenous peoples have been instrumental in the resistance against oil and natural gas pipelines across North America. New pipelines promote our continued reliance on non-renewable fossil fuels and put people, animals and land at risk, and their construction often ignores Indigenous tribal sovereignty.

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The multi-billion-dollar [Keystone XL Pipeline](#) was intended to transport tar sands oil from Alberta through Montana to Nebraska, about 1,897 km (1,179 miles). Tar sands oil is thicker, heavier, more acidic and more corrosive than conventional crude oil—and therefore more likely to cause a leak, and more difficult to clean up after a spill. It also causes more pollution than conventional oil.

Even before the Keystone XL Pipeline was first suggested in 2008, tar sands extraction was already harming Indigenous communities in Alberta’s boreal forest, including the Mikisew Cree and Athabasca Chipewyan peoples. It degraded the land and the water, causing many wild animals to die, and led to increased rates of cancer for the area’s residents.

For more than a decade, Indigenous groups from both Canada and the United States joined with other environmentalists to campaign against the pipeline’s construction. Arguing that the pipeline would, among other things, risk the safety of the Ogallala Aquifer—which lies under portions of eight American states, and is one of the largest underground sources of fresh water on the planet—they organized sit-ins, marches, petitions and more.

One unlikely coalition that emerged was the Cowboy and Indian Alliance, which brought together ranchers, farmers and Indigenous communities along the proposed pipeline route. In April 2014, the group rode on horseback into Washington, D.C., for [Reject and Protect](#). Complete with an encampment of tipis on the National Mall, this multi-day demonstration and protest was aimed at getting President Obama to stop the Keystone XL Pipeline.

After several more years of protests, TC Energy officially [cancelled the pipeline](#) in June 2021.

Perhaps this environmental win can give activists a much-needed boost in the fight against projects such as the Coastal GasLink Pipeline, another TC Energy endeavour. It has been opposed by the Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs, along with other Indigenous peoples and environmental activists, and faced [years of protests and blockades](#), but it is still going ahead.

