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Gregory Scruggs

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## Five Latin American Winners Among UNDP's Equator Prize Recipients

by Gregory Scruggs

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The UN will honor six indigenous and women's initiatives from five Central and South American countries on topics ranging from land rights to environmental protection to animal conservation at a ceremony this month. The accolade is the Equator Prize, given every two years since 2002 by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) to recognize outstanding community efforts to reduce poverty through the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

The Central and South American winners hail from Belize, Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Honduras. They are among 15 winners from around the globe who were selected in a competitive process that saw over 800 nominations from 120 countries.

"It is our privilege at UNDP, alongside our partners at the Equator Initiative, to have this opportunity to recognize and commend the achievements of this year's Equator Prize winners," said Achim Steiner, UNDP administrator, in a statement when the winners were announced in June. "The solutions they have found in the service of their communities are as diverse as the development challenges they face. But what unites them is that each shows the power of people to bring about change while protecting the planet."

The winners will each receive US\$10,000 and the opportunity for a community representative to join a week-long summit in New York during the 72nd UN General Assembly. They will be celebrated at the Equator Prize Award Ceremony on Sep. 17 featuring celebrities, government and UN officials, civil society, and the media.

### *Meet the winners*

The winners cover a wide range of biodiversity and land use issues from the Amazon to the Andes to the Caribbean coast.

In Brazil, two indigenous groups were given the award. The Ashaninka people of the Amônia River live in the heart of the Amazon rain forest. Their community association won for its use of participatory 3D mapping, advocacy, education, and cultural exchange to ensure healthy forests and communities. The Xingu, meanwhile, maintain a 27,000-sq. km reservation in the state of Mato Grosso. Recently, the Associação Terra Indígena Xingu became the first community-based organization to achieve organic certification in Brazil. The community produces two tons of certified organic honey each year to generate income, maintain vibrant indigenous culture, and promote traditional sustainable livelihoods.

Across South America in the Andes, the Organización para la Defensa y Conservación Ecológica de Intag has been active in Ecuador's Intag Valley for over 20 years. It provides support to communities resisting mining interests, conserving over 12,000 hectares of Andean biodiversity and advancing alternative livelihood options for 38 communities.

The remaining winners hail from Central America. In Honduras, the Federación Tribus Pech provides the global fragrance industry with an essential ingredient, liquidambar, through sustainable cultivation in the northeastern part of the country. They harvest the plant, also known as American sweetgum, on government-sanctioned indigenous land through a benefits-sharing arrangement. In Guatemala, the Maya-led Alianza Internacional de Reforestación has worked over the past 24 years to create a network of community practitioners engaged in reforestation and agroforestry to improve food security, reduce the risk of disaster, and increase incomes. Finally, the Community Baboon Sanctuary Women's Conservation Group has worked to save the black howler monkey, known locally as a baboon, on the northern coastal plain of Belize.

"By shining a spotlight on these initiatives from all corners of the world, we hope that others will be inspired by their example," Steiner said in his statement. "Their dedication and commitment shows what is possible when communities come together to protect and sustainably manage nature for the benefit of all."

### *Urban indigenous*

Even as the UN honors indigenous communities in rural areas for preserving biodiversity and sustainable land use, the demographic trends beg to differ. In Latin America, 49% of indigenous people now live in urban areas, according to data published on Aug. 9 by Peru's Centro Amazónico de Antropología y Aplicación Práctica (CAAAP) to commemorate the UN's International Day of Indigenous People.

This year's annual commemoration also comes on the 10th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. Despite a decade of advocacy efforts, indigenous people are still overrepresented in poverty statistics. Although they make up just 8% of the population in Latin America and the Caribbean—about 42 million people—they constitute 14% of the region's poor and 17% of the region's extremely poor.

According to the UN's 2017 State of the World's Indigenous People report, the indigenous in Guatemala can expect shorter lives—by 13 years—than their non-indigenous compatriots. Ecuador's indigenous are exposed to intense mining activity and face throat cancer at a risk 30 times higher than non-indigenous Ecuadorans.

"Even as indigenous people have made significant advances in the defense of their rights in international and regional forums, the implementation of the Declaration [on the Rights of Indigenous People] has been obstructed by the persistence of vulnerability and exclusion, particularly among indigenous women, children, youth, and people with disabilities," the report reads.

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