## Amazon rainforest

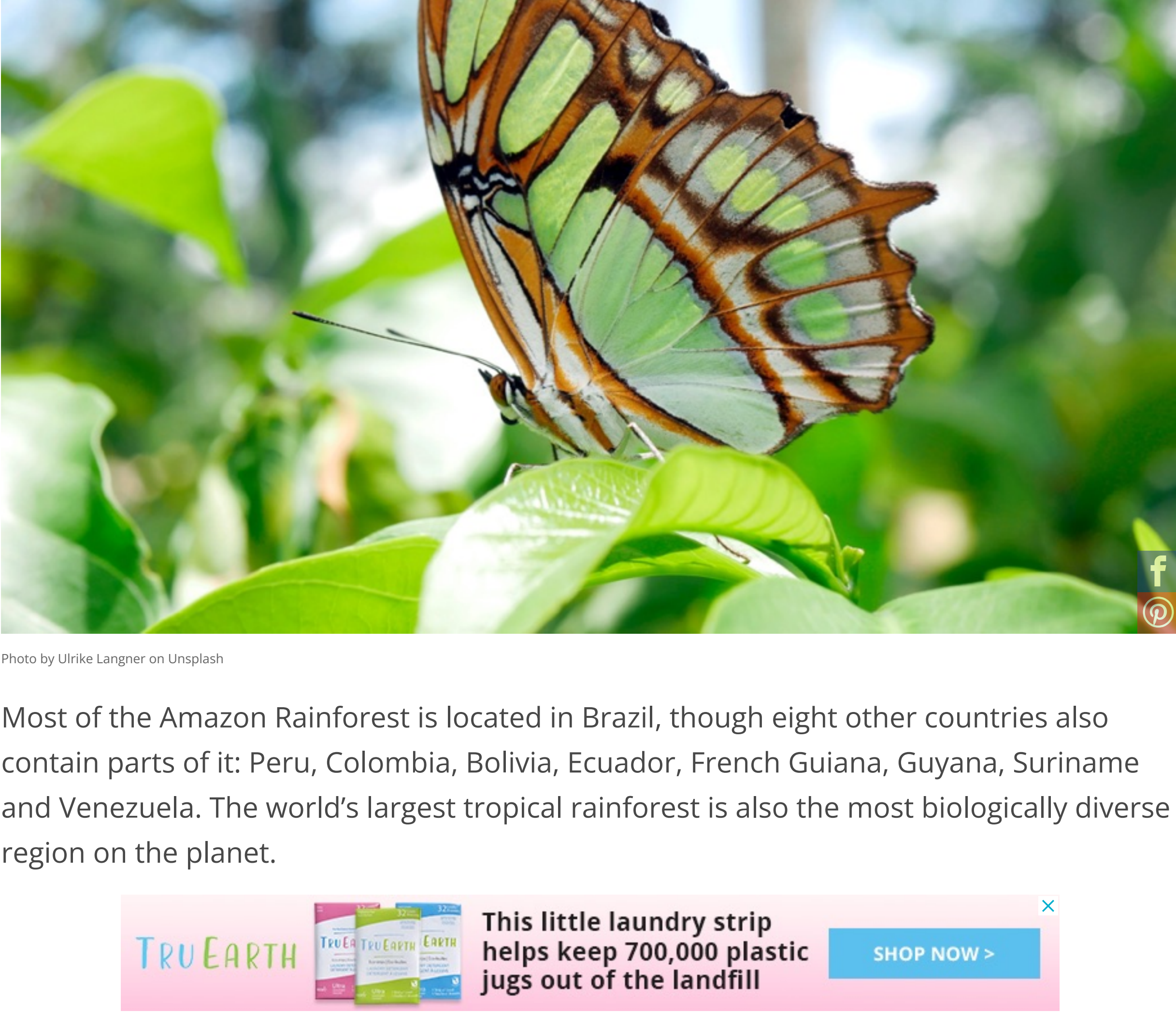



Photo by Ulrike Langner on Unsplash

Most of the Amazon Rainforest is located in Brazil, though eight other countries also contain parts of it: Peru, Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Suriname and Venezuela. The world’s largest tropical rainforest is also the most biologically diverse region on the planet.

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[According to the World Wildlife Fund](#), the Amazon “contains one in 10 known species on Earth, 40,000 plant species, 3,000 freshwater fish species, and more than 370 types of reptiles.” Some of the many [creatures that exist only in this rainforest](#) include [Gallala river dolphins](#), popular for their pink colour; [pygmy marmosets](#), the smallest monkeys in the world; [giant otters](#), which humans have hunted almost to extinction for their luxurious fur; and [black caimans](#), giant alligators that are the largest predator in the Amazon.

The Amazon Rainforest plays a key role in stabilizing the global climate by helping to regulate the Earth’s oxygen, carbon and water cycles. Around one-quarter of the drugs used in Western medicine are derived from rainforest plants—and at least 95 percent of rainforest plant species haven’t yet been examined by Western scientists. Plus, foods such as acai berries, passion fruit, cashews, Brazil nuts, black pepper, cinnamon, ginger and vanilla (which is derived from orchids) all come from the rainforest.

But the Amazon is at risk. Even before the devastating forest fires of 2019 and 2020, much of the rainforest had already been lost to logging, cattle ranching, mining, oil extraction, highways, hydroelectric dams and unsustainable agriculture. More than 350 Indigenous and ethnic groups live in the rainforest and depend on it for their livelihoods. These Indigenous peoples have been fighting back for years, trying to protect their homes.


[In August 2019 in Brazil](#), Indigenous activists and other environmentalists took part in more than 30 protests across the country, pressuring President Jair Bolsonaro to do more to stop illegal deforestation and out-of-control forest fires.

[A year later](#), members of the Kayapo Mekranoti ethnic group—dressed in traditional headdresses, wearing warrior body paint and carrying wooden weapons—defied a court order and blocked an important Brazilian grain highway. They demanded that the government end illegal deforestation and mining in the rainforest and also help Indigenous groups cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.

[In June 2021](#), Indigenous activists were met with tear gas and rubber bullets outside Brazil’s congress. They had gathered peacefully to protest legislation that would attack Indigenous land rights and weaken regulations in the Amazon.

Time is running out to save the rainforest. [According to Robert Walker](#), a researcher who has studied the Amazon for decades, it will be completely wiped out by 2064 and be replaced by an open savanna. To come up with his dire prediction, Walker analyzed patterns of rainfall, drought, fires and deforestation.

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Indigenous leader José Gregorio Díaz Mirabal still holds out hope for the future, even though the [Paris Agreement on climate change](#) removed a reference to protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples. Mirabal [wrote in a 2020 opinion piece](#): “Five years after Paris, scientists have shown it was a mistake to remove our rights from the agreement. Their research reveals that we, the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon, when armed with strong rights, manage our lands better than commercial ventures or conservation efforts.”

## Mining

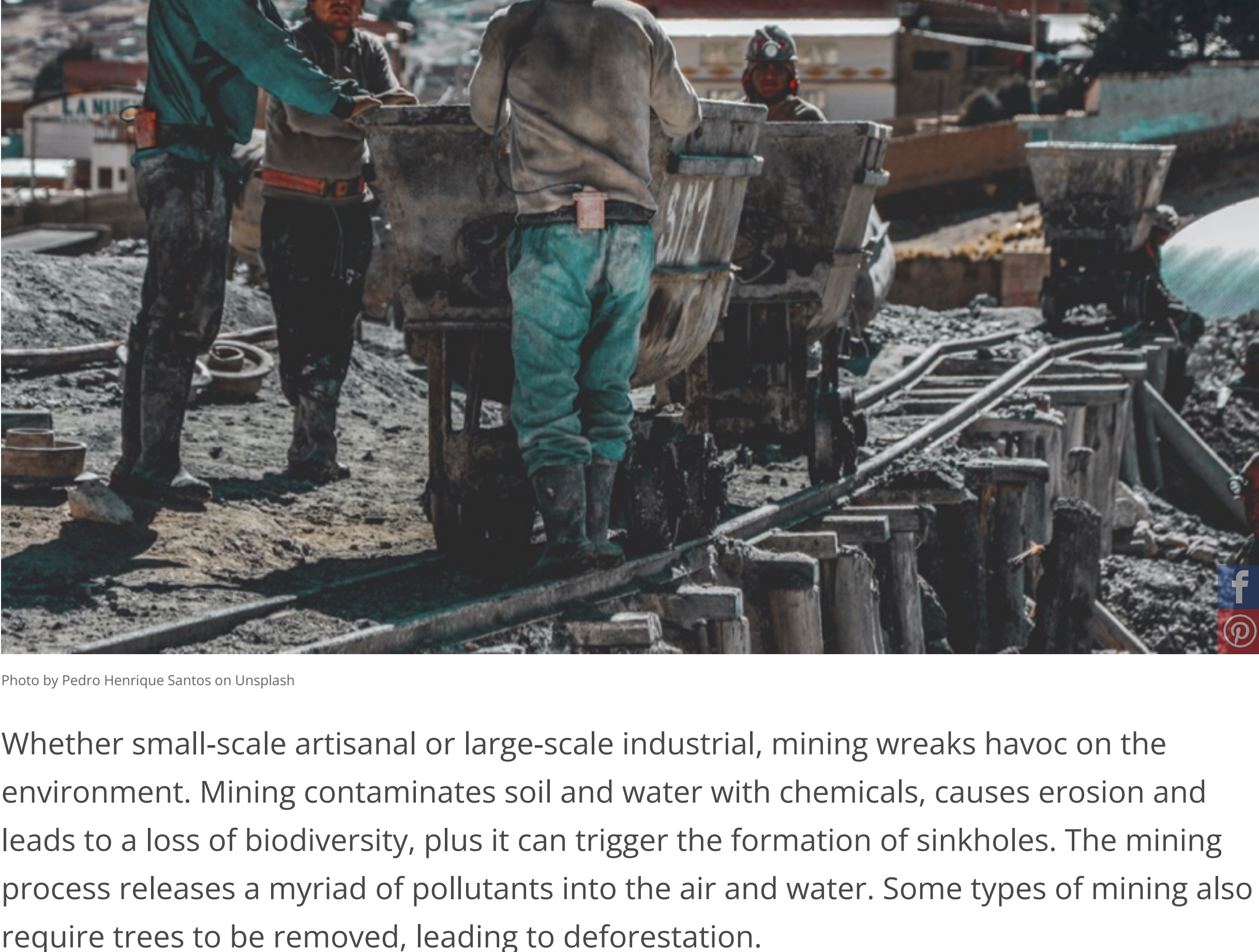
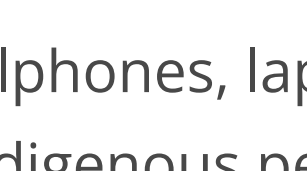


Photo by Pedro Henrique Santos on Unsplash

Whether small-scale artisanal or large-scale industrial, mining wreaks havoc on the environment. Mining contaminates soil and water with chemicals, causes erosion and leads to a loss of biodiversity, plus it can trigger the formation of sinkholes. The mining process releases a myriad of pollutants into the air and water. Some types of mining also require trees to be removed, leading to deforestation.

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In Chile in October 2019, Indigenous protesters from around the Atacama salt flats formed [blockades that shut down roads leading to the area’s lithium mines](#). Lithium is used in batteries for cellphones, laptops and electric cars, and Chile has the world’s largest reserves of it. Indigenous peoples have been [on the leading edge of societal change in Chile](#), demanding everything from a new constitution to an end to oil fracking.

Since 2011 in Guatemala, environmentalists and Indigenous activists such as the [Parlamento Del Pueblo Xinka](#) have been [protesting against the Escobal silver mine](#), citing its environmental impact and the owners’ disregard for Indigenous land rights. The protesters’ nonviolent marches, demonstrations and blockades have been met with [kidnappings, assaults, prison sentences, shootings and even murders](#). To suppress protests, in 2013 President Otto Pérez Molina declared a 30-day state of siege in four municipalities near the mine, and he sent in more than 3,000 soldiers and police officers to enforce martial law. Escobal has been shut since 2017, but [discussions about reopening it started up again in May 2021](#).

For over a decade in South Africa, [Indigenous activists such as Nonhle Mbuthuma](#) have been fighting to stop the proposed Xolobeni titanium mine, which would destroy local ancestral grounds and be disastrous for the environment. Mbuthuma co-founded the [Amadiba Crisis Committee](#) (ACC) to oppose construction of the mine. She now receives so many threats that she leaves her house only when accompanied by a body guard. Sikhosphi “Bhazooka” Rhadebe, chair of the ACC, was assassinated in 2016 for his involvement in the group.

## The fights continue

Just a few weeks ago, [climate change activists gathered around the White House](#) and even chained themselves to its gates. Groups such as the [Indigenous Environmental Network](#) were protesting the American government’s continued involvement in pipelines and infrastructure projects that harm the environment and violate Indigenous treaty rights.

All around the world, Indigenous peoples keep on fighting—for their ancestral rights to be respected, for an end to our reliance on fossil fuels, for a healthier future for everyone on the planet.


Even if you are not an Indigenous person, there are ways you can participate in the ongoing battles. Reach out to the Indigenous groups in your area and ask how you can help, make financial contributions to the relevant charities, write letters to politicians and newspapers, post on social media, march in solidarity as an ally—the list goes on.

## More information

These groups (and countless others) are working to protect the fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples:

- [Indigenous Environmental Network](#), United States
- [Indigenous People’s Power Project](#), United States
- [Honor the Earth](#), United States
- [Assembly of First Nations](#), Canada
- [Congress of Aboriginal Peoples](#), Canada
- [Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami](#), Canada
- [Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica](#), Ecuador
- [Articador dos Povos Indígenas](#), Brazil
- [Mídia Índia](#), Brazil
- [Confederación Mapuche de Neuquén](#), Argentina
- [Parlamento Del Pueblo Xinka](#), Guatemala
- [Center for Support of Indigenous Peoples of the North](#), Russia
- [Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara](#), Indonesia

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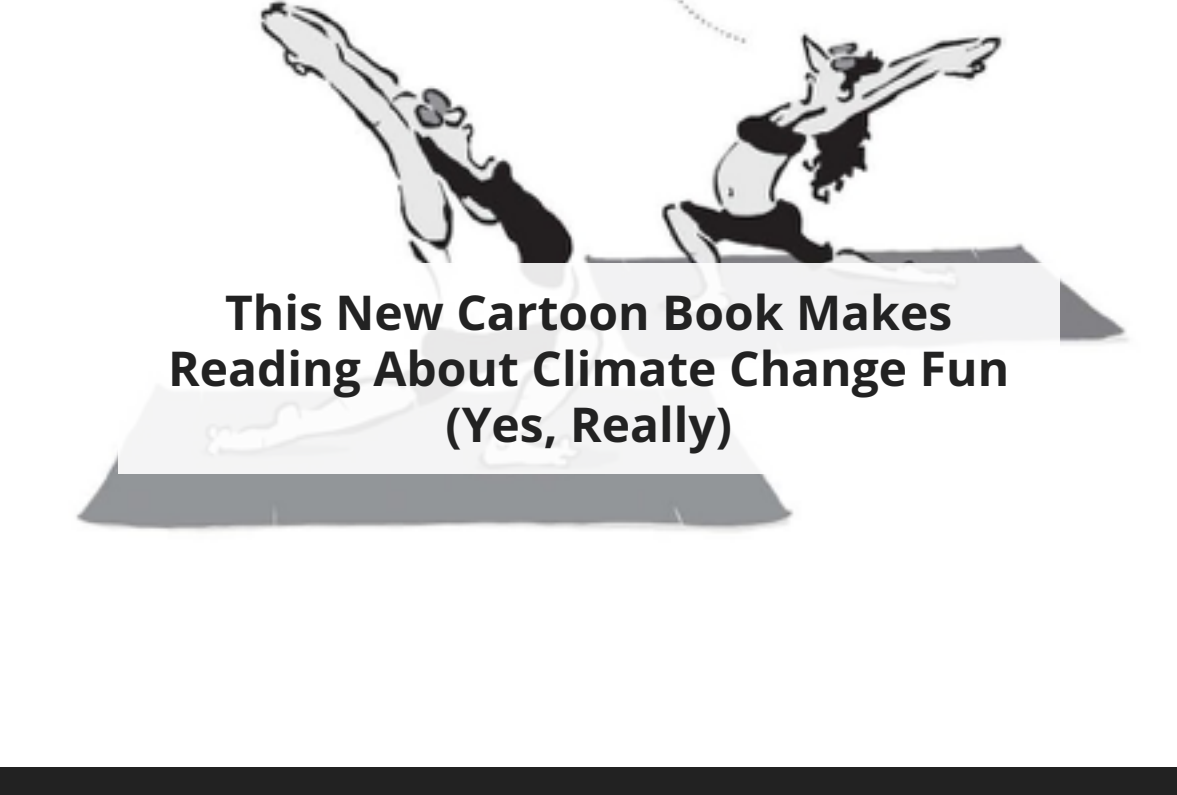
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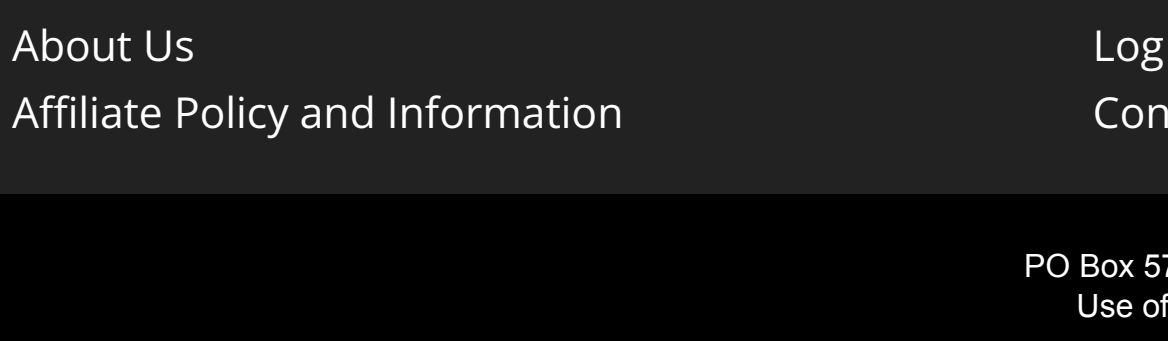
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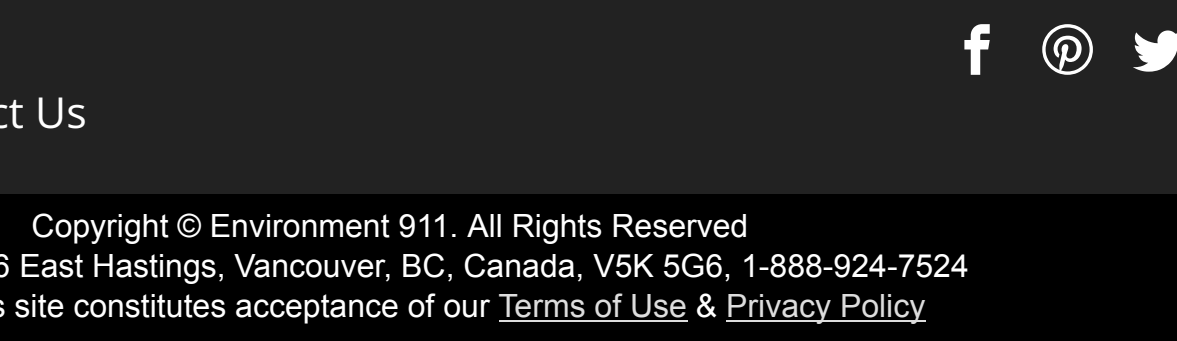
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